

Centenary (France)

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Summary

The centenary of the Great War was, in France, a unique commemorative phenomenon in terms of its duration, intensity, and geography. The areas marked by the conflict were very much taken over by tourists and by national and international political celebrations. Commemorative practices around the First World War permeated the whole of society: young people, associations, and family memory were mobilized. Commemoration took very diverse forms, from the classic forms of exhibitions and television presence to more original ones such as commemorative cycles.

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Introduction

Whether in terms of remembering the sacrifice of millions of men alive or dead, laying the foundations for reconciliation between former enemies, or glorifying the homeland, the

[memory](#) of the First World War occupies an important place in French political and social life.

It is of course centered on the date [November 11](#),¹ but like all memories, it has taken many different paths over the past hundred years. Over the past thirty years in particular, the Great War continues to act as a groundswell of memory, under the effect of the gradual disappearance of the last witnesses, the [historiographical](#) renewal around cultural and social issues, social dynamics, and remembrance policies.² Because of its multifaceted nature, bringing together family history, diverse cultural, patrimonial and militant appropriations, and political references to the conflict, notably during the commemorations of 1998 and 2008, the First World War stands apart in French memory. The centenary is thus part of a form of continuity. But the remembrance of this past is distinguished by its duration, spread over almost six years, its intensity, and its territoriality. From 2014 to 2018, more than 7,000 labeled events by the *Mission du Centenaire* (Mission) took place in [France](#), a rate of almost four per day. The only comparable event was the bicentenary of the French Revolution, which was originally intended to serve as a model. As in 1989, the state and its various subdivisions ([education](#), culture, foreign affairs, prefectures, etc.), local authorities, and private players (artists, associations) were mobilized extensively. The 150 million euros committed by these different groups is a measure of the investment in [commemoration](#).³

As for the bicentenary, the state set up an organization, the *Mission du Centenaire*, a public interest group whose objectives were to organize the highlights of the commemoration, to coordinate and support private and public initiatives in France or organized by France abroad, and finally to communicate about the events and ensure the dissemination of information about the conflict.⁴ With this in mind, the Mission established a classification system for identifying the most innovative projects that took place under its remit. This process, which was based on departmental committees and the expertise of the Mission's scientific council members, is a valuable source for estimating the number and type of events that took place during the period, and for drawing up a quantitative assessment of this commemoration. At the end of 2018, the president of the scientific council, historian [Antoine Prost](#), attempted to present an initial assessment of the Mission's activities and the centenary commemorations as a whole, concluding that: "Alongside the expected official events, we were surprised by the public's desire to commemorate, coming from local authorities, associations, learned societies, museums, libraries, street theater groups, etc."⁵

This success was not guaranteed, because the Mission almost disappeared before the start of the commemorations. However, it has managed to move away from the bicentenary model where the year 2014 was to concentrate all the commemorations, in favour of a commemorative rhythm, alternating international, national and local celebrations, spread over

five years.⁶ This exceptional longevity has led the commemorations to experience momentum shifts, marked by high points in 2014 and 2018 and periods of lesser intensity or ones concentrated on specific areas. This duration has also been an exceptional laboratory for analyzing and understanding commemorative practices around the Great War. Two areas in particular have emerged: a social and cultural dynamic around the Great War, and a political will oriented towards the international dimension of the centenary and the major celebrations.

The Centenary, a Powerful Social and Cultural Dynamic

If we look only at the number of events organized in France from 2014 to 2018, it is clear that the commemoration was a popular success. The Mission approved 7,414 projects over the period. 6,455 of these projects came from [schools](#), approved by rectorates, and from regions, whose proposals were analyzed by departmental commissions. These figures reflect only part of the commemorative dynamic. We must add the events that did not apply for official recognition and therefore fell under the statistical radar. For Antoine Prost, the total number of initiatives is more like 30,000.⁷ This estimate calls for several comments. The duration of the centenary has favored a multiplication of the number of events, leaving the actors ample time to organize their actions over five years. Although 2014 and 2018 were undoubtedly high points, the years 2015-2017 were not devoid of action. While the country comprises just under 35,000 communes, there was an event in almost every town or village. However, not all communes participated in the commemorations. There are areas where the centenary commemorations were much more dynamic than others. These chronological and spatial variations deserve attention because they underline the social and cultural dynamics at work during the centenary.

Time and Space of the Commemorations at the Time of the Reviews

The various assessments commissioned at the end of the Mission's activity all highlight three commemorative periods, which correspond to the recommendation in Joseph Zimet's report *Commemorating the Great War*, submitted to the president of the republic in 2011:⁸ the year 2014, the period 2015-2017, and 2018. However, these time periods were not equally weighted. 2014 was the central focus of the centenary. Cultural institutions ([archives](#), [museums](#), [libraries](#)), various associations and private interests ([art](#) companies, publishers, etc.) prepared the first year of the commemoration far in advance, leading to a veritable deluge of events and publications. No fewer than 511 exhibitions with the Mission's label were held in the region during the year, and the Mission received a further 2,300 applications.⁹ In highly competitive fields such as publishing, the centennial events began at

the end of 2013, when President F. Hollande officially launched the commemorative rhythm. Thus, nearly 300 titles on the First World War were put on the market that year (compared to about 150 in 2012). Books published on the Great War were even more numerous the following year, in 2014, when publishers published 659 new titles and reprints.

