

First World War Centenary

Proposal for Lectures

“Das Geheimnis der Erlösung heißt Erinnerung.”

“The secret of salvation is remembrance.”

Richard von Weizsäcker, as Federal President of Germany, 1985

Outline

In 2014, most countries in Europe remembered the outbreak of the First World War. However, it is both reasonable and necessary to address the First World War beyond this commemorative year. In this respect, I am offering lectures on various topics about the Great War. They can all be tailored to a young or adult audience with or without specific knowledge and delivered in English or German.

1) Not Just in Flanders Fields: Cultures of Commemoration and the First World War

- a) The First World War and International Cultures of Commemoration
- b) The First World War and European Memory
- c) Rediscovering History: The Centenary in Germany

2) From Propaganda to Pacifism: The First World War and the Arts

- a) German Art and the First World War
- b) The First World War and the Arts
- c) From Flanders to Verdun: Great War Battle Landscapes in Contemporary Art
- d) Picturing the Loss: The First World War in Contemporary British and German Art

3) Warfare and Society

- a) The Unsurprising Surprise: The First World War and Total Warfare
- b) “...let the rest follow”: The First World War in 1918
- c) “The War is over, long live the War!” – The End of War without Peace
- d) Of Heroes and Demons: Propaganda and the First World War
- e) Martyrs and Monsters: Myths and Realities of the First World War

4) Popular Memory of the First World War

- a) Virtual World War: The First World War and Computer Games
- b) Taking the War Serious, but still being a Game: “Valiant Hearts” and the First World War
- c) Truly Graphic: The First World War in Graphic Novels

The First World War – Not Just a Subject for 2014 and 2015

“Wer aber den Frieden will, der rede vom Krieg.”

“Those who want peace should talk about war.”

Walter Benjamin, German philosopher, 1926

In 2014, the outbreak of the First World War was internationally remembered. Numerous exhibitions and publications addressed various aspects of that global conflict. Not the least in Germany, they were met with huge interest by the population. This came to a certain surprise, as in the previous decades, the First World War had not received much attention. The media, too, dealt with the topic at an early stage. After the “bar-
rage of memory” (Prof Gerhard Hirschfeld), the “media front” seems to have returned to quiet, sometimes already with the anniversary of the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo.

But Prof Christopher Clark was right when he called the First World War “one of the most complex events in human history”. Indeed, many aspects received little attention in 2014, not the least the global perspective or views beyond the different national perceptions in general. The “Great War”, as it is called in various countries, has still a huge impact to our present age in many ways.

Opening up the past, however, is the key to understanding our presence – and only then, the future may be constructively shaped. The international cultures of commemoration regarding the First World War are highly different and offer an almost unique opportunity for mutual understanding and reconciliation. Especially in times when peace appears to be increasingly fragile and democracies have to face new challenges in order to ensure security and prosperity for their citizens, a better understanding of the First World War as a complex turning point in world history will serve international understanding and peace.

I am offering lectures to the subsequent topics for various target audiences:

1) Not Just in Flanders Fields: Cultures of Commemoration and the First World War

The different cultures of commemoration are at the centre of my work. Among other publications, I wrote the research study for the German Foreign Office on how to address the WW1 centenary. How do we remember? What is being remembered? What is the impact on the respective societies? What are the differences and similarities of the cultures of commemoration? Is there a common denominator of remembrance? And how will remembrance develop and change?

a) The First World War and International Cultures of Commemoration



The First World War is often seen as a purely European conflict. However, countless present states were involved: My research study for the German Foreign Office included 117 countries and the war’s respective impact. The individual perception of this global conflict is at least nationally connoted, beginning with the date of entry into the war or which battles or events are being primarily remembered. And who remembers combatant nations such as Brazil, Portugal and Siam (now Thailand), or the countless workers from China?

