

Museums

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Summary

This article describes the lives and afterlives of the First World War museums in France, Russia, Germany, and in Britain and its Dominions Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In all these polities, the war was perceived to be an unprecedented event, motivating new and large-scale attempts to record for posterity history as it was happening. During and after the war a diversity of museums of the First World War were established, flourished, were forgotten, or reinvented, illuminating the different paths of nations in the twentieth century. This article analyses the creation and evolution of war museums in each national context during the First World War, through the interwar and Second World War periods, and into the present.

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Introduction

In March 1915, shortly before the Austro-Hungarian [fortress](#) of Przemyśl capitulated after

months of siege, Lieutenant-General [Hermann Kusmanek von Burgneustädten \(1860-1934\)](#) ordered the establishment of a “fortress museum” even as the city had been reduced to eating dogs (the cats having already been eaten).¹ There was in reality very little left to put in it. Nevertheless, in the face of annihilation, the instinct to memorialise and exhibit, and thus escape oblivion, was overwhelming. The impulse to create [collections](#) and institutions narrating the war was widespread, but reflected the differing contexts of the combatant nations. This article will describe the lives and afterlives of the First World War museums in [France](#), [Russia](#), [Germany](#), and in [Britain](#) and its dominions ([Canada](#), [Australia](#), and [New Zealand](#)).² In all these polities, the war was perceived to be an unprecedented event, motivating new and large-scale attempts to record for posterity history as it was happening. New [technology](#), state support, and mass participation permitted collection on a new scale. The singular and novel nature of the war elicited a variety of responses across combatant nations. Individual soldiers collected objects as witnesses of their own war experience. Community groups collected and exhibited war-related images and objects for the curious at home. Combatant nations commissioned officers to write histories, collect artefacts, and organise artists, [photographers](#), and filmmakers to record the conflict. Government and army historical units formed to minutely document all facets of the conflict, creating [propaganda](#) that was simultaneously and explicitly a narrative for the future. This escalation from a broad base of mass collection amongst troops and private actors to huge state-sponsored initiatives is distinctive to the First World War. Armies had traditions of trophy-taking dating back to antiquity, and entrepreneurs had, for example, taken and exhibited photographs of war from the mid-19th century. Some notable military museums of course had their origins before the war, such as the 19th-century Vienna Museum of Military History, and the Musée Royal de l'Armée in Brussels opened in 1910. But the wartime development in some combatant nations of an enterprise that was comprehensive, state-centralised, and consciously part of the national war effort was new and particularly striking given that these schemes were begun when the outcome of the war was uncertain. However, while this process was part of a pattern, it was not realised in all combatant polities. The range of outcomes in private and public museum formation is informative. Looking at the history of First World War museums enables us to understand the processes of wartime propaganda and mobilisation, history creation, and mythmaking in both victorious and defeated states. Seeing how after the war the wide variety of museums of the First World War were established, forgotten, reinvented, or flourished also provides a way of understanding the different paths followed by nations in the 20th century. The sections of this article will analyse the creation and evolution of war museums in each national context during the First World War, through the interwar and Second World War periods, and into the present.

Britain and its Empire

During the First World War

From the beginning of the conflict, objects and images depicting the war were collected and displayed in Britain. Soldiers themselves enthusiastically collected mementoes of their experiences in the form of objects taken from the enemy, debris collected from the battlefield, or souvenirs purchased behind the lines. Many also photographed or artistically represented their experiences, keeping sketchbooks or creating [art](#) from objects to hand such as bullets or shell casings.³ People at home, not having direct experience of the battlefield, sought out opportunities to experience a sense of connectedness with the war. Early in the conflict, diverse groups sponsored exhibitions to connect domestic audiences with the drama of the war. For example, the Leicester Galleries in London mounted several exhibitions (including photographs of Rheims Cathedral before and after German bombardment – visually alleging German barbarism and war [atrocities](#)), and in early 1915 the Royal Academy, the Goupil Gallery (London), the Grafton Gallery, Brighton Museum, Leicester Museum, and the National Museum of Wales mounted exhibitions of Belgian and Belgian [refugee art](#).⁴

These kinds of grassroots efforts soon became entangled with official attempts to encourage support of the war. As the state had control over numerous items from the battlefields (captured war trophies, for example, came under the control of the armed forces and the War Office), community groups and the [press](#) demanded [government](#) assistance in providing artefacts to display. Official endorsement verified these objects' provenance, and thus seemingly guaranteed their authenticity and their authority to describe the war. At the end of 1915, twenty-one captured German field guns and three trench-mortars captured near Loos were provided for display in the Horse Guards Parade, London. Crowds gathered around these captured [weapons](#) were reported to have shown particular fascination with any signs of damage – evidence that they had *been there*.⁵ Like religious relics, and possessing a similarly sacred aura, objects from the front operated as a means to imaginatively translate the powerful experience of war from the combatant to the viewer.⁶ Audiences sought out encounters with the experience of war that were seemingly as authentic as possible. Likewise, the "Active Service Exhibition" organised by the *Daily Mail* for the British Red Cross Society and Order of St. John in Knightsbridge in March and April 1916, gained the aura of authority and authenticity via official involvement. The exhibition's full-sized trench system replica was constructed by sixty men of the Grenadier Guards who had "seen service in France".⁷

This state involvement in representations of the war increased as the war progressed; across Britain and its dominions collecting and exhibiting the war was by 1918 markedly state controlled. This could involve deliberately displacing more demotic means of memory formation. British authorities banned personal cameras on the [Western Front](#) by 1916. Subsequently, although many soldiers continued to take photographs clandestinely, Western Front photographs used by the press and in exhibitions were drawn from a pre-censored pool of official images sent home from the photographers that Britain, and Canada and Australia appointed from 1916 onwards. (New Zealand initially tried to share other countries' photographers, then when this fell through appointed an official cinematographer and photographer in 1917.) Likewise, in 1916, Britain (and then in Canada through [Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook's \(1879-1964\)](#) Canadian War Memorials Fund) appointed its first official war artist, increasing the influence of state agencies over the artistic depictions of the war in circulation.

By 1917, a clear shift had occurred from a patchwork of privately sponsored patriotic war exhibitions to predominantly official control over the collection and display of representations and remnants of the war. Britain founded the National War Museum, which was soon renamed the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in early 1917, responding to proposals by [Charles ffoulkes \(1868-1947\)](#), curator of the Tower Armouries, Lord [Harcourt \(1863-1922\)](#), a backer of the London Museum, and Ian Malcolm, a conservative member of parliament (1868-1944).⁸ In March 1917, a proposal was approved by the War Cabinet,⁹ asserting control over the detritus of war; the War Office then "issued circulars and orders to the various Fronts asking the several Commanding Officers to note Museum requirements and collect specimens that may be of value".¹⁰ The Department of Information, which oversaw the national propaganda effort at governmental level, and the National War Aims Committee, which conducted [domestic propaganda](#), were established the same year. Efforts to display the war to a domestic audience proceeded at the same time as collecting efforts in the field, and the embryonic IWM sponsored mobile exhibitions which travelled the country in aid of war charities. Although the museum existed in the framework of the British government, it operated imperially, and collected objects relevant to the wider [empire](#). From the summer of 1918 the IWM co-ordinated thirty small but representative loan collections distributed from the store of war relics and trophies at Pimlico (London).¹¹ The IWM received applications from all over the United Kingdom for the loan of trophies in aid of approved war charities.¹² Short-term loans travelled to seventy-six provincial towns as part of this programme.¹³

Dominion efforts varied in scale, with Canada's and Australia's the most significant. Australia and Canada began parallel activities advertising their respective contributions to the imperial

war effort to the British public, and consciously creating a record of each nation's feats for posterity. New Zealand's efforts were smaller in scope and began later in the war: for example, New Zealand appointed a group of official war artists to document their war effort between April in 1918 and the beginning of 1919. The remaining dominions of [Newfoundland](#) and [South Africa](#) lacked programmes of even this scale. Australia, meanwhile, was ambitious: by early 1917, official [war correspondent](#) and later official historian [Charles Bean \(1879-1968\)](#) proposed an Australian war museum, and an Australian War Records Section charged with collecting a comprehensive record of Australians in the war was established the same year under the leadership of First Australian Imperial Force clerk [John Treloar \(1894-1952\)](#). Bean also oversaw the creation of a scheme to collect and commission official war art as well as official photographs. Offices and depots were established in France and London to hold collected objects. Official exhibitions of Australian war photographs and [art](#), such as the work of the soldier-artist [Will Dyson \(1880-1938\)](#), were mounted in London and around the United Kingdom.