During this first commemorative rhythm, in which the Mission and key cultural structures played a very important role, the following three years saw a decline, and 2015 was the least active year of the centenary. It is likely that there was a saturation effect at play for the public. 2015 also did not have a major celebration that attracted the attention of national political authorities and the media. However, 2016 and 2017 saw a commemorative rebound, mainly linked to the celebration of the major events of the conflict such as the [battles of Verdun](#), the [Somme](#), and the Chemin des Dames; the entry of the [United States of America](#) into the war, and the Russian [revolution](#), among others. Thus, during these three years, the requests for labeling fell to 707 in 2015 and 606 in both 2016 and 2017.¹⁰ As shown by the 474 exhibitions organized and labeled and the 320 or so books published, 2018 was the second most active year of the centenary. But unlike in 2014, when events were held throughout the year, the commemoration in 2018 was concentrated on the second half of the year, with November 11 as the high point.

In his pre-event report, Joseph Zimet proposed splitting the commemoration between national events and others carried out by local authorities. The results show that this scheme worked rather well and we can say, as Antoine Prost has argued, that all of France commemorated the Great War.¹¹ The memory of the conflict is inseparable from the French landscape, which was strongly marked by [destruction](#) along the 750 kilometers of the front line. Even if the demonstrations were very numerous in the departments affected by the hostilities, the commemoration was not limited to them.

Other institutions behind the front line also had a role to play: they stood out for their strong cultural offerings and/or the liveliness of the memory of the war. The major cities of Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, and Rennes are part of this group. Very often, the exhibition projects mounted in these population centers were designed in cooperation with academics specializing in the conflict and in Paris in particular by the major institutions holding important collections on the Great War (National Archives, National Library, *La Contemporaine*, Army Museum). These cultural institutions participated according to their specialties in the scientific committees, as on the occasion of the exhibition *Été 14* organized by the National Library. These institutions were able to gather international and national specialists to participate in their events. Another result of these events were the scientific collaborations begun before the start of the centenary with research centers and universities

nearby. The varied presence of cultural and scientific players has encouraged commemorative initiatives, but these are also based, depending on the area, on a memory of the Great War that is still very dynamic. It is therefore no coincidence that the Breton departments (Cotes-d'Armor, Finistère, Ille-et-Vilaine, Morbihan) are among the key areas of the centenary. Since 1914-1918, the issues of remembrance were particularly centered on the question of the number of mobilized soldiers killed and [war memorials](#),¹² as they are linked to the issue of Breton identity and make a powerful contribution to it. This strength of memory is reflected in the attendance of cultural events, which is rather high compared to other parts of France. The exhibition on *Les Morbihannais dans la Guerre 14-18* organized in 2014 by the departmental archives of Morbihan thus attracted 4,341 (non-school) visitors in one year while the exhibition *1914, Les moissons interrompues*, organized by the departmental archives of the Gard, welcomed about 2,000 people.¹³

The existence of a varying interest in the Great War from one region to another sheds light on a final group of departments where interest in the Great War has waned during the centenary. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons that led these areas to invest little in remembrance activities. The sparsity of cultural, educational, or commemorative actors, such as [veterans' associations](#), as well as the low social demand around the war are all reasons that explain this relative distance from the centenary. It is important to stress "relative" in this context. Firstly, not a single French department avoided commemoration completely; and secondly, the data we use to measure commemorative activity – that of the Mission's labeled events – only reflects part of the activities that took place within the various regions. The case of the Gard shows that the difference can be very significant. While the departmental committee for the centennial identified twenty-one projects for the Mission, an analysis of the local editions of the main regional [press](#) title (*Le Midi Libre*) reveals that 102 events were organized around the Great War in the department between January 2014 and December 2018.¹⁴ Thus, these territorial characteristics must be treated with caution and contextualized. However, it is reasonable to think that this method of centennial mapping is very close to the commemorative practices in the area.

Actors of the Commemorations

The centenary was of an unprecedented duration and spatial presence and was also distinguished by the great variety of actors involved. A review of the events that took place in the Gard region gives us an idea of the breadth of involvement: it includes departmental councils, municipalities, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, [music](#) conservatories, veterans' associations, local history and heritage associations, groups of genealogists, professional musicians, and regular people with a passion for the conflict. This

variety seems to confirm that the Great War occupies a special place in French society and also shows an awareness of the centennial event, as if most of the cultural actors had a duty to participate in the commemoration. Prior to the centenary – and decennial celebrations aside – remembrance was very much alive in veterans' associations, as guarantors of the memory of the fallen.

However, the promoters of the labeled projects show another reality. Schools (primary, middle, and high schools) organized 35 percent of the actions during the centenary, thus establishing themselves as the primary commemorators. As for the communes, they organized 27 percent of the labeled commemorations. The analysis carried out in the Gard department shows that the large [urban](#) centers (Nîmes, Pont-Saint-Esprit) tended to have a greater number of events during the centenary, which a municipality could not afford due to a lack of actors and financial or human resources. On the other hand, the participation of small municipalities (Codognan: 2,400 inhabitants, Vénéjan: 1,200 inhabitants, Saint-Gervais: 700 inhabitants) is far from negligible and can be encapsulated by the classic ceremonies of 11 November at the foot of the town's war memorial organized around the mayor's speech, the presence of flag bearers and the reading of texts by [children](#). In this type of municipality, 11 November is still largely the focal point of commemoration. In Saint-Gervais, an exhibition evoking the genesis of the war memorial and the mobilized who were killed during the war was inaugurated on 11 November 2014 near the monument.

The exhibition in Saint-Gervais was prepared by the village's heritage association. This type of actor organized as many projects (27 percent) labeled by the Mission as the communes did during the centenary. The associations that took part cover a very broad spectrum, from learned societies to historical and genealogical associations, artistic companies, and veterans' groups. In its regional report, the Mission proposes a typology of the associations that carried out the labeled projects. Grouping all historical, heritage and genealogical associations into a category of "cultural associations", this report shows that these actors carried out more than half (55 percent) of the events. Artistic companies (theater, music, performing arts, etc.) accounted for 17 percent, and veterans' associations, the traditional organizers of the 11 November ceremonies, for 15 percent.¹⁵ Their actions were complementary and often interacted with each other, as many commemorative programs show.