The war had a tremendous impact on the neutral countries, too: Switzerland, the Netherlands or Denmark are usually forgotten regarding the Great War. This lecture will approach the different cultures of commemoration, including the respective participation in the conflict and its impact on the societies.

b) The First World War and European Memory



The First World War has become history, 100 years after it has been fought. Quite often it is described as a necessary and just war to defend democracy – as well as senseless slaughter that affected everybody. But if everybody was a victim, how could it happen? The reasons are still disputed, and not just in former Yugoslavia, Gavrilo Princip is portrayed as either a Slavic and anti-imperialist hero or as a terrorist who provided the ultimate reason for war. Generally, the focus lies on the Western Front, despite the importance of

other theatres of war, especially for the regions affected. For some countries, the First World War seems to be unfinished: Hungary's current constitution refers to the Treaty of Trianon as an unjust contract that needs to be revoked. To what an extent is a common European memory possible – or desirable? This lecture will approach the different European cultures of commemoration and its differences and similarities.

c) Rediscovering History: The Centenary in Germany



In Germany, a common narrative of the First World War could never be established. In the post-1918 period, explanations of Germany's defeat were highly contested between the political factions of the Weimar Republic. The subsequent Nazi tyranny, the Second World War and the Holocaust came – and continue – to overshadow any other event in German history. During the Cold War, the First World War was largely a forgotten conflict. In recent years, the federal government remained hesitant about embracing the centenary, but countless exhibitions, seminars, books and other media productions brought this aspect of history back to public attention from late 2013, and with it came a renewed public debate on war guilt. The lecture will describe the development of remembrance in the past century, including an emphasis on the current situation.

2) From Propaganda to Pacifism: The First World War and the Arts

Of course, the First World War was a major topic for the arts. Even more so, this historical caesura was a turning point for the arts, too. Today, many artists and their impressive works need to be rediscovered. As with other aspects of the cultures of commemoration, art tells a lot about the respective societies.

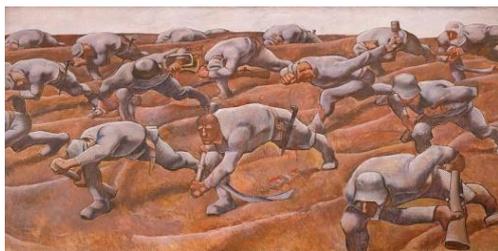
a) German Art and the First World War



Especially in Germany, expressionism established itself to tackle the horrors of modern combat. However, most of today's known works are from the post-war period, for example George Grosz's scathing examinations of the Weimar Republic, or the impressive cycle "War" by Otto Dix, as well as his eponymous triptych. Many artists wait to be rediscovered, such as Willi Jaeckel, Willibald Krain, Fritz Steisslinger or Otto Fischer-Trachau. Back then, most were enthusiastic about the outbreak of war and its alleged "cleansing power". But this perception

soon changed with their own wartime deployment: Many of the artists were killed or returned home physically or mentally broken. If wished, this lecture could include today's art addressing the Great War, too.

b) The First World War and the Arts



Artists were massively influenced by the First World War, and many of them took part in combat, too. Impressionism failed to transfer the horrors of modern warfare, while different forms of expressionism and realism were more successful. Futurists openly welcomed the war – and many were killed after they had volunteered. On the contrary, dadaism emerged to find a nihilist answer to war. Some nations had specific artistic ap-

proaches, while several topics and aspects of the picture language became ubiquitous. The presentation may refer either to art from the First World War and the immediate post-war period only, or take a broader perspective by including contemporary art.

c) From Flanders to Verdun: Great War Battle Landscapes in Contemporary Art



Even after a century, the First World War and its iconography forms an inspiration for artistic expression. For many artists, the battle landscapes are at the centre of their work. This is hardly surprising, as the large battles such as Verdun, Somme, Isonzo, Jutland or Gallipoli formed the collective memory of nations. Even more so, the Great War has become history, and the last living soldiers have died in the past some years. The landscapes remained, and so did their scars of war. This lecture will present different international artistic approaches to the First World

War from the 21st century, as well as the artists and their backgrounds.

d) Picturing the Loss: The First World War in Contemporary British and German Art



Beyond the countless commemorative events, exhibitions and publications, the First World War centenary is also reflected in contemporary fine arts. This lecture focuses on selected works from two major belligerent countries, the United Kingdom and Germany, from which influential art was created during and after the war, too. The presentation will examine the subjects and artistic forms of expression chosen, the artists and their motivations for addressing a war that happened one hundred years ago, and not the least the public debates initiated.

