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Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory

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The study of war and memory has been popular amongst cultural historians for over two decades, yet scholarly interest in the subject shows no sign of abating. Indeed, as this collection demonstrates, memory remains a fruitful area of research, particularly if approached from a comparative perspective. The essays in this book are the outcome of a conference which took place in September 2011 at St. John?s College, Cambridge and collect the work of a number of leading scholars working on the history of Britain and France in the 20th century. As Robert Tombs notes in his introduction, the book explores the ?difficult relationship? between these two countries during the two world wars (p. 3). As such, this collection analyses the key military and diplomatic moments which defined this uneasy partnership. Memory, however, is central in two ways. First, the authors are concerned with how these events have been remembered in the two countries, and how often widely diverging narratives of them have emerged. Secondly, many of these authors are also concerned with how the memory of particular moments has impacted upon the military and diplomatic relationship between France and Britain. The major strengths of the book lie in this welding of military, diplomatic and cultural history. To address these themes, the book is divided into three sections, each comprising an introduction and three essays. The first two sections, which primarily focus on the

military and diplomatic history, address the First and Second World Wars respectively; the final section is dedicated to the issue of memory.

Tombs defines memory as ?the combination of diverse cultural actions and artefacts [?] which seeks to preserve and transmit ideas and emotions about the past? (p. 2). What remains unclear, however, is how exactly ?memory? relates to the ?truth? and ?myth? within the book?s title. It is implied that ?memory? is not ?truth?, but rather a distortion of it, yet it is questionable whether this truth can ever be fully accessed. Empirical historical study may help to uncover this truth, but as some of the essays demonstrate, the historical profession itself has also perpetuated distorted narratives of the past. It is also unclear where ?myth? sits within this framework. The term is loaded with notions of falsehood, but has also been used by scholars, perhaps most notably Samuel Hynes, to denote a concept similar to that of memory.(1) Whether or not the two terms are interchangeable, or whether they are used to denote slightly different concepts, remains unclear throughout this book.

Gary Sheffield provides an effective introduction to the opening section on the First World War, reminding the reader that coalitions are not friendships, but rather uneasy ?marriages of convenience? (p. 19). Following this, John Keiger?s essay introduces us to the theme of forgetting that runs throughout these chapters. Any discussion of how societies remember inevitably turns to what has been forgotten, and the Entente Cordiale provides a prime example. Although it is now taken to be a symbol of Anglo-French cooperation throughout the 20th century, Keiger stresses that actually the Entente was a case of cultural ?crossed wires?; the French always perceived the Entente to be a firm commitment of mutual support ? something the British were in fact unwilling to provide (p. 30). It was only after the invasion of Belgium that the British felt compelled to offer military assistance. During the centenary commemorations of the Entente Cordiale, however, Britain?s initial hesitancy was overlooked (p. 43).

More edifying moments in the history of Anglo-French relations have also been side-lined in official accounts. As William Philpott demonstrates in his essay, key instances of joint sacrifice and endeavour ? such as the heavy involvement of the French during the Battle of the Somme ? have not been remembered in either country. This is partly because both Churchill and Haig downplayed the French contribution (pp. 53?5). However, as Philpott notes, the historical profession is also implicated. Military history is less commonly pursued by French historians, and as a consequence source material pertaining to the functioning of the French army has been less thoroughly scrutinized (p. 53). More damningly, however, Philpott blames British historians for relying too heavily on Haig?s testimony, who, keen to convey a narrative of French decline, gave the French little credit (p. 57). Philpott does not offer an explanation for this reliance on Haig, but I would suggest that in their efforts to counter the popular mythology of ?lions led by donkeys?, many historians may have been overly sympathetic to the Field-Marshall?s testimony.