Nearly 90 percent of the labeled projects were organized by schools, municipalities, and associations. This figure gives the impression that departments, regions, government services and higher education institutions were not very mobilized during the centenary. This absence is only *trompe-l'oeil*. The regions and departments financed the labeled projects to the tune of 35 million euros. The departmental archives, which preserve local holdings on the

Great War, played an important role in disseminating memory, whether through exhibitions, educational workshops for children, conferences, or participation in the digitization and online publication of registers of personnel numbers. The universities committed themselves through their researchers who curated or accompanied the commissioning of the major national exhibitions and appeared in the media at some 1,467 events during the commemoration.

The number of events held during the centenary throughout the country over five years by a wide variety of actors, demonstrates that the commemoration cannot be reduced to a vertical, top-down political initiative. The centenary largely came from below, which explains its unprecedented scale.

Youth Mobilization

Before the centenary, very often the [youth](#) were associated with commemoration of the Great War. Elementary school and college pupils were particularly involved in 11 November, along with elected representatives and veterans' associations. Students were invited to read extracts of testimonies or accompany the ceremony in song. The Mission wished to move away from this passive model of youth participation.

With this in mind, it set up academic labeling committees responsible for examining school projects. Between 2014 and 2018, just over 2,200 projects were proposed and just over one million euros were allocated.¹⁶ Secondary schools (middle and high schools) mobilized a great deal, at the impetus of history and geography teachers in particular, which enabled students to work on themes present in the contemporary historiography of the conflict including communities of mourning, combatant and civilian experience, and the transnational dimension. Numerous interdisciplinary projects were also built with teachers of modern languages, [literature](#), arts, and [sciences](#) and in partnership with veterans' associations and offices (like *L'office national des anciens combattants*, ONAC) and archival professionals. The involvement of these actors helped give new impetus to the commemorative ritual by having students work on local memories of mourning. Very often, the projects consisted of a study of the individual or collective journeys of soldiers who "died for France", which were presented in the form of a temporary exhibition or reading on the occasion of 11 November memorial events.¹⁷ Trips to the local war memorial, workshops organized by the departmental archive services, research on the online Great War archive databases, and the participation of local historians were all part of this activity, which was a means of helping the students understand the interactions between local memory and its national and even international issues.

The fact that a significant number of educational projects were spread over a school year and beyond helped consolidate the students' remembrance of the Great War. This historical and memorial work gave rise to a wide variety of productions: exhibitions, fictitious notebooks and booklets written from the perspective of soldiers and civilians, audio-visual productions of web radio, and active participation in the great celebrations, such as in [Verdun](#) in May 2016 where 4,000 young German and French students participated in an event choreographed by Volker Schlöndorff, and in Paris on 11 November 2018, where forty-eight high school students from the Créteil academy participated in the organization of the event and reading of texts.¹⁸ These original approaches to the memory of the Great War are close to forms that are well established in pedagogical practice. Visiting places of memory is a classic activity that can be found in 30 percent of the school projects awarded the Mission's label. The places chosen by the teachers confirm strong trends from well before the centenary. The Somme and Meuse rivers occupied a central spot, and Verdun remained the place of remembrance *par excellence* for schools throughout the commemoration of the Great War. However, the renewal of historiography and the dynamics of the centenary have enabled other places to establish themselves as essential memorial sites for school visits. This is the case of the *Chemin des Dames*, whose history and memory of the 1917 battle was the subject of scientific work and a major museum development twenty years ago. These two elements are important for the visits because they support the pedagogical purpose of the teachers. And in this context, the *Chemin des Dames* offers students the opportunity to work on their memory, focusing on the combatant experience and the universal figure of the [Poilu](#), both [hero](#) and victim of war.

The Centenary from Below

The strong participation of civil society surprised the organizers of the commemoration of the Great War. This dynamism led the Mission to change its model at the beginning of the centenary and adopt a multi-year approach.¹⁹

Family Memory

In 2008, the digitization and online publication of the records of French soldiers who died and their marching and operations logs undeniably supported the demand for remembrance of the Great War by making it easier to access. One figure illustrates this dynamic, that of the consultation of the database of the Morts pour la France (Dead for France). Between November 2013 and June 2019, 39,898,550 searches were carried out on the site.²⁰

While the memorial dimension certainly dominates in the consultation of the Morts pour la France (Dead for France), the use of the database of those executed during the First World

War seems to meet slightly different objectives. From November 2014, when it was published online, to June 2019, 550,000 searches have been carried out within it. The creation of this database follows the proposals of Antoine Prost's report concerning those executed as an example submitted to the minister of veterans affairs.²¹ This proposal, as well as that of creating an educational space in a museum, was taken up by President Hollande in 2013. The memory around this issue is very much alive, mobilizing the political world, families whose ancestors were convicted, and the curious interested in the functioning of [military justice](#) during the Great War. Entering this history through the prism of the individual confronted with the arbitrariness of the military authorities of the time or that of the victimization of the men mobilized – two contemporary approaches to the historiography of the Great War – gives us an understanding of the war as it was. In this respect, the choice of the Army Museum as the venue for this history appears highly symbolic. Inaugurated in November 2014, the space is fully attached into the history of the First World War. This new museum installation has generated little debate, which perhaps shows that historical work plays a role in calming the memory and in the collective acceptance of the events of the past.

The volume of consultation of the database of those shot is testament to the predominance of electronic access in the public use of the archives of the Great War. The consultation data from the departmental archives of the Gironde department clearly shows this shift. The matricular registers were put online in 2015. Before that date, between 2012 and 2014, there were on average 1,600 archive consultations on the Great War per year. From 2015 to 2017, there was an average of 5,100 consultations per year. Access to electronic documents has, in the case of the departmental archives, multiplied the volume of consultations by three. This interest was maintained or even increased throughout the centenary and did not decline, as was the case between 2015 and 2017 for other commemorative practices. The number registers put online by the departmental archives of the Marne, for example, increased from almost 10,000 consultations in 2015 to just over 25,000 in 2018.