Canadian efforts were advanced by dominion archivist Sir [Arthur Doughty \(1860-1936\)](#), who travelled to France in spring 1916 expressly to seek out war artefacts to construct an "ancestral heritage".¹⁴ Touring exhibitions formed a large and popular part of Canadian activities. In late 1916, a small collection was exhibited in Canada and major [United States](#) (US) cities.¹⁵ Further exhibitions followed in late 1917 and 1918. Canadian exhibits of posters, painting, etchings, and captured German armaments also formed the principal part of the 1918 Allied War Exposition supported by the US Committee on Public Information and touring major US cities.¹⁶ Before the exhibition opened in Chicago, nearly a million tickets had already been sold.¹⁷ In Chicago, the show also featured a replica first aid dressing station, an eleven-acre reproduction of a French battlefield, and a mock battle staged by the Canadians.¹⁸ Finally closing in March 1919 (in Milwaukee), this exhibition was estimated to have drawn over 8 million spectators.¹⁹

The Interwar Years

Interest in objects and artefacts acquired during the war was not lost during the interwar period. While many demobilised soldiers kept small souvenirs at home, the largest and most significant objects were concentrated into state hands. They were both exhibited and organised into collections ready to be displayed in the national war museums planned for after the war. After the Armistice, war exhibitions staged by the IWM and the Australian War Museum (AWM) became a way of asserting that victory made the sacrifices of the war years worthwhile. In general, the only real resistance to the museum project was voiced on the

political left. For example, in Australia, some Labor Party members of the Sydney City Council suggested that the War Museum's collection ought to be thrown into the sea.²⁰ The IWM and AWM continued to commission art and photographs of war-related subjects. The war art collection of the Ministry of Information was incorporated into the IWM's collection in 1918, and was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Burlington House in December 1919 and January 1920. Travelling trophy shows and exhibitions continued in Canada and Britain. An exhibition of Canadian war trophies and artefacts was mounted in London in 1919.²¹ In Canada, numerous local organisations requested trophies for events like annual fairs and exhibitions, and 125 small trophy displays were dispatched across the dominion in the "Peace Summer" of 1919.²² At the end of the war, ships full of artefacts sailed back to Australia, most arriving during 1919. These included several thousand, mostly German, [artillery](#) pieces and [machine guns](#) captured by Australian troops. After preferred specimens were reserved for the museum, an AWM committee oversaw the distribution of the remaining 3,500 to municipalities throughout the country. These were most often installed as war memorials. Trophies travelled the country by train raising money for the Peace Loan, visiting country towns (especially in Victoria), and public meetings were held at train stations.²³ The train was "The Australian War Museum on wheels, bringing the enemy guns, silent, battered and captured, practically to the very doors of the country people."²⁴

Founding national war museums was the culmination of years of collecting and exhibiting activities. On 9 June 1920, [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) formally opened the IWM at the Crystal Palace in London, under Charles ffoulkes as secretary and curator and Sir [Martin Conway \(1856-1937\)](#) as director-general. The museum was explicitly intended to immortalise the national experience of war:

It is hoped to make it so complete that every individual, man or woman, sailor, soldier, airman or civilian who contributed, however obscurely, to the final result, may be able to find in these Galleries an example or illustration of the sacrifice he made or the work he did, and in the archives some record of it.²⁵

Certainly many people made the trip; approximately two and a half million in the first year. Indeed, organisers believed that "a considerable proportion of the visitors were men and women who had served in the fighting and ancillary forces during the war".²⁶ After four years at the Crystal Palace, the IWM moved to the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, moving again in 1936 to its present location in Lambeth. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the IWM worked in its varied contexts to solidify itself as the primary location for the records, relics, and representations of the Great War. In this they were successful. Local museums,

regimental museums, and notably the Scottish National Military and Naval Museum (which opened in Edinburgh Castle in 1933) also worked to depict the war to their respective audiences. However, for all their efforts, smaller museums looking to exhibit war-related subjects often fell back on loan exhibitions from the national collection.

By contrast, in New Zealand, hopes for a National War Memorial Museum in Wellington soon faded. As a result, the war art collection created by the short-lived New Zealand War Artists' Section of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force was kept by the Department of Internal Affairs and then the Dominion Museum. It was not exhibited as a collection, although individual works were occasionally loaned out for display, such as for the South Seas Exhibition in Dunedin in 1925, and for the opening of the municipal Auckland War Memorial Museum in 1929. Despite its title, this museum was a municipal museum rather than a war museum per se, and war-related objects never formed more than a small part of its collections.

Prior to opening the full museum, the AWM mounted popular temporary exhibitions of aircraft (in Melbourne in 1920) and official war photographs (touring capital cities and regional centres from 1921).²⁷ Still very much steered by its wartime proponents John Treloar and Charles Bean, the AWM proper first opened in a temporary location in Melbourne on [Anzac Day](#), 25 April 1922. (Anzac Day commemorated the landing of the Australian and New Zealand soldiers on the [Gallipoli](#) peninsula in 1915 and was later mythologised as a national baptism of fire.) It featured war art (many pieces being commissioned by a museum committee after the war), war trophies and relics, pieces of military [technology](#), war photographs, and dioramas of particular battles or terrains. It was arranged broadly chronologically and by theatre, creating a narrative which moved from heroic defeat at Gallipoli to a series of Australian victories in 1918. In 1925, the enlarged museum collection was moved and reopened in Sydney as the Australian War Memorial Museum (AWM), where it remained until 1935. Following a design competition, Sydney architects [Emil Sodersten \(1899-1961\)](#) and [John Crust \(1884-1964\)](#) were invited in early 1927 to collaborate on the AWM in Canberra: it was to be a building that would incorporate both the national war memorial and a museum. This "set in stone" the museum's narrative of national coming-of-age already visible in Melbourne in 1922, now to be made sacred by its arrangement around a central memorial courtyard. After delays caused by the Great Depression, the building was opened to the public during the Second World War on Armistice Day (11 November) 1941.

Canada's planned war museum remained in a hiatus during the 1920s. A Commission on War Records and Trophies was created in 1918. It was supposed to prepare a report on how to accommodate the materials Canada had collected so energetically through the war. In May 1919, the commission was also ordered to collect and care for all material appropriate for a

National War Memorial.²⁸ In 1921, however, the wartime union [government](#) of Sir [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) was defeated at the polls and the priority of a national war memorial museum faded under the new Liberal government of [William Lyon Mackenzie King \(1874-1950\)](#). Public opinion was divided in Canada, as French-Canadians resisted the use of the war to promote a unifying national vision. This opposition was rooted both in French Canadian ambivalence to the political project of the dominion as overtly both British and imperial, and the related [wartime political conflicts](#) over conscription.²⁹ Many war trophies were, in an operation overseen by Doughty, distributed across the country for use as war memorials. Canada's main war collection remained stored in an annexe to the National Archives in Ottawa. It was not until 1935, when only one of the original members of the commission remained, that the annexe of the National Archives began to be prepared for exhibition, and the Canadian War Museum opened in it in 1942.

