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Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. x + 310 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-49682-7.

Reviewed by William R. Keylor (Boston University)
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In the four-year blood bath that began in the summer of 1914, about half of the nine million people who perished were citizens of France, Great Britain, and Germany. One in six of those who served in the armed forces of these three nations never returned. There was scarcely anyone on the home front who had not lost a close relative. The one experience shared by virtually all the survivors of the Great War, regardless of socio-economic status, educational attainment, or political tendency, was that of bereavement. Jay Winter's engrossing book investigates that process of mourning by treating the multifarious ways in which the widows, orphans, and parents of the dead soldiers in these three countries sought to cope with the loss of their loved ones. It also examines the ways in which literary, artistic, cinematic, and architectural themes served as devices of commemoration. This study of the cultural consequences of the Great War admirably complements Winter's earlier works on its military, political, social, and economic dimensions. The author is unabashedly selective, restricting his comparative analysis to the three principal participants in the war on the Western front and focusing on a limited set of representative texts.

Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning is a revisionist work which boldly challenges the standard assessment of the Great War as a caesura in European cultural history that severed all connections with a discredited heritage. He dissents from the familiar claim that the iconoclastic, ironic vision of modernism supplanted the traditional literary forms of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, which could not adequately express the despair of the postwar generation at European civilization's descent into barbarism. On the contrary, Winter contends that the desperate search for consolation by bereaved mourners prompted a revival of traditional modes of aesthetic expression that had been prematurely interred by the high priests of modernism. Far from discrediting the classical, romantic, and religious themes of the past, the traumatic experience of the war and the need to preserve the memory of those whom it had swept away reconnected the grieving postwar generation with the familiar, comforting cultural imagery of the past.

Winter contends that the common experience of bereavement bequeathed by the Great War erased the traditional barrier between "high" and "low" culture, yielding a set of universal themes that resonated throughout the three societies at all levels. The symbolic theme of reuniting the dead with their surviving kin recurred throughout the cultural history of the war and the postwar decade, from the literary works of Henri Barbusse, Karl Krause, and George Bernard Shaw to the painting of Otto Dix and Max Beckmann. Abel Gance's silent film *J'accuse*, commissioned by the French army as a propaganda work but not screened until shortly after the Armistice, featured the apocalyptic image of dead soldiers returning home to judge the living. Winter draws an interesting parallel between the leitmotif of resurrection in the postwar cinema (from Gance's ghostly *poilus* to the dead platoon marching into the distance in Lewis Milestone's 1930 film version of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*) and the revival of interest in spiritualism during and after the war. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle regularly communicated with his dead son in seances, which had become popular vehicles for the denial of death's finality. Hallucinatory experiences with resurrectionist themes proliferated amid the stressful conditions of wartime Europe: British infantrymen sighted an angelic army of bowmen from the battle of Agincourt bolstering their front lines at Mons. A vision of the Virgin at Fatima in Portugal stimulated a revival of Marian cults across the Continent. The purveyors of "psychic photography," who claimed to capture the spirits of dead soldiers hovering above the living, did a lively business. Winter skillfully employs these and other examples of apocalyptic, biblical, and spiritualist themes to buttress his argument about the persistence of traditional forms of commemoration after the traumatic experience of the Great War.

The theme of the "return of the dead" assumed a lit-

eral meaning when the French government made the decision on practical grounds to bury the dead in improvised cemeteries near the war zone. This policy inspired a clandestine traffic in bodies, as bereaved kinsmen hired grave robbers to exhume and reinter the remains in the parish churchyard. Since almost half of the bodies had been rendered unidentifiable by machine gun or artillery fire, the tomb of the unknown soldier under the *Arc de triomphe* provided symbolic solace to those families denied the privilege of proper burial for their fallen kin. Winter demonstrates how the periodic rituals of commemoration involving friends and neighbors–such as pilgrimages to cemeteries and public ceremonies at monuments *A nos morts* erected in town squares–forged powerful emotional bonds among communities in mourning.