Family Heritage and History of its Own, La Grande Collecte

Organized by the National Archives, the Mission, and the National Library, the *Grande Collecte* (Great Raising) is a nationwide operation calling on the French population to document or donate their personal or family memories to the event's partner institutions. In 2013, 2014, and 2018, the public was invited to bring their documents dating from the First World War to the archives and libraries participating in the operation. The first round of collection in 2013 was carried out by sixty-two departmental archive centers, the National Library and a dozen municipal libraries, before being extended the following year to ninety municipal archives and the *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine* (renamed *La Contemporaine* in 2018). It was also the subject of an ambitious territorial

partnership, like the meeting of several cultural and scientific players in the Pas-de-Calais: the Coupole, Louvre Lens, Nord-Pas-de-Calais History, Memory Center and departmental archives. The documents brought by individuals were digitized, indexed and a small part of them was put online on the *Grande Collecte* website and, at the same time, on Europeana 14-18.²²

More than 20,000 people brought [letters](#) from soldiers, notebooks, and photos to the collection events organized in 2013 and 2014; 325,000 documents were digitized, showing through this volume of documents put online the vivacity of the memory of the war within families in the present day. The large number of people who took part in the *Grande Collecte*, reflecting the scope of local initiatives from 2014 to 2018, illustrates this vitality, however, it is difficult to know whether this is a rediscovery on the occasion of the centenary or a continuation of family memory that was just waiting to emerge in a favorable context.²³ A century away, the desire to make family memories part of our heritage remains very strong. It largely dominates over an awareness of the scientific interest of digitized objects, which could have led to the deposit of these coins in public funds. While 420 people came to the National Archives in 2014 to have their heritage objects digitized, only a third of them wished to bequeath them to the institution. Another phenomenon also attracted attention when the participants came to *La Contemporaine* in 2014. The overwhelming majority of the fifty-seven participants who came to the library were over sixty-five years old.²⁴ They were able to document very precisely the context in which the objects, correspondence, drawings, or photographs were passed down. The majority of them were directly related (grandchildren or even children) to the creators of the documents. Of course, this observation cannot be generalized to all the participants, but it allows us to formulate the hypothesis that a significant part of the public who came to participate in the “raising” had a direct memory of the documents and represented, in a way, the last witnesses capable of speaking about this transmission of family memory of the Great War.

The First World War Community on the Web

Along with the database of the Morts pour la France (Dead for France), the consultation of the registers of military personnel is probably the best example of the vitality of the memory of the Great War during the centenary. This family use of the archives is a remarkable demonstration of the appropriation of the memory of the conflict by the population, which brought a more intimate dimension. Even if we do not have elements that allow us to know the profile of online users, the hypothesis that families, genealogists, and enthusiasts make up the majority of connections can be put forward. The profile of the participants in the collaborative indexing of matricular registers initiated as part of the *Grand Mémorial* project

seems to confirm this hypothesis. This concluded they are mostly individuals interested in the First World War, either historically or as families, and in genealogy. The 103,670 contributions to the indexing of the matricular registers kept by the departmental archives of the Saône-et-Loire gives an idea of the extent of interest in these documents.²⁵ This participation is also testament to the importance the presence of the Great War on the [internet](#) has for the population's engagement.

The centenary did not create this craze on the web, which is another form of activism around the Great War. Since the 2000s, there have been many sites, forums, and personal pages online on the war that contribute to building and animating a community that vigorously maintains the memory of the First World War. There is as yet no study on the role of the internet in the centenary. To try to understand what this presence on the internet represents, one must turn to the work of Valérie Beaudoin carried out in 2014 on the "Pages 14-18" forum. Opened in 2004, it registered 18,000 members in 2014 who have since posted nearly 400,000 messages.²⁶ At the end of the commemorations, in November 2018, the forum had more than 23,700 subscribers and contained 495,000 messages.²⁷ Today, the forum has 24,789 members and over 516,000 posted messages.²⁸ These figures show that interest in the conflict has not diminished with the end of the centenary. The online Great War community is still as active as it was in 2014 or before.

Memory Groups Under the Centennial Spotlight

The second most prolific actors of the centenary, based on the labels, were the associations, who were very active during this period. Their activities were driven by Great War enthusiasts, whether civilians or veterans, who came together to keep alive the memory and remembrance of the conflict. The commemoration highlighted three types of memorial associations: veterans' groups, such as the [Union Nationale des Combattants \(UNC\)](#), which are very involved in the commemoration of conflicts; those working to preserve and enhance sites; and those seeking to bring the history of the Great War to life. We have chosen to focus specifically on the latter two categories because their action is particular to activism around the First World War. The work of veterans' associations is indeed more typical, centered on the perpetuation of the duty of remembrance and in particular on participation in the commemoration of 11 November.

The associations focused on the heritage and revivalism of the First World War (wearing uniforms, restoration of vehicles, and logistical and military elements such as camps and trenches) are therefore part of a long tradition of remembering the Great War. The centenary acted as a powerful endorsement of their activities by putting them at the center of the

commemoration. The reenactors were indeed very much in demand throughout the centennial. The activity of a group from Vaucluse, *Mémoires de Poilus*, between March and October 2018 gives an idea of the intensity of the investment of these associations during the centenary.²⁹ Its members took part in sixteen reenactments over the period, which took them on a fifty-three-day tour from Sète to Armentières. These associations were not only been called upon by local authorities and schools on the occasion of the 11 November ceremonies, for parades or presentations in the classrooms; but also by the state, which, on 14 July 2014, paraded several of these associations on the Champs-Élysées and thus incorporated living history into its commemoration rites, introducing a significant break in its practices.