The Second World War and after 1945

The advent of the Second World War meant that the remit of these national war museums, originally intended to exhibit relics of the cataclysm of 1914-1918, widened to include this new war and subsequent conflicts. The Canadian and Australian museums' mission changed even as they opened in 1942 and 1941 respectively and the IWM's changed mission was perhaps somewhat more dramatically witnessed by the German bomb which fell on it in 1941. State programmes for commissioning and collecting representations and objects of war were reanimated: official war artists, war photographers, filmmakers, and collecting units were once again appointed. This time, however, in most cases the institutional museum structures for housing the result already existed. After the Second World War, galleries depicting that war were incorporated into the IWM, the Canadian War Museum, and the Australian War Memorial. In the immediate postwar period too, a South African military museum was put together and then opened in Pretoria.

Over time, the war museums of the Great War in Britain and what had once been the British dominions transformed more broadly into museums of the nation at war (although primarily in the 20th century). In some cases, they became focal points for debates over new ways of displaying history and the politics of contemporary conflict. The IWM, for example, installed immersive experiential exhibits in the 1990s, including the Trench Experience and the "1940s House" (which had originally been a television set).

Debates over the politics of conflict are most pronounced in Australia, where the national war museum is also the national war memorial. This symbolic centrality has only become more pronounced over time: an unknown soldier of the Great War was brought home from the

Western Front and reburied in the Hall of Memory in the centre of the building in 1993, enhancing the building's sacred aura. At the same time, debates continue over whether to include the colonial frontier wars which dispossessed Australia's indigenous people. At present, the memorial includes the stories of the Australian colonies' involvement in British imperial wars, such as in South Africa from 1900-1902, but not the violence of the frontier.

The First World War as the subject for museum display only grew in popularity with the new millennium. A new, purpose-built Canadian War Museum opened in Ottawa in 2005, drawing praise for its design. The [centenary](#) of the Great War provided yet more momentum for exhibition renewal and expansion. The IWM and the AWM both opened new, refurbished World War I galleries to great fanfare in 2014. Although all these museums now present the story of their nations' experience of war more broadly, the heart of their collections and their ethos can be traced back to the project of collecting the First World War.

Germany

During the First World War

At the start of the war, many Germans hoped that it would end in a few weeks. Most Germans believed that their empire was encircled by its opponents and was waging a just war to defend itself. Many young men feared that the war might be over before they could prove their heroism and loyalty to their homeland. Nevertheless, most Germans already realised in August 1914 that this war was a global event, a conflict of unprecedented proportions.

This sense that the war was an unprecedented conflict motivated people from its outset to collect material that had heralded global conflagration. There was an early recognition of the ephemeral nature of leaflets, newspapers, posters, and other materials, and a shared belief amongst librarians, archivists, and private individuals that these materials deserved immediate collection.³⁰ They recognised the impact the war was having on all areas of society and everyday life, and sought to provide extensive material for future research. Collecting efforts were both an expression of pride in the common purpose of the war effort, and a way to foster that togetherness and staying power in support of the war. Naturally, not everything found its way into the collections: there were, for example, no pictures in the collection of the Historical Museum Frankfurt of long queues outside grocery stores.³¹ [Propaganda](#) and collecting were at first closely interwoven, with collectors believing that their own nation was waging a defensive war and fighting according to the [Hague regulations](#) on land [warfare](#). Exhibitions were used during the war to encourage the home population to believe in the inevitability of victory, the rightness of their cause, and the superiority of their homeland.

Deprivations were hidden; sacrifices, justified. War exhibitions organised by the German Red Cross were enormously successful, especially in 1916 and 1917. They showed weapons; [airplanes](#); booty taken from the enemy; and scenes from the trenches featuring mannequins. These scenes were particularly disparaging towards the colonial troops deployed by the British and French, depicting them as brutal and cowardly fighters.

Wartime collecting saw librarians and archivists develop a feeling for a wide array of new sources intended to be evaluated by historians in the future: reports by soldiers; diaries; [letters](#) from the front; and even interviews specifically conducted to tell future generations about the war experience. Photographs and [films](#) developed into important media, and many found their way into the collections. [Newspapers](#) printed by companies for their soldiers in the field were collected, as were newspapers from the trenches, military [hospitals](#), and [prisoner-of-war](#) camps.

Early in the war, some curators began plans to build large war museums, collecting everything from small [cigarette](#) cases to immense cannons. There were practically no limits on the objects collected: coins; porcelain with wartime motifs; dolls; and jewellery all formed part of the array of hundreds of items expressing suffering, hope, or national pride. As in other countries, there was a great demand for those objects made by soldiers in the trenches, military hospitals, or prisoner-of-war camps. In especial demand were objects that could tell a story, such as a weapon, the visible traces of a battle, or a cigarette case that had been hit by a bullet. Although the collectors' motives were neither neutral nor directed solely and dispassionately towards the needs of future research they cannot be regarded as simple contributors to the propaganda machine: many deliberately left future users to interpret the sources.

The Interwar Period

Many collectors and collections faced hard times after the war. The Association of German War Collectors (*Verband der deutschen Kriegssammler*) ceased its activities as early as 1921 and reported with regret that many collections could not be continued and that the Association of War Collections (*Verband der Kriegssammlungen*) had also had to cease its activities.³² In Germany, the collections were placed into storage; books were catalogued and read only in libraries. A single private collection was able to survive due to foreign assets: the World War Library (*Weltkriegsbücherei*, WKB) in Stuttgart, belonging to the industrialist [Richard Franck \(1871-1931\)](#). Although the library made large numbers of loans to doctoral students, it generally attracted significantly fewer visitors than had been anticipated. This may have been due in part to the fact that a chair of history was not established at the Technical University in Stuttgart until 1931; this establishment enabled the state of Baden-

Württemberg to prevent the removal of the library to Berlin.

Despite these difficulties, the library and its collection continued to be a tool for both the scholarship and political debates around how the war was understood in interwar Germany. The library's director, [Friedrich Felger \(1882-1969\)](#), began organising lectures and conferences in the 1920s; these lectures had a clear political thrust. Two main issues had emerged: firstly, the fight against the [Treaty of Versailles](#), and the related, critical question of war guilt; and secondly the presentation of enemy propaganda. Felger, and by extension the library, advanced a particular perspective on these issues: in 1925, he declared that the library had become a meeting point for propagandistic efforts to combat the lies of war guilt.³³ Contemporaries believed that the German "educational work" had been too naive and too honest. Many of the collection's documents were recruited as evidence to call for the revision of the Treaty of Versailles. When the library's world war museum was inaugurated in 1933, the aggressive tenor of the curatorial voice was unmistakable. Pictures from the overcrowded museum rooms testify to the popularity of the collection. A striking photo from one of the exhibition rooms shows a collage of posters and leaflets, in the middle of which is painted a personification of Germany, wrapped in chains by its neighbours: this was the library's depiction of the Treaty of Versailles. Promising a better future, the [National Socialists](#) completed the museum's presentation of the collection in 1933,³⁴ when a [monument](#) to the [fallen](#) German soldiers was erected in the foyer.

War exhibitions, particularly between 1924 and 1928, mostly remembered wartime events on their own terms. In this they were comparable to postwar exhibitions internationally, if drawn from a rather different perspective. However, there was one museum in Berlin that stood out as a contrast internationally: the Anti-War Museum of the committed pacifist [Ernst Friedrich \(1894-1967\)](#), who displayed photographs of soldiers seriously injured in war to counteract the glorification of the willingness to make sacrifices and the death of soldiers. He was consistently committed to educating young people in the importance of peace and to achieving reconciliation with former enemies. His book *War Against War (Krieg dem Kriege)* was accompanied by texts in four languages (German, English, French, and Dutch).³⁵ Established in 1925, the museum aroused the anger of the National Socialists. It was destroyed by a *Sturmabteilung* (SA/"Stormtroopers") troop in 1933, and Ernst Friedrich and his family went into exile. The museum was reopened in Berlin in 1982.

The Second World War and after 1945

During the war itself, there was collecting activity between 1939 and 1945 comparable to that of the First World War – the interpretation of what was happening in the war was a

conscious part of the war effort, part of wartime propaganda, and thus the task of the Ministry of Propaganda. Those private institutions involved were placed under tight operational restrictions.