3) Warfare and Society

The First World War is regarded as the first contemporary and total war. Furthermore, the media and propaganda played an enormous role. These aspects, including respective national martyrs, heroes and villains, are still vivid in national perceptions of this global conflict and need to be examined for a better understanding for the past as well as the present.

a) The Unsurprising Surprise: The First World War and Total Warfare

The First World War is often described as the first total war. In fact, the immense number of casualties and a profound transformation of warfare suggest this assumption, for example the emergence of air forces, the massive use of machine guns and trench systems, or the development of poison gas and tanks. Considering, however, the military and technological developments in the preceding decades, the alleged sudden rise of total warfare seems almost odd: Already during the American Civil War, evidence of a new total di-



mension of warfare could be found, while the Balkan Wars, the Italo-Ottoman War and not the least the Russo-Japanese War emphasised the newly establishing form of the eternal “chameleon war” (Carl von Clausewitz). The lecture confronts shortened perceptions with historical realities, and thus serves as a debate about our presence, too: As a rule, armed forces tend to prepare themselves to fight in the last type of war they encountered, instead of a possible future war.

b) “...let the rest follow”: The First World War in 1918



With hindsight, the end of the First World War in November 1918 might be regarded as natural development. But assessing the situation in early 1918, the war’s result was far less clear-cut: In autumn 1917, the Central Powers could achieve a breakthrough in the Alpine Front – Italy could hardly hold the line, and by massive British and French support only. Victorious at the Eastern Front, Germany could transfer many divisions to the West, preparing an offensive that would also lead to breaching the hardened front. Nevertheless,

the outcome is known – but what were the factors that made it happen? The lecture will give a multi-perspective approach to the situation one hundred years ago.

c) “The War is over, long live the War!” – The End of War without Peace



On 11 November 1918, the First World War ended – or so it seemed. In fact, it was succeeded by regional wars, regime changes, social unrest, coup attempts and difficult economic and political situations in many countries. Even more so, the conditions for peace proved to be disappointing for all protagonists and fuelled further conflicts. The lecture could focus on the German situation from 1918 to the mid-1920s, or include a more international perspective on the same period.

d) Of Heroes and Demons: Propaganda and the First World War



In the First World War, too, all the rulers needed the backing of their respective populations. The tremendous casualties had to be compensated with new soldiers, while the war had to be continued – and thus funded – until the envisaged victory. One of the tools was propaganda, which was shaped very differently, from the emphasis on the heroism of one’s own soldiers to ridiculing one’s enemies and even disinformation. All sides accused each other of atrocities, while underlining the right for own “reprisals”. Cartoons and, for the first time,

movies were of central importance to secure public support. The impact of propaganda during the First World War was manifold, not the least regarding to the later Nazi dictatorship and the Second World War, making a suitable debate of propaganda and its functionality even more necessary.

e) Martyrs and Monsters: Myths and Realities of the First World War



Remembering the First World War is dominated by national perceptions. This concerns not just the respective battles and other events, but also certain individuals. The ace pilot Manfred von Richthofen was idolised already during wartime; his international perception as “Red Baron”, however, is a post-war construct. For the UK, nurse Edith Cavell and the passengers of the *Lusitania* are counted among the martyrs of the Great War. In fact, ambivalences can be found in all these people, from “Lawrence of Arabia” to the Austrian *Standeschütze*

Sepp Innerkofler, and from Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (who successfully fought in German East Africa) to Austro-Italian *irredentista* Cesare Battisti. To reach a more comprehensive understanding of the First World War, it is necessary to address the full spectrum of these perceptions.