The 14 July 2014 ceremony incorporated a well-established memory practice. The reenactors of the Great War – fourteen associations in total – are few in number in comparison to the communities reenacting the Napoleonic armies, the Second World War or the Middle Ages, which is the most popular period,³⁰ in events that attract large crowds. However, they embody a cultural activity that renews the interest in the history of the conflict, bringing it to life in the eyes of the public. This way of showing the conflict has been very successful as demonstrated, for example, by the 5,388 subscribers to the [Facebook](#) page who follow the activities of the reenactment group *Le Poilu de la Marne*.³¹ This contemporary, almost tactile, connection with the Great War explains why these associations have worked a lot with schoolchildren. The association *Mémoires de Poilus* is perhaps the group that has pushed this re-creation of the Great War the furthest by reproducing a trench, which is open to visitors, on the private land of a member of the association in Althen-des-Paluds (Vaucluse).³² These singular reconstructions may perhaps trivialize the war and dilute the importance of remembrance of the dead, but they also contribute to the emergence of a new form of remembrance of the Great War that is more open to exchange with the public than traditional commemorations.³³

Commemorative Practices

Posting a message on a forum, searching for ancestors who died during the hostilities, organizing a symposium, publishing a story, putting on a show about the *poilus*, or visiting a site from the First World War are all commemorative practices that existed before the centenary. However, the commemoration from 2014 to 2018 brought all these practices together and integrated them. While a third of the projects labeled by the Mission were organized by schools, 18 percent of the initiatives supported were exhibitions, 11 percent performances, and 6 percent publications. These are very classic types of action, but they are

based on the historiography of the Great War of the last thirty years. Many of these initiatives focused on issues of remembrance and on the experience of combatants and civilians. They emphasized the suffering of soldiers, the role of [women](#) during the conflict and the mobilization of children. If there is a “centenary effect”, it lies in the fact that the cultural and social history of the Great War was disseminated on an unprecedented scale.³⁴ One of the reasons for this is the broad participation of conflict specialists in cultural activities. Many of them acted as scientific advisers for exhibitions or documentaries and spoke at conferences for the general public. Another is the popularization of this historiography for almost twenty years through secondary education and the media.

The lack of information on most of the 30,000 events organized in France between 2014 and 2018 makes it difficult to have a complete picture of commemorative practices. We have already tried to highlight several of them throughout the article, but we would like to focus on a few types of celebrations that we think are interesting for what they reveal about commemoration. Returning to the exhibitions, however, allows us to go into more detail than we did on the themes developed for the centennial. Focusing once again on [battlefield tourism](#) during the commemorations is a way of addressing the issue of economic returns. Taking an interest in the visual documentaries produced during the celebrations gives an idea of what was broadcast and seen on television, the most popular media even though it is increasingly competing with the internet. It is also worth analyzing the only new cultural practice born of the centennial, the commemorative cycle, which was among the most numerous types of celebration. Finally, this picture of practices would be incomplete without an analysis of political practices on the occasion of major commemorations.

Local, Transnational: Exhibitions

Considering the number of events held during the centenary, at least 3,000 exhibitions were probably organized during the period, and more than 70 percent of them took place in 2014. Not all of them were of the importance of *Vu du front* by La Contemporaine and the Army Museum, which, at the end of 2014, brought together more than 200 European works. The focus of this exhibition was on representations of the front by combatants and commissioned artists. It attracted nearly 35,000 visitors who came to see works (painting, [photography](#), sculpture, [film](#), etc.) that sought to show the different facets of the war from its most sanitized to its most brutal. As in this case, the majority of establishments chose to prepare exhibitions for the beginning of the centennial in 2014. This is the case for the National Library and the departmental archives of the Ardèche (*Fragments d'histoire: l'Ardèche dans la Grande Guerre*). These exhibitions began in September 2014, for the most part. As the titles of the examples suggest, the conflict was treated as a whole, from its origins to its conclusion, and addressed both the question of the front (mobilized soldiers, links with the

rear, daily life at the front, fighting, death, representations) and the rear (economic life, reorganization of society, reception of the conflict). The themes developed during these exhibitions placed importance on the social and cultural dimensions of the conflict.

These global exhibitions were also seen as the starting point for a cycle of exhibitions, following the example of the departmental archives of the Gard. In 2014, the exhibition *1914, les moissons interrompues* focused on mobilization and the entry into the war. It was seen by 2,000 people. In 2017, the archives of the Gard proposed *1917, et après?* which begins with the social and military contestation in France and [Russia](#), and then discusses exiting the war. This work on social movements, both civil and military, and on exiting the war is as close as possible to the latest historiographic trends on mutinies and [attempts at peace](#). This national and international approach to the conflict was constantly linked to the local context. The choice to evoke the regional aspects of the Great War was one of the keys to the success of these exhibitions. The circulation of the itinerant version of the exhibition *La Loire-Inférieure dans la Grande Guerre* organized by the departmental archives of the Haute-Loire gives an idea of this territorial dynamic. Borrowed seventy-one times by municipalities, it was seen by 10,087 people. These exhibitions addressed all dimensions of the conflict (social, economic, political, cultural, women's commitment, mobilization of children, memorials), cross-referenced sources (photographs, official archives, private correspondence, posters) and diversified the focus, sometimes evoking the international context of the war, sometimes the national and local contexts.