Many collections suffered losses during the Second World War. Although the book holdings of the *Weltkriegsbücherei* were first saved – by evacuation to the US Library of Congress – and then restored by the postwar negotiating successes of its then-director, [Wilhelm Hoffmann \(1901-1986\)](#), the museum itself had been destroyed in a bombing raid in September 1944.³⁶

When the World War Library books returned to Stuttgart from the USA in 1948, the new context, in which there was no longer a single or singular “world war”, motivated a name change: at the beginning of the 1950s, the World War Library became the Library of Contemporary History (*Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte*, BfZ), coming under the umbrella of the Württemberg State Library (*Württembergische Landesbibliothek*, WLB) and the state, and being partly funded from 1958 by the federal [government](#). With its new name, the library could also change the area in which it collected, and in the years following became a recognised special library that collected materials from the two world wars, as well as contemporary historical literature since 1945. The BfZ became a department of the WLB in 2000 in order to continue to secure public funding.

The distance of the post-1945 period brought the opportunity to exhibit not just the history but the museology of the First World War. One of the first collections from 1914-1918 to be rediscovered was that of the Historical Museum, Frankfurt, whose archival material was reinterpreted in 1976 for the exhibition *A War Is Exhibited* (*Ein Krieg wird ausgestellt*). The focus of the critical approach was on the images that the Germans had constructed of their enemies. But photographs taken by soldiers in the ruins of destroyed villages in France and [Belgium](#) were also the objects of critical reflection. Historians in the 1970s interpreted the [attitude](#) with which soldiers were photographed in the ruins as pride in their work of destruction.³⁷ Without wishing to enter the debate here, I should point out that dealing with the material collected in 1914-1918 triggered fruitful debates and opened up new fields of research – such as the work of Anne Lipp, who has used newspapers written in the trenches to research the soldiers’ war experience.³⁸

There was no real war museum either in the Federal Republic of Germany or in the German Democratic Republic. In Rastatt, a study collection comprising military [technology](#) was used to train soldiers. The Bavarian Army Museum in Munich (or, since 1972, in Ingolstadt) concentrated on Bavaria, expanding its permanent exhibition at the beginning of the 1990s to incorporate the First World War. Opening in Dresden in 1972 and following the prevailing

ideology, the Army Museum (Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr) depicted the First World War as the birth of Russian-German friendship and legitimised the claim to power of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED). The museum did not deal in a nuanced manner with the two world wars and concentrated instead on the history of the National People's Army and its allies in the Warsaw Pact.

Post-reunification

German reunification offered opportunities to take new approaches to how the record of violence should be exhibited in Germany – opportunities that in some ways transcended the old categories of “war museum”. Following German reunification, the Army Museum was taken over by the Federal Ministry of Defence in 1990 and renamed the Military History Museum. Federal Defence Minister Volker Rühe decided to develop the new location into the Central Army Museum in 1994. Opened in 2011, the museum is unique in Germany. It reflects on the theme of violence and is therefore neither a war museum nor an army museum. The [press](#) has praised the museum from the outset not only for its spectacular building, but also for its consistent inclusion of contemporary works of art, a willingness to challenge its audience – for example, with a film of a kitten dying in poison [gas](#) – and everyday objects linked to war and the army, such as Star Wars toys or clothes by fashion designers. Visitors and the many recruits, both German and international, also praise the museum, which challenges them to reflect on the manifold forms of violence.

The war collections were hidden treasures for many decades, only accessible to readers and users on site. Occasionally, parts of the old collections were even discovered in cellars – in 2013 in Wuppertal, and in 2005 in Detmold.³⁹ A 2008 exhibition entitled “In Paper Thunderstorms” showed how extensive the holdings of the war collections are, and which research questions can be dealt with.⁴⁰ The year 2014 also saw exhibitions on the First World War in many German cities. What was surprising was that many private persons made objects available after they had been called for by the press, refuting the idea that in the German familial memory the First World War plays no role.

The collections received a boost a few years ago with digitisation. The “Europeana Collections 1914-1918” portal linked the digitised holdings of libraries, archives, and museums working together internationally on this innovative project. The digitisation projects not only allow users to use the documents without having to travel long distances, but also broadens access to sources for students and pupils – without endangering those sources. The digitised collections support [school](#) and university projects, and facilitate a large number of exhibitions and smaller research projects. But comprehensive investigations can also be carried out, since digitisation also allows researchers to search the scanned texts for specific keywords or

place names efficiently. Blank spots left behind by the first collectors and gaps caused by later destruction can be closed by digitising, and by archives, libraries, and museums exchanging information. Digital collections continue to grow through action days inviting European citizens to scan and upload sources from their private collections. By May 2014, there were more than 10,000 objects from an array of nations.⁴¹

France

During the First World War

French society was deeply marked by the First World War. France was invaded and [occupied](#) in 1914. French lands suffered from intense destruction, particularly in the northeastern territory and the Western Front (from the Vosges mountains to the Belgian border), as well as enduring extensive mobilisations, heavy [losses](#), and pervasive [mourning](#). The occupation; the massive destruction; the violence on the battlefields; the evaporation of pre-war towns, villages and landscapes; and the suffering of the civilian population constituted an unprecedented trauma in these territories.

In response to this trauma and to express the desire to witness the loss, to document the war and to show the devastation, war collections and temporary exhibitions were produced from the very beginning of the war. A great variety of actors, public or private, national or local, have considered war traces as heritage to be kept and transmitted. In Paris in particular, they took up the task to display the war. Echoing the desire to preserve the ruins and vestiges of war in devastated regions in order to testify “German atrocities”, these museographic practices became an expression of a war culture at the service of anti-German [propaganda](#) and French [nationalism](#).

Contrary to other museums whose activity decreased, the war gave a strong impulse to the development of the Army Museum⁴² located in the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris since 1905. The First World War played a crucial role in the orientation given to this military institution. The Army Museum, originally consisting of the Artillery Museum and the Historical Museum of the Army, enriched its collections from the battlefields. While its success remained low during the first decade of the 20th century, the museum experienced an exceptional influx of civilian and military visitors from 1915 onwards. The public showed enthusiasm for the new collections seen as war trophies and memorabilia, very closely connected with events taking place on the front. According to Caroline Barcellini, the Army Museum affirmed its vocation as a patriotic sanctuary, since its purpose, to contribute to patriotic education, was now coupled with a commemorative purpose. The exhibition of war machines in the museum’s Courtyard of Honour allowed visitors to learn more about the technical innovations of the Germans, but

above all it praised and confirmed the victories of the French, adding to exhibitions of flags taken from the enemy. The Army Museum was, in a way, an extension of the battlefields, as well as an official sanctuary for the relics of war.

As early as 1915, in the context of nationalist exaltation following the German invasion of 1914, certain exhibitions were organised in Paris and testified to the desire to show the architectural and artistic destruction in the war zones. The exhibition of photographs of the destroyed monuments organised in the Musée des Sculptures Comparées by its director [Camille Enlart \(1862-1927\)](#)⁴³ reflected the use of cultural weapons to fight the enemy and support French propaganda. From November 1916 to December 1917, an exhibition of mutilated pieces of art was held at the Petit Palais,⁴⁴ a Parisian museum dedicated to fine art, which had been emptied for fear of bombing. The museum became a centre for cultural propaganda in 1915, where visitors could see remains and fragments of ruined monuments coming from territories alongside the front line. Placed under the patronage of the under-secretariat for fine arts, the exhibition had a strong political dimension and “positions cultural heritage and architecture as the witness and victim of ‘German atrocities’, in a resolutely patriotic reading”.⁴⁵

Some exhibitions reflected the desire to document the war and to display the war as it unfolded on the front, based on artists’ works conceived as testimonies. Six exhibitions by artists and painters who were sent near the front to document the history of the war took place from March 1917 to March 1918 at the Musée du Luxembourg, organised by the under-secretary of state for fine arts.⁴⁶ The commercial sector was also part of this movement, as shown by an exhibition of watercolours painted by [Jean Lefort \(1875-1954\)](#) on the front, held between 1915 and 1916 in the Parisian Petit gallery.⁴⁷

A large number of artists from the front were also represented in the Leblanc collection, an important private collection assembled by a Parisian couple from 1915 onwards with the aim to document various aspects of the war as closely as possible to its current events.⁴⁸ When the Leblanc collection was transferred to the French [government](#) on 4 August 1917, it was divided into three categories detailed by Caroline Fieschi:

bibliographic documents (which became the library with 15,532 documents, including 1,813 posters), iconographic documents (46,025 items, including 7,047 photographs and 725 illustrated posters) and miscellaneous objects (9,644 items) [. . .]. The last two categories became the responsibility of a Museum of the War, and included items as varied as paintings, drawings, prints, illustrated posters, photographs, postcards, objects made by soldiers,

patriotic tableware, toys, figurines, etc.⁴⁹

The collection was moved several times, struggling to find a permanent place to be exhibited in Paris, before it finally opened to the public in 1917.