4) Popular Memory of the First World War

The general perception of the First World War is primarily shaped by popular media such as films and literature. Comparably new media such as computer games and graphic novels have a growing influence. What are the subjects and how are they portrayed within the framework of the war? Instead of the following single lectures, I could also offer a combined one on “The First World War in Popular Culture”.

a) Virtual World War: The First World War and Computer Games



Films and computer games have become important media for shaping our memory: New generations increasingly obtain their perceptions about historical events through audio-visually appealing media. In comparison to the Second World War or contemporary conflicts, only a few computer games address the First World War, which can be partly explained with an equally reduced perception of many game developers. Thus, most of the relevant games are either flight simulations

or so-called strategy games. In recent years, several new approaches could be seen, including artistic and educational games. The presentation is an overview of the various genres and games and explores the possibilities and limitations of a virtual approach to the First World War. The lecture can be designed for people with little or no prior knowledge on computer games, or as workshop for game designers or teachers.

b) Taking the War Serious, but still being a Game: “Valiant Hearts” and the First World War



In 2014, the computer game “Valiant Hearts” was internationally published on various platforms, including Windows PC, Playstation and Apple iOS. The player switches between several characters, including a German soldier, a black American volunteer, a Belgian nurse, and even a dog, leading to a subsequent change of perspectives. The story is highly emotional and many rather unknown facts about the war are addressed. Thus, “Valiant Hearts” can teach lots about history while remaining an entertaining game.

What are the advantages of this approach and how are sensitive issues being addressed? Is “Valiant Hearts” the exemplary “good game” and what are its limits? The lecture can be shaped for a general audience or for teachers.

c) Truly Graphic: The First World War in Graphic Novels



During the past decade, a number of comics and graphic novels about the First World War have been published, including historical narrations, educational approaches, crime fiction, adventure tales and adaptations of literature classics such as Erich Maria-Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front" or Karl Kraus's "The Last Days of Mankind". Their style is highly different, too, as are their approaches towards "the other", be it the enemy, civilians, or soldiers and workers from the imperial powers' colonies.

What are the differences in the respective approaches, and to what an extent is the contemporary status of academic research being reflected?

Wartist

Founded in 2008 by Martin Bayer, the project WARTIST is a multi-faceted and inter-disciplinary examination of the cultural dimensions of war and the cultures of commemoration. It includes a bilingual blog website (www.wartist.org) with reports about the different artistic approaches to address war: fine arts, theatre and movies, as well as graphic novels and computer games. Furthermore, the label WARTIST is used to organise art exhibitions, for example at the Bavarian Army Museum, Ingolstadt, or at ARD-Hauptstadtstudio, Berlin, the capital studio of one of the main German TV and radio broadcasters. Via the "detour" of an emotional contact through art, thinking processes about war, peace, terror and security ought to be stimulated. The objective of WARTIST is civic education, as remembering the past and a consequential improved understanding of the present are keys to a constructive shaping of the future.

Martin Bayer



Education: **Master of Peace and Security Policy Studies (2004)**, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, Germany; **BA in War Studies (2003)**, King's College London, UK; **Photographer (1994)**, Lette-Verein Berlin, Germany. Born in 1971 in Plochingen, Germany.

Since 2004, activities in the civic education of youths and adults, e.g. for the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education), *Deutscher Bundestag* (German Federal Parliament), *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* and other institutions. 1994-2000, occupations in the development of computer games and edutainment software. Various international lectures, seminars and workshops about the cultural dimensions of war, the cultures of commemoration and security political aspects.

Not just since its centenary, the First World War is a research priority. Among others, one may refer to the research study "The First World War as Subject of German and International Politics of Memory" for the German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa) with policy recommendations for the German Federal Foreign Office, or other publications for the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the Goethe Institute, etc.