These exhibition themes were related to more classical subjects, such as the republican school of [warfare](#), war technologies (above all aviation) or related to the major stages of the conflict. In this respect, the entry into the war by the United States in 1917 and their arrival on French soil gave rise, in 2017 and 2018, to several exhibitions in the port cities where they landed, and in the areas where these troops were stationed. 20 percent of the exhibitions organized took place in the final years of the centenary. These exhibitions focused solely on the end of the conflict. In this context, three subjects dominated: the return of [Alsace-Lorraine](#) to France, reconstruction, and the end of hostilities. As these subjects had a strong regional resonance, they were approached from a local perspective. Such was the case with the exhibition *1918, la Haute-Saône se souvient*, curated by the departmental archives. The aim was both to show the difficult return of combatants to civilian life, based on the latest historical research on this subject and through public or private archives or documents, and to evoke immediate memory (mourning and war memorials are emphasized) and long-term memory, using an equally renewed scientific approach (the role and place of veterans, in particular).

Battlefield Tourism Boosted by the Centenary

Since the 1920s, many memorials, museums, interpretation centers, and restoration projects have been built on or near battlefields. Intended to preserve memory, to become places of pilgrimage or simply to represent the heritage of the Great War, these areas have seen the development of tourism, which changed as the centenary progressed. In 2014, there were nearly 1,000 places and sites of remembrance, mainly in the two regions that experienced the battles of the Great War: the Hauts-de-France and the Grand-Est. Aware of the economic stakes of the centenary, local authorities and the state made a strong commitment by investing nearly 150 million euros between 2014 and 2018. For example, the renovation of the Verdun Memorial, inaugurated in February 2016 at a cost of 12.5 million euros, was mainly financed by the state, the Lorraine region, and the Meuse department. The economic returns have been impressive. In the two regions of the Hauts-de-France and the Grand Est, spending by visitors coming to visit the battlefields between 2014-2018 was estimated at 270 million euros. In 2018 alone, the impact of remembrance tourism is estimated at 93 million euros, of which 22 million is directly attributable to the centenary.³⁵ The research firm that conducted an analysis on the economic impact of the commemoration for the Mission and the two regions estimates that the centennial has increased the tourism impact in both regions by 110 million euros.

By the summer of 2014, the number of visitors to Great War memorial sites was on the rise. The Wellington Tunnels in Arras (Pas-de-Calais) thus recorded a 79 percent increase in attendance in July and August of that year compared to the same period in 2013. Memorial tourism also followed the major commemorative events. In 2016, the celebrations of the Battle of Verdun and the Somme benefited the Meuse and Somme departments considerably. The five major memorial sites of the Meuse welcomed a little more than a million visitors in 2016 compared to 597,000 in 2015.³⁶ The quantity of foreign visitors explains, in part, the increase in tourism attributable to the centenary. The promotion of Great War sites was very strong abroad and important work was carried out by tourism players in seven international markets: [Great Britain](#), [Germany](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), [Canada](#), the United States, and [Belgium](#). These nations that fought on French soil have many memorials and cemeteries that attract groups of their nationals. To establish this presence further, these countries did not hesitate to create new memorials during the centenary. The Sir John Monash³⁷ Centre opened in Villers-Bretonneux on 25 April 2018 is perhaps the most emblematic international action on French soil. The Australian [government](#) invested 60 million euros to build an interpretation center that moves away from traditional object-based museography to offer visitors an immersive experience of the war supported by multimedia devices.

The four most visited memorial sites in 2018, which welcomed a quarter of the 1.5 million visitors, are a good illustration of the internationalization of Great War remembrance tourism, which the centenary has reinforced. This internationalization is mainly due to European countries marked by the Great War: British, Belgians and Germans make up the majority of tourists. It is therefore essentially a form of local tourism. If Verdun is among these four sites, Notre Dame de Lorette, where a memorial bearing the names of the 580,000 soldiers of all nationalities who fell in the Pas-de-Calais was inaugurated in 2015, [Thiepval](#) and Vimy complete the quartet. The centenary was therefore a rather successful opportunity to highlight the sites of the First World War. This momentum seems to have continued in 2019.

The Audiovisual Deluge

A place must be reserved for documentaries and [films](#) produced during the increased activity of the centenary. Following the example of tourism, the number of audiovisual productions on the Great War broke records. Between 2014 and 2018, sixty-five documentaries made by French companies were shown on screens.³⁸ The productions deal with the same issues as other cultural events: the cultural and social history of the conflict and issues of remembrance dominate. The focus is on war memorials, photographers on the front, Belgian child [refugees](#) in [Switzerland](#), [Maurice Genevoix \(1890-1980\)](#), war trauma, the mutinies in the Courtine camp, and civilian internees. No theme that has been addressed in the past twenty years by conflict specialists has escaped the attention of filmmakers. The treatment of these relatively recent subjects, which are likely to spark the interest of an audience that has been shown a great deal about the First World War during the centenary through archive footage and the testimony of specialists (television news, docu-dramas, films, rebroadcasts of documentaries released prior to 2014), has not been to the detriment of more classic documentaries focusing on battles (Verdun, the Somme or Vimy) and a few great figures ([Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), [Anne Morgan \(1873-1952\)](#)).

