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Review of Judith Heß, *Europäisierung des Gedenkens? Der Erste Weltkrieg
in deutschen und britischen Ausstellungen*

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JUDITH HESS, *Europäisierung des Gedenkens? Der Erste Weltkrieg in deutschen und britischen Ausstellungen*, Public History – Angewandte Geschichte, 8 (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 358 pp. ISBN 978 3 837 65619 0. €60.00

Looking back at the First World War centenary, Daniel Todman labelled the vast range of public activities staged in 2014 a ‘swirling cultural blizzard’. These events, he wrote, allowed ‘the already fascinated to confirm their existing beliefs’, provided others with ‘a superficial moment’ of engagement, and passed many more people ‘completely by’.¹ At the start of the centenary, however, there had been a brief period of hope, when it seemed that new approaches to the conflict that escaped national boundaries might take hold. Judith Heß’s book concentrates on the opening salvos in this period, concluding her observations long before the optimism of August 2014 was lost in the ‘blizzard’ of centenary fatigue. Her focus is on the numerous First World War exhibitions that sprang up in both Britain and Germany, all seeking to offer the public a framework through which to understand the complexities of the conflict’s many histories. Across eleven detailed chapters, Heß explores whether these exhibitions managed to achieve a ‘Europeanization of remembrance’, thereby cementing new approaches to the war in the public imagination.

Where Heß’s book differs from other recent studies of the centenary is in its comparative approach. This focus allows Heß to move beyond the centenary moment itself and to delve more deeply into the British–German relationship through the prism of the two countries’ memory cultures. Scholarly writing on this subject has long emphasized a stark difference in the ways that the British and German publics have looked back on the First World War. George Mosse’s seminal work on the ‘cult of the fallen soldier’ identified revanchist memories in inter-war Germany that were never replicated to the same degree in Britain.² After 1945 this difference persisted, with the

¹ Daniel Todman, “‘Something about Who We Are as a People’: Government, Media, Heritage and the Construction of the Centenary”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27/4, (2016), 518–23, at 523.

² George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990).

more recent experience of Hitler's genocidal war overshadowing the earlier conflict in divided Germany.³ For the British, meanwhile, as David Reynolds has noted, the First World War still retained a hold over the public imagination as a symbol of apparent futility.⁴

Following the pattern of these studies and others, Heß's starting point is the same perceived gulf between British and German memory cultures. 'In German historical consciousness', she asserts, 'it is above all National Socialism and the Second World War that are present.' In Britain, by contrast, memory of the First World War is 'kept alive' by the annual Remembrance Day commemorations (p. 15). However, given the significant role that memories of the Second World War also play in British politics and society – something that has been a theme in the work of Lucy Noakes and Mark Connelly – perhaps this rigid dichotomy between a British focus on the First World War and a German fixation on the later conflict is slightly wide of the mark.⁵ Instead, it appears far more apposite to start not from a point of division, but rather by looking at how the Second World War shaped and has continued to reshape memories of the 1914–18 conflict in both countries.

There have of course been a variety of different political and cultural impulses feeding into the way both British and German societies have understood the First World War. Films and novels through to memoirs and mementos have all played a role. For Heß, though, it is solely the exhibitions that are important to her discussion, although she is very careful to situate these more broadly, considering them within the wider cultural landscape in which they were produced. Each chapter of the book then sees Heß ask different questions of the centenary exhibitions to determine which aspects of the war each exhibition chose to prioritize. The thematic chapters run chronologically, starting with familiar questions about war guilt, moving through to violence, death, and suffering on the home front, before

³ Annika Mombauer, 'The German Centenary of the First World War', *War & Society*, 36/4 (2017), 276–88, at 279.

⁴ David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013).

⁵ Lucy Noakes, *Dying for the Nation: Death, Grief and Bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester, 2020); Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, 2004).

finally turning to consider how politicians chose to discuss the centenary exhibitions.

With such broad themes and overarching research questions, it was clearly always going to be a tricky task to select case studies that fully aligned with them. Heß's approach, therefore, is to focus on regional and national exhibitions that had the potential for good visitor numbers (p. 29). From a German perspective, special exhibitions held in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr in Dresden, Stuttgart's Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg, and the Historisches Museum der Pfalz in Speyer all feature. The British comparison comes from the new First World War Galleries in the Imperial War Museum in London, the Firing Line: Cardiff Castle Museum of the Welsh Soldier, and the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. As the case studies all cover exhibitions housed in significant regional or national museums, it is clear that each would touch on Heß's main themes concerning the broad course of the war. Yet at the same time, the reliance on such prominent exhibitions is something of a missed opportunity. While the Deutsches Historisches Museum's centenary exhibition repeated some of the themes covered ten years earlier in its 'Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Ereignis und Erinnerung' anniversary presentation, smaller local exhibitions offered more exciting approaches.⁶ The Staatliche Bibliothek in Regensburg, which approached the war through the history of French prisoners of war, and Stockport Museum's exploration of the experience of minority voices offer good examples of local innovations.⁷

There may well have been plenty of local exhibitions offering a slightly different perspective on the war experience, but the book's seven case studies provide a good snapshot of broader museal trends that came to the fore during the centenary. With the case studies

⁶ René Schlott (ed.), *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918 – Ereignis und Erinnerung – Eine Ausstellung im Deutschen Historischen Museum Berlin* (Berlin, 2004).