The symbolic representation of the reunion of the dead and the living was notably evident in the architecture of war memorials, the most public and durable sites for the rituals of bereavement. Building on the recent scholarship of Annette Becker, Daniel Sherman, Antoine Prost, and others, Winter explores the cultural function of French memorials to the fallen of the Great War. He concludes that the commemorative art of the war monuments appropriated language more suitable to the age of chivalry, replete with cliches of sentimentality celebrating the knightly virtues of duty, honor, and loyalty. A case in point was the rhetoric of commemoration associated with the famous "Trench of the Bayonets." After the entire third company of the 137th French infantry regiment was annihilated in a ravine near Verdun, a French rescue unit came upon a collapsed trench with bayonets protruding from the earth at regular intervals. This eerie discovery spawned the patriotic myth of the brave *poilus* who had remained at their posts until buried alive. An austere monument constructed near the site after the war drew on pagan and Christian motifs to memorialize this mythical act of heroism. It was a further example of the return to traditional forms of aesthetic expression in order to provide solace to the "communities of the bereaved."

Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning represents an audacious and (for me) persuasive reassessment of the cultural history of the Great War. Winter has seriously undermined the credibility of the standard shibboleths about the death of traditional European civilization and the birth of "modern memory" amid the bloodshed of 1914-18. What I find less cogent is his argument that the true break with the past came in 1945, at the end of a war of unspeakable brutality in which half the casualties were civilians. Winter's claim that the unprecedented horrors of the death camps "put an end to the rich set of traditional languages of commemoration and mourning which flourished after the Great War" rings true only if one treats victor and vanquished on the same moral plane.

German culture after 1945 could obviously not provide any traditional frames of reference for commemorating the pitiless war of annihilation that Hitler waged and for mourning the soldiers who perished for that morally indefensible cause. But surely the "communities of mourning" among the victors of the Second World War, even more than those among the victors of the First, were able to derive consolation for their losses from the certainty that their loved ones had died for a noble cause. The RAF fighter pilots who perished in the Battle of Britain, the Soviet soldiers who died defending Stalingrad in the "Great Patriotic War," and the Americans who fell on the Normandy beaches were commemorated in an even more traditional manner than the dead of the Great War–one thinks of the rows of crosses and stars atop Omaha Beach, for example–precisely because their sacrifices evoked more meaning and less moral ambiguity than the seemingly senseless carnage at Verdun and Passchendaele. Barbusse, who had marched to battle in 1914 convinced that he was fighting for the salvation of humanity, came to believe that humanity was being callously sacrificed for reactionary political ends and that neither side had a legitimate claim to moral superiority. After the liberation of the death camps and the full disclosure of the extent of Nazi brutality, the mourners of Allied war dead could temper their grief with the certain knowledge that their kinsfolk had not died in vain.

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A Comment by Jay Winter (September 13, 1996)

I write in response to the stimulating review by William R. Keylor of my book *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. He rightly takes issue with the assertion I made in conclusion that the two World Wars represent entirely different moments in cultural history. My claim was that the failure of the commemorative effort after 1914-18 to make war unthinkable made it difficult for the collective remembrance of the years 1939-45 simply to repeat the grammar and syntax of the earlier generation. In addition, the fact that more than half the casualties of the 1939-45 war were civilian, and the related fact that the rules of engagement in war were revolutionized by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, add weight to the view that as the character of war losses changed, so too did both the language and practices of collective mourning in Europe.

Professor Keylor is right to question the validity of this argument, which on balance I still wish to defend. He is right to claim that the Soviet Union and the United States do not fit the model of a break in commemorative forms after 1945. In the Russian case, their 'Great War' was not 1914-18, but the 'Great Patriotic War' of 1941-45; not surprisingly, their commemorative forms after 1945 naturally resemble those of the earlier period in Western Europe. In addition, the American story cannot be conflated with the European, though I would suggest that the ending of the war at Hiroshima and Nagasaki raised moral issues we have yet to resolve about the nature and consequences of the Second World War. In addition, the absence of American civilian casualties may tell us something about the gap that separates what Maurice Halbwachs termed the collective memory of that war in the United States from European collective memory.

I still feel there is something we have yet to come to terms with about the Second World War which leads me to posit a cultural break after 1945. On the German side, we agree that a break certainly occurred, though it is interesting to note that Helmut Kohl chose a Kathe Kollwitz pieta to conflate the victims of both world wars and Communist rule in East Germany in the national war memorial placed (under very odd circumstances) in the New Watch in Berlin. But even when we turn to France and Britain, the other two cases on which I focus in *Sites of Memory*, there are reasons to distinguish sharply between the two world wars and their commemoration.

Watching one brief moment of the Touvier trial at Versailles, I was struck by the difference in the rhetoric used to describe the war from that used in the 1920s and 1930s to describe the 1914-18 conflict. It is trivial but true to say that occupation and collaboration mattered. The old stories of heroes and villains may be found, but there were other stories, very hard to ignore, that came out of the Second World War.