In certain cities located in the immediate vicinity of the front, some museum curators adopted similar approaches. This is the case in Beauvais, a town located in the Oise department not far from the battlefields, where as early as 1917 a collection of war paintings by [Auguste Ravenel \(1892-1916\)](#), a native of the town, was exhibited in one of the rooms of the local Museum of Archaeology and Fine Arts.⁵⁰

The Interwar Period

Some initiatives born during the war continued during the interwar period; the war exhibition became a genre that spread and sometimes continued the work of anti-German propaganda. Some remains and objects of war exhibited in Parisian institutions were widely circulated, enriching new temporary exhibitions in France and abroad. From the beginning of the 1920s, these events led to new partnerships between Parisian and provincial curators. It has been particularly the case in Strasbourg, capital of [Alsace](#), which had been under German sovereignty since the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). At the request of its mayor, and with the help of the curators of the Museum of the War (the Leblanc collection), an important war exhibition⁵¹ “France and its Allies” took place in 1920 in the former Imperial German Palace in the Neustadt, the German neighbourhood of the city. The aim was to enable Alsatians to learn about how the war was experienced in France and by the Allies.

In 1920, the city of Strasbourg also hosted a new Historical Museum,⁵² which opened in the premises of the former museum of decorative arts, in a context of cultural and patriotic effervescence. Following the return of the French administration, the museums had to be reorganised. As a reaction to the period of German sovereignty over the city (1870-1914), the first collection of the new historical museum was mainly devoted to highlighting the region’s French past (from 1681 to 1870) and the First World War. Housing some pieces of the Leblanc collection, the museum was predominantly filled with donations from patriotic local families. Its first curators aimed to create a memorial dedicated to the citizens of Strasbourg who bore arms in the service of France.

In the front territories and in the cities liberated from German occupation, the interwar period was a time of reorganisation of pre-war museums and collections, many of which had been moved, stored, or destroyed. The desire to set up museums exhibiting the martyred local heritage existed in some cities in the postwar period. This is the case in Noyon, an almost

completely destroyed town located in the “red zone”, where the mayor pleaded for the creation of an anti-German “museum of the occupation”.⁵³ This project ended up failing, and, in the context of reconstruction, the museum set up in the 1930s (opened only in the 1940s) would finally be devoted to the “glorious hours of the city’s past” and to “great local figures”. This example reflects the sense of loss and revenge that still inhabited a part of [postwar French society](#), while at the same time, it shows a marginal place of museography in war commemoration within the devastated territories, where other kinds of practices obtruded: museums appeared to be rare in comparison to the countless war monuments, memorials, necropolises, and cemeteries built in the Western Front territories. While war collections often exist as private enterprises, they were not the dominant mode of public commemoration in the martyred cities or on the battlefields. What seemed to prevail during the interwar period was the need to protect and exhibit the battlefields or some ruined architecture as authentic war heritage. Therefore, some of them were inscribed as national monuments in the 1920s, preserved, and landscaped with memorials, crypts, crosses, and cemeteries – all signs of sacralisation of these memory and mourning places. Museums acted as spaces for constructing the meaning and [memory of the war](#), completing but also competing in the process of making battlefields sacred and cities permanent martyr-status witnesses.

However, in the devastated territories, some small private local museums used to attract the so-called battlefield tourists who were curious about local war-related events. One example was the small exhibit room near the *Caverne du Dragon on the Chemin des Dames*,⁵⁴ a famous battlefield located on the Aisne front, which welcomed visitors from the 1920s. Another example is the war collection added to the Franco-American museum of Blérancourt (Aisne)⁵⁵ by the American philanthropist [Anne Morgan \(1873-1952\)](#), founder of the American Committee for Devastated France, a [humanitarian](#) organization to help the local population. This art and history museum was seen by the American philanthropist and her team as a diplomatic tool to promote a positive image of Franco-American relationships, mutual understanding, and international cooperation in the context of the 1930s. This example illustrates the growing role of foreign stakeholders (particularly from the commonwealth) in the commemoration and monumentalisation of battlefields on the former Western Front during that time.

During the interwar period, however, Paris used to be the place where the most important war collections were developed, first with the reorganisation of the Army Museum under the aegis of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and later, by the opening of the Museum of the War (Musée de la Guerre) in the Château de Vincennes (south east Paris) in 1926. As Caroline Barcellini argues, with the creation of new rooms from 1923, the Army Museum became the

very centre of the commemoration of France's military glories.⁵⁶ Named after four army generals, these rooms celebrated military [heroes](#), both officers and ordinary soldiers. One honoured general killed by the enemy, another was dedicated to the French [poilus](#) and life in the trenches. The museum focused on battle history illustrated by artefacts and war paintings picturing French victories in Alsace Lorraine. Cartels were used mainly to present and explain military operations in which the French army excelled. The museum offered a historical approach to the collections, rather than a technical one of armament, which demonstrated a desire to make the museum's collections accessible to a wide public. It also became a venue for official national or international commemorative ceremonies through official visits, flag ceremonies, and the celebration of the [Remembrance Day of 11 November](#). According to Caroline Barcellini, in pursuing the celebration of high acts of war, the museum used to reactivate a pre-war nationalism in its approach to commemoration. But in doing so, she writes, this museum tended to be "at odds with the ceremonies for the dead that occupy the forefront of the commemorative scene of the inter-war period".⁵⁷ The army museum built an aggressive conception of commemoration, highly militarised and warmongering, by contrast with the commemoration carried out by veterans that celebrated peace.

The objective of the Vincennes Museum of the War was less to celebrate the glory of the French army⁵⁸ than to exhibit societies at war at the front and at the rear, in France and abroad. Until 1926, the enrichment of the collection has been based on continuous acquisitions (paintings, drawings, and prints bought from artists and galleries), deposits from public or associative organisations (Army Photographic Section or Smithsonian Institute) or donations (trench objects, [medals](#), or posters donated by French or foreign collectors, most of them rich industrialists). Between 1919 and 1925, important state deposits were made to enrich the painting collection, which became a priority. Unlike the Army Museum, the Museum of the War was supported by historians, art critics, and well-known artists. The museum used to follow a chronological order to present a comparative approach of different nations at war (France, allied nations, enemy nations). From 1927 onwards, the museum guidebook was translated into English and has been edited several times as the museum became successful. However, in 1934, the affiliation of the institution to the university led to the development of an "International Documentation Library" instead of the museum, whose orientation, according to Valérie Tesnière, had always remained somewhat uncertain: "Art museum? Museum of history? Documentary museum?"⁵⁹ This example testifies to the often-ambivalent status of war objects in museography: between art piece and historical document.

The Second World War and after 1945

The Second World War and the German occupation sometimes had a devastating effect on museums and collections built up in the interwar period. The Museum of the War was partly destroyed by a fire in 1944. Later, the library (*Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*, BDIC) moved to the Nanterre campus and the war collections were sent to the Hôtel National des Invalides in Paris. During the German occupation, some artefacts considered as war relics or symbolic heritage were looted and transported to Germany, such as the wagon in which the armistice was signed in 1918. This wagon became a museum piece first exhibited in the Invalides in Paris, then in Rethondes from 1927, where it became a place of remembrance and a tourist attraction. In 1940, after the German invasion of France, the wagon became a symbolic place of the French defeat, as it was used for the signature of the 1940 armistice.⁶⁰ It was taken to Berlin to be displayed to the public as a Nazi propaganda tool, before being destroyed.