The theme of forgetting persists into Elizabeth Greenhalgh?s article, which also casts a critical eye over historiographical trends. Greenhalgh demonstrates that historians have overlooked the French support for the British that was crucial during the German Spring Offensives. Moreover, they have over-emphasised the role of the British during the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918 and the subsequent ?Hundred Days?. This obscures the fact that an earlier Allied offensive occurred on the Marne on 18 July and was instrumental in the eventual victory (p. 70). Like Philpott, Greenhalgh suggests that an over-reliance on Haig?s testimony is partially to blame (p. 67). Yet it is not only France?s role that has been forgotten. The French have similarly forgotten the logistical contribution of the British navy, which was essential in supplying raw materials and American troops to the continent during the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare (p. 73). Finally, Greenhalgh suggests that geography underlies this antagonism. The British, protected by the channel and a powerful navy, possessed a detached sense of superiority in relation to the rest of Europe, whilst the French, whose soil had actually been invaded, were unwilling to concede that the British had made a comparable sacrifice (p. 77).

Akhila Yechury and Emile Chabal also underscore the importance of geography in the second part of the book. Stressing that the Second World War was very much a ?global conflict?, and that Britain and France were ?the two greatest imperial powers of the age?, Yechury and Chabal convincingly illustrate the

centrality of Empire to an understanding of Anglo-French relations (p. 83). Significant moments, such as the British attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir, for example, took place in a colonial setting.

The significance of forgetting also remains a theme in this part of the book. As Martin S. Alexander aptly demonstrates in his essay, cultural amnesia has led to a sense of unequal sacrifice with regard to Dunkirk. In his summary of the military operations themselves, Alexander notes that the French performed an important role in shielding the British retreat to Dunkirk (p. 96), but the British have largely forgotten this, instead choosing to condemn the French for capitulating (p. 98). This chapter?s major strength is its thorough consideration of the ways in which these operations have been represented and remembered in Britain and France. This is particularly important with regard to Britain, which has developed a distinct Dunkirk myth. Perpetuated in numerous war films, this myth depicts the debacle as a heroic ?escape from the jaws of disaster? (p. 103), and, as Alexander perceptively shows, slots into a broader ?meta-narrative affirming Britain?s indelible role in World War II? (p. 104). Alexander uses the term ?myth?, rather than ?memory?, to refer to this narrative, and again I feel that definitions of some of these terms might be instructive. Alexander quite rightly notes that ?myths, like comedy, only work if they contain grains of truth? (p. 101), but a more explicit definition would be useful here. Nevertheless, the chapter effectively contrasts this narrative with that advanced by some French, who blamed the British for an ?unforgivable act of perfidy? (p. 101). Understandably, however, the more painful legacies of Vichy, occupation and collaboration have dominated French concerns, and Dunkirk does not occupy such as prominent place in French memory (p. 102).

These issues greatly complicated the nature of the Anglo-French relationship during the Second World War, and have consequently led to a further divergence of memories. Sébastien Albertelli?s essay explores the relationship between the British, the Free French and the Resistance, noting that the relations at this stage were highly uneven. De Gaulle and the Free French were dependent on the British (p. 119), yet De Gaulle, determined to assert his authority, insisted on bilateral agreements with Churchill?s government. The British, however, had little faith in the Free French, often choosing to engage directly with various resistance movements (p. 121). Ultimately, the Free French were given very little say in the planning for the D Day invasion (p. 129), but as Albertelli demonstrates, the Resistance proved to be of significant tactical benefit, undertaking a number of important sabotage missions (p. 132). However, like many other instances of Anglo-French cooperation, this has since been forgotten in Britain (p. 133).

This forgetting can work both ways. Olivier Wieviorka?s essay demonstrates that the British role in the liberation of France has also been downplayed. In this instance, however, historians are not seen to be at fault. Rather, Wieviorka suggests this is because popular narratives have become ?Americanized? (p. 138). Wieviorka?s analysis of this is unfortunately rather brief, as his primary aim is to ?piece together the true extent of the British contribution? (p. 138). He reveals that the early military failures of Montgomery, which owed themselves to ?strategic blunders, poorly motivated troops and firm German resistance? (p. 144), ultimately consigned Britain to the role of ?junior partner? to the United States (p. 149). But Wieviorka stresses that the British did make a significant contribution to the liberation, providing essential manpower and resources (p. 149). It is this contribution which has been overlooked by the French (p. 150). What is not made entirely clear, however, is how the British themselves have remembered their mixed record during the liberation. To what extent did the ?Americanization? of memory extend to Britain, which had no problem constructing powerful national narratives of other key events of the war?