⁷ 'Mitten im Krieg: Das Regensburger Kriegsgefangenenlager während des Ersten Weltkriegs', Staatliche Bibliothek Regensburg, 2016, at [<https://www.staatliche-bibliothek-regensburg.de/article/mitten-im-krieg-das-regensburger-kriegsgefangenenlager-waehrend-des-ersten-weltkriegs/>] accessed 17 Jan. 2022; Stockport Museum, 'Keep the Home Fires Burning: Stories from World War I', 2014.

settled and the key historical themes selected, the purpose of the eight main chapters is to determine which image of the war each exhibition displayed, focusing in particular on differences between the British and German presentations. Each chapter works towards this goal in a systematic, albeit rather rigid, fashion. In the first section of each chapter, Heß provides a synthesis of the existing historiographical debates relevant to the particular topic. After this outline, the discussion then turns to see if each exhibition has followed the historiographical consensus or whether 'differences between research and the exhibitions' can be determined (p. 139).

This hunt for some form of historical truth begins in chapters three and four, which follow on from two lengthy introductory sections. Their focus is on the outbreak of the conflict and the well-trodden war guilt debate. Perhaps due to the complexity of this history, which does not lend itself particularly well to the museum setting, Heß finds that the exhibitions mainly skirt around the subject of guilt. Where the issue is touched upon, however, she notes that the German exhibitions were more likely to 'sketch out a picture of shared responsibility amongst the belligerent powers' (p. 138), while in comparison the British tended to depict the war's outbreak as a clash between a 'German aggressor' and a passive British state (p. 165). Chapters five and six focus on the memory of the war, exploring how the conflict has been understood in politics and society. Again, Heß identifies a dividing line between the two countries' approaches. The German exhibitions viewed European integration as a 'successful outcome of the learning process' that the two world wars started (p. 175). Unsurprisingly, in Brexit Britain, the exhibitions avoided framing the war in European terms, but still managed to imbue it with meaning. Leaving behind older narratives of futility and a lost generation, they viewed the war as a justified defence of civilized values for which contemporaries were willing to fight (p. 201).

The next set of chapters, seven and eight, deal with the history of wartime suffering at home and on the (Western) Front, covering everything from trenches and shelling through to forced labour and propaganda. In an engaging section on gas warfare, Heß explores how the exhibitions all chose to deploy original artefacts and images of gas masks in action as a means of visualizing the horrors of frontline warfare. What makes this discussion so successful is that it breaks away

from a fairly strict comparison of the historiography vis-à-vis the exhibition displays. Instead, Heß demonstrates a more transnational approach, as both the British and German curators used a similar set of objects to create immersive displays (pp. 212–16). Finally, the book's concluding chapters, nine and ten, explore politicians' contributions to the centenary period. Unlike in the earlier chapters, the exhibitions are more at the margins of the discussion, making an appearance only when politicians turned up to declare them open. This was a role that both David Cameron and Angela Merkel performed in 2014, opening the main centenary exhibitions in London and Berlin (pp. 276, 283).

Heß concludes her narrative lamenting that the centenary exhibitions failed to 'present a Europeanization of the history of the First World War'. The reason for this shortcoming, she contends, is that 'national narratives and national historical perspectives were not integrated into a transnational European history of the First World War' (p. 309). None of this should come as a great surprise, as these exhibitions had to speak to national audiences, funders, and political beneficiaries. Yet despite Heß's pessimism, British and German representations of the conflict, whether in museums, literature, or on screen, do offer more than a parallel history of wartime suffering. To uncover these other aspects of a complex memory culture would require an exploration of a broader range of exhibitions, beyond the more familiar national or large regional interpretations. It would also mean picking up shared cultural responses, such as the history of the gas mask, or exploring points of contact and exchange where British and German experiences overlapped. Histories of humanitarianism, diplomacy, prisoners of war, enemy aliens, and care parcels—which did make an appearance in some of the exhibitions—all offer important starting points for highlighting interactions rather than just divisions. A shared history of British–German memory of the war may still be awaiting its author, but for now Heß's study gives readers plenty to ponder.

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