Apart from the Armistice Place, protected battlefields such as [Verdun](#) or the Hartmannswillerkopf (Vosges) were relatively spared during the occupation, mostly because they were the burial places of German soldiers. After the conflict, First World War battlefields and museums were gradually overshadowed by the preoccupations of the postwar period (reconstruction) and the traumatic, complex, and often conflictual memory of the Second World War.⁶¹

Transformations in the 1960s

Things changed during the 1960s with the multiplicity of museums erected onsite at former battlefields, and near necropolises and monuments built in the interwar period.

The fifties and sixties were decades of reconstruction of the country, cold war, and colonial conflicts. Serge Barcellini shows that [Charles de Gaulle's \(1890-1970\)](#) acquisition of power led to a mutation in French official remembrance policy, linked to the international and European context, as well as the national political situation.⁶² In the 1960s, a "General Committee for War and Resistance Memorials" was created, controlled by the Veteran Ministry which would also lead a "Committee for Remembrance and National Ceremonies Committee". The [veteran organisations](#) became more active and influential in museum developments, for fear that the First World War would be relegated to oblivion in the post-World War II context. In Verdun, a new museum, the Verdun Memorial, was initiated in 1967 by the writer and academic [Maurice Genevoix \(1890-1980\)](#), who fought on the battlefield during the First War. The memorial was to remember both French and German combatants. In 1969, on the Chemin

des Dames⁶³ a museum was launched by the *Souvenir Français*, a national association in charge of maintaining the graves of soldiers who died for France, and the monuments in their memory. The constitution of the collection was made possible thanks to a very successful call for donations, objects, documents, and weapons from all over France and from abroad. Like the Verdun Memorial, the museum exhibition related to a Franco-German place of remembrance. This new generation of site museums (Verdun Memorial (1967), the Chemin des Dames Museum (1969), the Linge Memorial (Vosges – initiated in 1969 and opened in 1981)) repeated common tropes of various war objects, found locally or gathered through donations; the incorporation of volunteer actors; and the exposition of dominant narratives recounting history of war, driven by a predominantly military approach to the conflict even if civilians could also be represented. In the French context, this generation of war museums reflected a process of reappropriation of the collective memory of the First World War, after a period of oblivion caused by the shadow of the second. At the time of the 50th anniversary of the war, these site museums expressed a collective desire to safeguard a fragile memory, and to protect war landscapes and authentic material heritage. A strong strand of local activism developed into associations that contributed to the restoration of battlefields and the creation of many small amateur museums along the former Western Front. The army and some veterans organisations such as the local sections of the [Union Nationale des Combatants](#) or the national network of *Souvenir Français* played a major role alongside residents, [youth](#) organisations, and local public figures. From the sixties onwards, these associations have grown in numbers and have constituted a closed and almost exclusively [masculine](#) network sometimes seen as a “heritage community”.⁶⁴ These organisations are socially heterogeneous even if the working-class categories are over-represented in many cases. They are often characterised by a strong sense of hierarchy (particularly in those closely linked with the army, and a tendency to develop exclusive and passionate appropriations of the historical sites and war collections – a phenomenon sometimes exacerbated by clandestine excavation practices. In their exhibitions, most site museums are primarily centred on narratives of battles as they occurred in situ. Collections are perceived as material testimonies of a reality unlivd by the visitors, making it tangible. They have been kept as remnants, even relics, a category addressing artefacts found on the bodies of dead soldiers. An example is the Verdun Memorial which has been described as a “combating enterprise”, perceived as both a patriotic and an educational place. Characterised by the traditional [historiography](#) of the Great War, the Verdun Memorial acted as a place of worship and a place of “combating liturgy”. The names of these museums – memorial, crypt-museum – clearly show their finalities, as well as the practices unfolded there: commemorations, military ceremonies, didactic visits in a continuity with some initiatives during the interwar period, but also promotion of reconciliation.

After 1980: Broadening Perspectives

Since the 1990s, with the context of the return to the Great War in different spheres of French society, linked geopolitical recompositions, and the progressive decrease in veteran numbers, new museums have developed. Most of them have appeared in urban settings, reflecting new political and cultural contexts: ways of narrating and exposing the war, the emergence of new networks of stakeholders as well as redefinitions of their role in the city. In this period, institutional actors have become central to the creation of the new cultural institutions, attempting to play a role in territorial planning and to be radiant cultural hubs. Regions, departments, and public organisations at different territorial scales instigated a new generation of museums; notable examples include the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* (Péronne, Somme, 1992), the World Center for Peace (Verdun, Meuse, 1990), Marne 14/18 Museum (Suippe, Marne, 2005), the Great War Museum (Meaux, Seine et Marne, 2015) or the War and Peace Museum (Novion-Porcien, Ardennes, 2018). During the 1980s, the Historial of Péronne, funded by the Somme department with the support of the French Ministry of Culture and European programmes, was conceived as a tool of urban regeneration in a post-industrial city on the margins of principal tourist routes. This museum also illustrated the values of French cultural politics: democratisation of culture and heritage, territorial development through culture and heritage planning, and a balanced diffusion of cultural institutions in French national territory. In addition, this new cultural machinery reflected the rise of the local powers in a decentralisation. This process of transfer of competencies from the central state to regional authorities led to new kinds of memory and heritage policies, challenging the conception of national memory, and entangling memory with attractiveness, marketability for tourism, and other competing interests.

These museums adopted new standards in exhibition, linked to the wider process of professionalisation that affected French museology during the 1980/1990s. The Historial of the Great War in Péronne is representative of the renewal of the war museums, shifting from war memories to the history of societies in war, and seeking to align its museography with rigorous academic discourse. It was a rupture: the Exhibition of Art Collection ([Otto Dix \(1891-1969\)](#)); the setting of the building (architecture imagined by George Henri Ciriani, based on horizontality); the scenography and exhibition of soldiers' costumes in simple pits; the cultural programming – all these choices expressed a will to break with the illusion inherent in the “pseudo-realism of the first generation of war souvenir museums that intended to tell visitors what the war had *really* been”.⁶⁵ Controlled by the Directorate of the Museums of France (Ministry of Culture) and overseen by an international scientific committee, composed of historians and experts in museology, the organisational structure of the museum was designed to foster renewed historiographical approaches to war, such as a

cultural approach of societies at war, rather than a military approach.⁶⁶ The museum concept opted for was a three-perspective view – German, British, and French – of each aspect of the war, breaking with the traditional national and military history-centred narrative. The idea of presenting the war as a shared disaster by all European nations also resonated with the political context of the 1980/1990s, and the formation of the EU (1992 Maastricht Treaty and 1993 European Union). The concept offers a kind of reply to the difficult question of finding meaning in creating war museums in times of peace and peace building.

Since the Historial of Péronne, the principle of shared memory spread within war history museums in France – a trend accentuated by the [centenary](#) of the war, whose “international” dimension was emphasised in the French conception of public commemoration.⁶⁷ This trend was illustrated by the recent modernisation of the Verdun Memorial (Meuse, 2016), the expansion of the Franco-British Museum of Thiépval (Somme, 2015) and the construction of the Franco-German Historial (Vosges, 2017), a result of Franco-German academic collaboration. These museums were conceived of as instruments of peace and reconciliation – the new paradigms of commemoration in contemporary Europe. They were also seen as principal attractions in the national policy on the tourism of memory in France, which emphasises commemoration, economic development, and the international influence of France. These museums can also be read as instruments of cultural diplomacy, a phenomenon exemplified in the programming of the Franco-German Historial. In this museum, historians built a narrative centred on the Vosges battles and the notion of mountain warfare as well as on celebrating [pacifism](#) and the Franco-German friendship – expressing a central pillar of contemporary French foreign policy.