Public interest in the Great War was notably reflected in the documentary *Apocalypse la Première Guerre mondiale*, broadcast on public television in March 2014, which was the media success of the commemoration. Watched by some 5.8 million viewers (a quarter of the evening's market share), the documentary allows itself some liberties in relation to the use of the archives of the time, namely the colorization of images, switchover to 16:9 format, and hyper realistic sound. The use of these technologies gives the images a very contemporary effect. However, the chronological distance with the image filmed at the time is broken. This documentary fits into a field of television representation of history that began long before the centenary. This modern approach to showing history has been much criticized, notably by the specialist of French cinema during the Great War, Laurent Véray, who criticizes the spectacularization of the images reworked for the documentary and the truncated use of the

images of the time.³⁹

The Invention of the Centennial: The Commemorative Cycle

The number of documentaries shows that the centenary was an opportunity seized by many cultural actors. But it would be simplistic to limit the scope of the commemoration to a windfall effect. It was also a period strongly dedicated to the cult of remembrance. It is no coincidence that many events organized in the regions dealt with the war from a local perspective and included an event linked to the war memorial of the town or city. But unlike previous commemorations of the Great War, which were marked by a unity of place (the war memorial), a unity of time (11 November) and a unity of action (the commemorative ceremony), the centennial gave rise to a new type of remembrance event.⁴⁰ 11 November continued to concentrate a significant number of events, but these were spread out over several days or weeks and in various places. The theatrical unity of 11 November disintegrated due to the gradual disappearance of witnesses and the modification of its meaning, particularly with the law of February 2012, which transformed 11 November commemorations into a day of tribute to all the dead for France, diluting the memory of the First World War.

During the centennial, many events continued to take place around 11 November, especially in small towns. They almost always involved the youth. But 11 November took the form of a commemorative cycle organised around several highlights (exhibitions, artistic performances, etc.), which is a novelty. This type of celebration represented 11 percent of the projects labeled by the Mission, which gives an idea of their number. As regional assessment of the centennial shows,⁴¹ exhibitions on villages or cities during the war, men who went off to fight and people who remained behind, along with objects or documents from the archives or on loan from families, formed the backbone of this commemorative cycle, which sometimes took place over several years or took the form of cultural seasons. Cultural events rounded out this system to create a complete and varied commemorative ensemble, combining historical, memorial, educational, and cultural approaches that sought to make the public no longer a passive spectator of remembrance, instead actively involving them in commemoration.

A Political Will Turned Towards the International and Major Commemorations

The state may have been a less visible actor than communities or associations during the commemoration, but its role was still central. It retained the power to coordinate and organize events, as we have seen through the role of the Mission. Since the 1920s, it has been, along with town halls and veterans' associations, a historic player in the celebration of

11 November. From this period and the choice of 11 November in 1922, the memory of the Great War has always been at the center of the political game.⁴² The date embodies commemoration by the state. Over time, there has been a form of dilution of the memory of the Great War in favor of other messages (European construction, peace, etc.) that use this memory according to the present political situation.⁴³ By transforming 11 November into a tribute to all those who died for France, the 2012 law seems to represent the ultimate result of this evolution.

The commemorations by the state during the centenary were in this respect a kind of retrograde step. The state opened all major ceremonies between 2014 and 2018. Their content was very classic in the sense that it marked a refocusing on the “fighters of 14”, on peace, particularly through the promotion of the Franco-German relationship on 11 November 2014, and on a very strong internationalization of the festivities: seventy-two foreign heads of state and [government](#) were present during the celebrations of 11 November 2018. France was also the site of commemorations organized by and in association with the countries of the former British Empire, notably in Picardy and Nord-Pas-de-Calais. The participation of the national political power (president of the republic, [government](#)) and its representatives in the regions (the prefects) alongside the foreign delegations is one of the characteristics of the centenary. For example, by taking part in commemoration of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and Villers-Bretonneux, and by creating a cycle around the entry of the United States into the war, the Mission sought to symbolically affirm the friendship that has been built up between France and these nations since the war. This political will succeeded in showing a form of international concord around the commemorations. In this context, the celebrations organized in Sarajevo in June 2014 (“Sarajevo, Heart of Europe”) are perhaps the only failure of this policy. France failed to convince its European partners of the benefits of joint commemoration and to make the events organized in Bosnia a strong political moment.⁴⁴

Conversely, the political power ensured its presence at the major national ceremonies ([Battle of the Marne](#) in September 2014, at Notre Dame de Lorette in 2015, at Verdun in 2016, and on the Chemin des Dames in 2017). This omnipresence of the “commemorative state-power” has been criticized. Some historians highlight low international participation in the commemorations and the weak discursive contributions of the prime minister and the president.⁴⁵

These criticisms tended to dry up after the Franco-German commemoration in Verdun in May 2016. On this occasion, other criticisms, this time political, coming from a part of the right and the [extreme right](#), focused on the scenography of the commemoration (having children

run between the graves was seen as a sacrilege) and on the concert planned for the evening in Verdun. The latter was to see the rapper Black M perform. Under pressure from the extreme right and facing threats of public order disturbances, the mayor preferred to cancel the performance. The speech delivered by the French president in front of the Douaumont ossuary is part of a tradition which emphasizes the suffering of the combatants of both countries, their desire for peace in the 1920s and the myth of Verdun as a symbol of Franco-German reconciliation.⁴⁶ This return to history then moves on to more contemporary political issues, centered on the future of Europe, the denunciation of the withdrawal and anti-European discourse that targets both the French far-right and left-wing political parties and the UK European membership referendum campaign. Wishing to strike a more optimistic note, the speech finally insists on the role of youth in building the future.

It is also characteristic of the speeches of French heads of state since [Valéry Giscard d'Estaing \(1926-2020\)](#) to move beyond the memory of the war to address immediate and European issues (welcoming migrants, for example). The 2016 ceremony, in the presence of Angela Merkel, takes this logic a step further. François Hollande insisted on the responsibility of both countries in supporting European ambitions.