We all know of the false claims advanced by some after 1944 to have played an active part in the Resistance; stories of phony heroism abound after all wars. But one man on the stand made me persist in my belief that something different was going on. Touvier's chauffeur was on the stand. He was a teenager who had been infiltrated into the *milice* by a Resistance group. The man stayed with Touvier throughout the Lyons period, and even after Touvier's flight from retribution. Had he changed sides? Which side was he on? I doubt if even he knew the answer to these questions. The grey fog of collaboration obscures any clear vision of the moral lessons of the Second World War in France.

Are the civilian victims remembered in the same way? I doubt it. Yes, there are commemorative plaques like those of 1914-18. One is on the building on the Ile St Louis from which Jewish orphans were deported. But this memorial plaque is not only a reminder of who was sent away; it is also a reminder of their neighbours who watched it happen and (in most cases) did nothing. I have trouble in applying the last phrase of Professor Keylor's review–referring to Allied servicemen to be sure–to these Jewish children. Did they die in vain? I am not claiming to have an answer to this question; all I am claiming is that the "answers" of 1914-18 survivors could not be applied easily after the Second World War.

It is important to adopt a gradualist approach here. It was not only the 1939-45 war itself which changed the landscape of commemoration; interwar developments played their part too. Antiwar sentiment was more widespread than ever before, and with good reason: the cripples were there in every village and *quartier* for those who wanted to see what war was like. Admittedly, many men and women on the Left who denounced war as an abomination changed their minds when the Spanish Republic needed defending. Nevertheless, the outbreak of war in 1939 was greeted not by great demonstrations; even in Berlin, the public mood was sombre and subdued. Why? Because everyone anticipated immediate aerial bombardment of civilian centres; and because the widows and orphans of the last war were everywhere. Now there would be millions more mourning those who "did not die in vain." I am sceptical about the healing effects of such soothing phrases; so were those who lived through the first week of warfare in September 1939.

There is a second level of argument about the supposed break in cultural forms and codes of commemoration after the Second World War. It may have been accidental, but the use of abstract forms in painting and sculpture was much more prevalent after 1945 than after 1918. This was not a war-related event, but it meant that the use of the figurative grammar in post-1945 commemoration was less widespread than after 1918. Reinhard Koselleck has shown this conclusively with respect to war memorial art. But even in this country, and much more recently, the same point applies.

Consider the two commemorative forms in the Mall in Washington to mark the Vietnam War. One is figurative; the other, Maya Lin's Wall, is not. All I am claiming is that the abstract form she adopted–and adapted admittedly from reflections on Lutyens's Thiepval memorial to the Allied Missing of the Battle of the Somme–characterizes much more post-1945 commemo-

ration than post-1918. Abstract forms describe a caesura in time much more effectively than figurative ones do. Herein may lie the convergence of the history of artistic developments, with their own internal dynamics, and the history of public commemoration.

On the literary plane too, there seems to have been a different response to the Second World War compared to the First. One school of thought has it that Second World War writers were simply standing on the shoulders of the poets and novelists of 1914-18. I do not accept this argument, since as Professor Keylor agrees, there is little evidence of an epistemological or stylistic divide before and after the Great War. Then why a different literary legacy after 1945?

One answer is that after Celine, the romanticism of Barbusse or Genevoix was no longer possible. Perhaps. But another answer may arise out of the claim I advanced in *Sites of Memory* that war poetry in 1914-18 was a form of the reconfiguration of the sacred, in the sense of the term used by Alphonse Dupront. I am still minded to argue that the 'sacred' was buried under an unimaginable pile of bodies, including but certainly not limited to the bodies of one million Jewish children.

Yes, Allied soldiers died, among other reasons, so that that figure was not doubled or tripled, as surely it would have been had the Nazis won. But the nature of the offence, as Primo Levi put it, would not have changed had the figure of innocent lives lost in the Second World War been higher still. Something happened in the Second World War that made it very difficult, if not impossible, to go back to the rhetoric of 1914-18 about soldiers not having died in vain. Some still stuck to older forms; for others, these forms stuck in their throats.

It is for that reason that I ended my book upon some reflections by Walter Benjamin, a man who made us question the notion of aesthetic redemption, in either a Christian or Hegelian sense. Without that notion, the 1914-18 world of commemorative affirmation, so full of sadness and so reluctant to abandon hope, was bound to fade away. As indeed it has done.

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