This transnational logic is also expressed in the proliferation of foreign initiatives on French territory. Since the interwar period, many nations have erected monuments, memorials, and stele on former battlefields, the care of which is entrusted to public institutions such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission or Parks Canada. Since the beginning of the 1990s, these stakeholders have developed active remembrance and tourism policies, and elaborated concrete itineraries peppered with museums and visitors’ centres. Governments and private foundations have created museums based on their own national narratives, which sometimes deviate from French approaches. The creation of the Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front, by the Australian government on the centenary of the war, is a characteristic example: this route connects different battlefields between the north of Paris and Belgium and it is lined with museums and interpretation centres offering a patriotic vision of memory based on the values of ANZAC. They have thus conveyed a certain conception of the Australian identity and nation, and have testified to the affirmation of Australia on the European and the world stages. This large-scale initiative cannot overshadow previous

museum creations, such as those of the Canadian government in Vimy (North) or Beaumont-Hamel (Somme). Several visitors' centres were built from the 1990s in the heart of large memorial parks on battlefields. In the 1980s, the South African [government](#) built a museum in Longueval (Somme). This museum's recent exhibition redesign testifies to post-apartheid political reconfigurations: most notably by acknowledging Black South African [participation](#) in the conflict, and including postcolonial approaches to the military history of [South Africa](#). In their turn, New Zealand, [China](#), and [India](#) are planning museum projects in northern France, reflecting contemporary geopolitical changes and new economic influences in a global world.

This internationalisation of museographies in the French territories, as well as the diversification of foreign visitors, have had an effect on the local conceptions of museums devoted to the history of war. The creation of many visitors' centres without collections of objects as well as the adoption of foreign museographical standards (e.g. Musée d'Albert Somme 1916 imitating the atmosphere of the IWM) tell of cultural cross-pollination of practices and globalised museographical trends. Nevertheless, war museums in many cases still strongly promote the idea of national identity building and belonging, combining science, [pedagogy](#) and entertainment.⁶⁸

Russia

The emergence and persistence of an internationalist revolutionary state on the territory of the former imperial Russia meant that the development of museums to the First World War would unfold differently in the Soviet Union than in other places. The country's first World War I museum was dedicated in 1916 but dismantled after the October Revolution, and almost a century passed before the dedication of a new "first" World War I museum in 2014. This long absence was caused by a distinctive Soviet experience that excluded World War I from public space in the interwar period and later enshrined the Great Patriotic War, the Russian-Soviet theatre of World War II, as the most important war experience. Russia's new World War I museum therefore differs from its counterparts in the West: disconnected from World War II, focused on a domestic audience for patriotic education, and conservative in museum practice.

During the First World War

Russia's wartime military museums emerged in a new and uncertain political and military environment. In the broad public wartime mobilisation, urban civic voluntary organisations took on a new integral role as the tsarist [government](#) concentrated on the military effort. These early war museums did not have a well-developed historical or political narrative, for their organisers intended them to be a collection of information for future generations who

would later analyse and contextualise the meaning of the still-ongoing conflict. They provided an informational architectural space where the public could have direct exposure to actual war artefacts and re-creations, that is, a spatial experience that communicated authenticity and created a direct, tangible presence that written or visual media could not provide. This focus on the display of artefacts over interpretive narrative presented diverse aspects of the Russian and international war experience to a wide audience and signalled Allied victory and heroism on the battlefield.

The first Great War museum opened in 1916 in Petrograd. Its basis was a special exhibition entitled "Our Trophies" that had been organised in 1915 by the Imperial Society for the Promotion of History (*Imperatorskoe obshchestvo revnitelei istorii*).⁶⁹ "Our Trophies" demonstrated Russian victory through the display of artefacts from all sides in the conflict, most especially captured war materiel but also posters, photographs, and written documents. It proved popular with the urban public, but the lack of a specific interpretive framework for its collection became obvious as the society began to fundraise for the creation of a permanent exhibition. In 1915, one conservative [newspaper](#) commentator could only suggest a vague mission statement: "the purpose of the museum should be the great lesson that this war should give to the human race and in particular the Russian tribe on whose shoulders lies the main burden of the bloody storm".⁷⁰ The tsarist government took a direct interest in the society's museum, but both had to explain how Russian and Allied military prowess had not yet brought victory. In 1916, [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) appointed a representative to oversee the project, now the State Museum of the War, which was to serve as a "monument" with an aim to show the organisational "character of the enemy" to "all Russian people and particularly ordinary people of Petrograd".⁷¹ Its archival nature was obvious in the huge quantity of visual material, models, and weapons that filled its walls and rooms.⁷²

The museum opened on 9 October 1916, and its organisers assumed that others would follow across the country.⁷³ The tsar, for example, turned the military collection of the Sovereign Military Chamber (*Gosudareva Ratnaia palata*), founded at Tsarskoe Selo in 1913, into a Great War museum, which opened in 1918, many months after he was deposed in February 1917. In mid-1917, the Moscow city government planned for a museum that emphasised popular civic sacrifice over a now-defunct imperial military culture. [Sergei Puchkov \(1856-1926\)](#), the main administrator of the City War Cemetery, proposed that the city build a "national All-Russian war museum" as "a visible monument of the great deeds and sacrifices of the Russian people".⁷⁴ He described the future museum as a collection of objects (*predmety*) similar to the museum in Petrograd, but its location near the City War Cemetery

would link it more strongly to the casualties of war than its counterpart. The city government then ordered that “the idea of the museum be popularized in broad public circles”.

Opportunities to complete any new museum, however, vanished as the [economy](#) collapsed and radical anti-capitalist Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917. The socialist regime withdrew from the war in March 1918 in what many interpreted as an ignominious unilateral surrender to Germany.

The Soviet Era

There were no First World War museums in the Soviet Union. Bolshevik leaders understood themselves to be part of an international movement that negated the tsarist past and its patriotic wars as well as the capitalist present. They promoted a narrative about the war based on [Vladimir Lenin's \(1870-1924\)](#) idea of imperialism, a theory in which the First World War was important not as a standalone event but as a capitalist phenomenon that hastened the inevitable socialist [revolution](#). In novels and [poetry](#), Russian people could sometimes find their individual experiences and collective traumas addressed. But officials did not want them to form independent public audiences. There were no veterans' advocacy groups, no commercial memorial industry, and no official narrative of war as an emotional experience for ordinary people. The government did not sponsor a public [cult](#) of war dead or allow for the kinds of public memorialisation practiced elsewhere.

In the interwar period, the war was, from the Bolshevik perspective, not a phenomenon that deserved its own museum. Wartime collections were dispersed to general military museums to avoid privileging the officially despised Imperialist War, but echoes of patriotic military heroism could be found in the Moscow Military History Museum into the mid-1920s.⁷⁵ Commemorations and travelling exhibitions needed World War I to demonstrate official views about the contemporaneous capitalist threat, as the title of an anniversary exhibition expressed in 1934: “The Exhibition of the ‘World Imperialist War 1914-1918’ and Preparations for a New Imperialist War”.⁷⁶ The required theme for one section shows that the historical importance of the war lay in its enablement of the inevitable socialist victory: “The revolutionary outcome from the war as the only outcome. October and its international importance”.

After 1945, Soviet war museums retained space for the First World War as military history, but it was not part of a narrative linked to the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet-German conflict (1941-1945) was presented as a war for the Soviet fatherland against Nazi barbarism and foreign invasion, not a second Imperialist War between capitalist imperialists and socialist revolutionaries. Communists, after all, were only a small audience (some 2 percent of the population in 1941), and the country needed to organise the entire population to oppose and

defeat the existential threat from without. The Soviet defeat of Germany, moreover, represented the salvation of humanity from the Nazi danger. For people and state, then, the Great Patriotic War did not fit into the same interpretive framework as the Leninist trifecta of Imperialist War, revolution, and [civil war](#), which remained together, at least in formal ideological terms, until the end of the Soviet Union. For most Russians, “The Second World War” still refers to the global conflict from 1939 to 1945, while “Great Patriotic War” describes the Soviet-German War. The exhibition in the Central Great Patriotic War Museum in Moscow, for example, begins with 22 June 1941. Signage in the military history section does mention the First World War but explains that the causes of the Second World War lay in Nazi aggression and the lack of interwar collective security.