Subsequent presidential ceremonies returned to a less innovative scenography. The commemoration of the Battle of the Chemin-des-Dames on 16 April 2017 thus bears a strong resemblance in its solemnity and sacredness to the British ceremony organized in Thiepval in July 2016. The French president visited the battlefield, accompanied by two historians, inaugurated a sculpture, and laid a wreath in the German and French necropolis. This rite then continued with a moment opened by the national anthem, followed by the reading of texts by actors and children. François Hollande's speech was centered on the necessity of remembering all combatants and on the forgotten of the republic at war, namely [colonial troops](#) and women. This speech ended with a discussion of the place of the 1917 mutineers in national memory. This debate was opened by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in November 1998 with a speech that called for the reintegration of those executed by the army as an example back into the national memory. This created strong polemics, however this debate has been politically calmed since. By insisting on the fact that:

One hundred years later, it is no longer a question of judging. It is about bringing together. They were all soldiers. They loved their country, they wanted to defend it, like the others. But they were only men, fallible, like all men, confronted with the excesses of a war without limits. Their memory belongs to the nation today.⁴⁷

Hollande thus completely sutured the memory of the mutineers to that of the combatants of the Great War. In this way, he integrated this episode of the war into national memory,

completely and definitively.

This very nationalistic reading of the memory of the First World War was taken up again in November 2018 by the new president Emmanuel Macron on the occasion of his tour of the regions and locations of war memorialization. This *Itinérance mémorielle*, a highly original memorial project, alternated between highly symbolic places to the memory of the Great War, such as Strasbourg, Verdun, Reims and Notre Dame de Lorette, and places less highlighted such as Feignies (siege of Maubeuge in 1914) and Les Éparges, whose memory is strongly attached to the figure of the fighting writer Maurice Genevoix. The visit to these areas devastated by the war was intended to resonate with present pain. With the exception of Strasbourg and Reims, the areas the president of the republic travelled to are very affected by the economic crisis. The desire to make the link between these two sufferings has moreover caught up with Emmanuel Macron and perhaps blurred the legibility of his approach. On his journey, he first encountered demonstrations by the yellow vest movement. Then, his statement on Marshal [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#), in which he legitimized paying homage to him along with the seven other marshals of the Great War, offended some of the public. This dual evocation of Pétain's memory ("great warlord" during the First World War and having also "led to disastrous choices during the second") is in line with the speeches made by several presidents of the fifth republic. [Jacques Chirac \(1932-2019\)](#) ostensibly distinguished himself from his predecessors by refusing to lay a wreath on the marshal's grave. President Macron's remarks especially encapsulate the confusion between memory and history fostered by politicians.

The speech delivered on 11 November 2018 under the Arc de Triomphe, an eminently symbolic place of the Great War since the unknown soldier rests there, continued this national rooting of the memory of war.⁴⁸ This remembrance appealed to the lexical field of sacrifice: the soldiers fought for their country and "died for our freedom". It is very close to the speech delivered by Clemenceau during the armistice. Emmanuel Macron also used the formula "soldier of the law and the ideal". He placed the war waged by France within the field of universal values that the country has upheld since the revolution ("France, the international homeland of liberties"). These national references took precedence in the speech and it was a strong act at the end of the centennial commemoration which completely refocused 11 November around the Great War alone. As has been obligatory since the 1970s, the president of course mentioned the construction of Europe, Franco-German friendship as the foundation of peace and, like his predecessors, collective hopes (the fight against global warming) on the immediate political calendar.

On 11 November 2020, Maurice Genevoix's remains were inducted into the Pantheon mausoleum to be honoured by the French Republic. A tireless figure and witness of the

generation that fought in 1914-1918, he wasn't inducted into the secular temple alone. Taking the title of the war story written by Maurice Genevoix, the national tribute paid by the Centenary Mission and the President of the Republic is addressed to all "Those of 1914". It thus marks the will to symbolically gather the combatants in this place and to commemorate their sacrifice. This entry, proposed in 2011 in Zimet's report on the commemoration of the Great War, can be read as the closing of a cycle surrounding the Great War which began in 2014. The *Mission du Centenaire*, through its labeling policy and its organizational role, was the linchpin of this commemoration. But the memory of the conflict, in France, does not originate with the centenary. For more than thirty years, this memory has been active. Schools, cultural and associative circles, and the political world play a key role in the maintenance of this past. The centenary therefore rather catalyzed this memorial activism than created it. The forms taken by commemorations are, in this respect, far from being unprecedented (exhibitions, publications, youth participation, the development of memorial tourism, the content of political speeches, etc.), with the exception of commemorative cycles, the only truly innovative practice. But the years 2014-2018 are different from previous commemorations. The memory of the Great War has indeed concerned all the regions, not only the former front zones, which were the usual lands of the memory of the conflict. It is probably at this level that the originality of the centenary in France lies, that of having closely mixed political commemoration from above with massive participation from below, from civil society over an extended period of time. Such a commemorative intensity questions the wellsprings of appropriation of the past. Did commemorating for five years truly have an effect on the understanding and construction of the memory of the Great War?

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External Links

- [Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: 2014. Centenaire d'en haut, Centenaire manqué? January 2015 \(Observatoire du Centenaire\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Bost, Mélanie / Kesteloot, Chantal: Les commémorations du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale, in: Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP 30-31/2235-2236, 2014, pp.5-63 \(Cairn\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Déclaration de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, sur le centenaire de la bataille de Verdun, la réconciliation franco-allemande et sur la construction européenne, à Verdun le 29 mai 2016 \(Elysee\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron à la cérémonie internationale du Centenaire de l'Armistice du 11 Novembre 1918 à l'Arc de Triomphe \(Elysee\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Forum Pages 14-18 \(Internet Archive\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Guyvarc'h, Didier: La mémoire bretonne de 1914-1918, in: Bulletin et Mémoires de la SAHIV 14, 2010, pp.219-235 \(Sahiv\) \(Article\)](#)
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- [Registres matricules militaires \(Archives Départementales de Saone-et-Loire\) \(Database\)](#)
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- [Véray, Laurent: "Apocalypse", une modernisation de l'histoire qui tourne à la manipulation, selon l'historien Laurent Véray, in: Télérama, March 2014 \(Télérama\) \(Article\)](#)
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