Revival under Putin

The Putin government has, in some ways, picked up the First World War where imperial Russia left it. Russian elites have for years sought to apply the perceived social stabilisation provided by the Great Patriotic War to other military conflicts. Russia’s “first” World War I museum was thus opened in the town of Pushkin in August 2014 as part of the centenary recognition of a war “forgotten” in the Soviet period. The “Russia in the Great War” exhibition is in the restored Sovereign Military Chamber that once housed the Great War Museum at Tsarskoe Selo, and the collection recalls its predecessor as a presentation of original or recreated artefacts and images, with some modern technological additions. The current government is keen to create a narrative of popular heroism around World War I, and it provided “serious financial support” for the new museum.⁷⁷ Culture Minister Vladimir Medinskii explained at the opening ceremony that it would have a patriotic educational function:

The main mission of this museum is that after visiting the exposition, visitors, especially young ones, would want to pick up a book, watch a film about the First World War and learn more about those distant events.⁷⁸

Sergei Naryshkin, then the Chair of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly, viewed the museum as a warning against war in the tense international atmosphere of 2014:

For many years, they preferred to be silent about this war. Today it is important for us to restore its memory, to relate those events to what is happening now to judge the risks for today’s Europe and the whole world, to avert violence and bloody wars.⁷⁹

The Soviet experience, though, has limited the public appeal of any new First World War museums. In principle, Russian people today know about the war, but public opinion polls

show that the Soviet legacy is strong, for they still do not separate it clearly from the revolution and civil war, nor is there much consensus about its meaning for Russian history. By contrast, there is little uncertainty about the importance or details of the Second World War. The country is filled with Great Patriotic War museums on every level, from the local school in the small town of Pronsk, Riazan Oblast, to the monumental Central Museum in Moscow. The First World War museum in Pushkin is the only one in Russia at the time of writing, and it is located inside a larger tourist complex some 25 kilometres from St. Petersburg that few ordinary people visit in the course of their daily lives. The Great Patriotic War, not the First World War, remains Russia's Great War.

Conclusion

Museums of the First World War provide a lens through which we may view the mechanics of how the war was incorporated in different places into broader narratives of the nation and of the tumultuous 20th century. During the war, the enthusiasm of many belligerents was strikingly similar in the collecting and exhibiting of the war as part of a need to connect with the cataclysm engulfing their friends, families, and societies. Often, these enthusiasms were harnessed in service of the national war effort. However, national patterns soon diverged.

During the First World War, soldiers, civilians, and military and [government](#) officials collected war trophies and souvenirs to keep and display, and created and disseminated representations of the conflict. War museums were created during the war by private and official actors. In some cases – especially in Britain and its dominions – these developed after the war into significant state museums which played a dominant role in shaping how the war was remembered and understood. In others, such as in Russia and Germany, the politics of [revolution](#) and defeat both physically dismantled these museums and rendered their message obsolete. In Britain and its dominions, the war museums were part of a process of reconciling people to the sacrifices of the war via a heroic narrative in which the grit of the nation in the face of adversity laid the foundations of an optimistic peaceful future. In the case of Britain, the victory is a tragic one, but one with meaning: the museum focused heavily on the collective effort of the diverse nation and empire in prosecuting the legitimate struggle of the War to End all Wars. In Canada and Australia, the more martial narrative was about national formation: the museums depicted new peoples who had demonstrated their worth through bloodshed. New Zealand had similar narratives, visible in postwar memorial culture, though they never built a grand central war museum to buttress and disseminate them.

France superficially resembled the British in their experience of the war as an ordeal, awful yet legitimate, that led finally to victory. The presentation of the *Musée de l'Armée*, for

example, depicted a recognisably heroic narrative of French struggle, sacrifice, and triumph. However, both the war itself and the following decades were more deeply traumatic for France. Years of static trench warfare transformed the French landscape: in many respects France, in the sepulchres along the former front and abandoned battlefields, was a war memorial museum. In the following decades, the complex experience of the Second World War in France inevitably impacted French constructions of the first: in some ways, the simpler and more directly heroic of the two wars.

If in Britain, the dominions, and France, the construction of the First World War was one of continuity – anchoring the nation in the struggle of the past – in Russia it was one of *discontinuity*. While during the war the same sort of collecting and exhibiting occurred as in other places, after 1917 the war was engaged with as an unhappy memory from a tsarist past. As in France, the effect of the Second World War was significant. However, in Russia, it was the *second* that dominated as the preferred national myth: The Great Patriotic War. In Britain, its dominions and France, the happier post-Great-War future was rooted in the past; in Russia, it was opposed to it.

At the end of the First World War, Germany too was defeated; and Germany too would reinterpret the First World War through the lens of the political needs of a radical new regime. During the war, Germans too collected and displayed the war for individuals at home as part of the national war effort. However, for Germany, the war ended in defeat and [revolution](#). Museum collections of the war were partial, fractured, and uncelebrated by the state. The post-defeat German cultural moment produced some of the most powerful anti-war art, and, uniquely, a privately-run *Anti-War Museum*. War collections, however, were largely relegated to storage, and exhumed to litigate and relitigate the question of German war guilt. The rise of National Socialism saw an attempt to re-interpret the war in more heroic terms, and open hostility to any anti-war sentiment. The further evils of the 20th century and the division of Germany became more immediate subjects of national debate, and more salient to the questions of constructing Germanness. The memory of the First World War became one part of a more general discussion about German culpability for European war and genocide in the 20th century.

In all the countries considered in this article, the way the war is displayed and interpreted continues to reflect present national political needs and priorities. At the same time, individuals and private organisations have continued to engage with the history of the war, often at a personal and emotive level. The way the war is curated and displayed began as and remains a reflection as much of a country's present, its politics, and its social needs as the war itself: recruiting the dead of past violence to present needs.

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Notes

1. Watson, Alexander: *The Fortress. The Great Siege of Przemyśl*, London 2019, p. 186. [↑](#)
2. There are of course other museums established to memorialise the First World War, such as the Liberty Memorial Museum in Kansas City, Missouri (opened 1926), and the Italian War History Museum in Rovereto, Italy (opened in 1921), but they fall outside the limited scope of this article. [↑](#)
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5. *Museums Journal* 15/6 (December 1915), pp. 214-215. [↑](#)
6. For a longer discussion of this phenomenon, see Wellington, Jennifer: *Exhibiting War. The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 25-27. [↑](#)
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- [The First World War \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Database\)](#)
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GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Kollektives Gedächtnis](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Collective memory](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Mémoire collective](#)

Key Person(s)

[Harcourt, Lewis](#); [Borden, Robert](#); [Burgneustädten, Hermann Kusmanek von](#); [ffoulkes, Charles](#); [Treloar, John](#); [Dyson, Will](#); [Doughty, Arthur](#); [Conway, Martin](#); [Sodersten, Emil](#); [Crust, John](#); [King, William Lyon Mackenzie](#); [Franck, Richard](#); [Felger, Friedrich](#); [Hoffmann, Wilhelm](#); [Enlart, Camille](#); [Lefort, Jean](#); [Ravenel, Auguste](#); [Morgan, Anne](#); [Puchkov, Sergei](#); [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia](#); [Lenin, Vladimir Il'ich](#); [Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook](#); [Bean, Charles](#); [George V, King of Great Britain](#); [Dix, Otto](#); [Friedrich, Ernst](#); [Gaulle, Charles de](#); [Genevoix, Maurice](#)

Key Location(s)

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Title

Museums

Author(s)

[Jennifer Wellington](#), [Aaron Cohen](#), [Anne Hertzog](#) and [Susanne Brandt](#)

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