The final section addresses how Britain and France have remembered the two world wars. As Philip Bell notes in his introduction, there are a number of striking contrasts between British and French memories. Whereas in France the First World War is normally seen as a necessary war, in Britain it is frequently dismissed as a futile disaster. But whereas numerous historians have highlighted the dominance of notions of futility in British memory (2), Bell crucially notes that British narratives of the war are actually more complex and divisive than this, as evidenced by the respect for the dead and the wearing of poppies (p. 155). The other critical distinction that Bell stresses concerns the Second World War, where ?the situation is almost totally reversed?. In this case, it is French memories which are divided and complex; in Britain the war is almost unanimously seen to be a ?good? war (p. 156). Despite these contrasts, Bell also notes similarities, such as the reaction of ?never again? to the First World War in both Britain and France (p. 157).

Jay Winter?s essay on divergent patterns of First World War remembrance in France and Britain, like much of his work, embraces the linguistic turn, considering the role of language in framing memory.(3) Winter?s innovative methodology uses Google N-grams to trace the frequency of the use of the word ?glory?, and its French equivalent, ?gloire?, in written works over the last 100 years. Whereas the use of ?glory? has been on a steady decline in British English, the use of the word ?gloire? peaked in France during the First World War (p. 164). For Winter, this is because the ?English language works differently from the French language when it comes to heightened eloquence; consequently memories expressed in the two languages may never be the same? (pp. 164?5). These diverging memories are not simply rooted in linguistic differences, but also contrasting assumptions regarding the war?s meaning. Winter notes that whilst the British have often dismissed the war as pointless, ?it is simply not possible to refer to a war of defence against the occupation of northern France as an act of futility? (p. 167). For Winter this might also explain a further contrast: in France joking about the war is deemed inappropriate, whereas in Britain irony is central to many narratives of the conflict. Consequently, Winter suggests that the Great War ?is sacred in France in a way that it is not in Britain? (p. 168). This is undoubtedly true, but there is still a reverent respect for the dead in Britain which retains a similarly sacred character.

In the following essay, Robert Frank focuses on how the Anglo-French relationship during the Second World War has been remembered. The sound theoretical foundation that Frank establishes is particularly admirable. Frank uses the concept of the ?other? and its role in the formation of self-identity, in order to explain how perceptions and memories of the Anglo-French relationship developed (p. 179). Frank then applies these concepts to a number of key issues, including the French amnesia regarding the role of the British during the liberation. His convincing explanation for this is that British successes ?have continued to hold up a mirror to French humiliations? (p. 186). For similar reasons, the important role played by Churchill in securing the beneficial treatment of France at Yalta has also been forgotten by the French.

Finally, David Reynolds explores how the memory of the two world wars has influenced policy in Britain and France during the 20th century. This weaving of cultural and diplomatic history provides an exemplary reflection of the collection?s methodology. Reynolds begins by noting some important contrasts in the way the First World War was remembered in Britain and France in the 1920s, reiterating the point that France?s need to expel an invader gave the war a stronger moral justification (p. 194). His suggestion, however, that the British were ?fighting *mainly* for abstractions? (p. 195) is debatable, and overlooks the clear strategic reasons which underpinned Britain?s decision to wage war. Nevertheless, Reynolds convincingly demonstrates that a greater French antipathy towards the Germans during 1920s, which had roots stretching back to 1870, led to differing policies during the inter-war years. Whereas the British favoured reconciliation, the French advocated a far stricter policy (p. 196). This process of drifting apart continued in the wake of the Second World War. The rapprochement and cooperation between the two countries that occurred during 1939 was forgotten and clouded by the memory of 1940. Whilst this may have been Britain?s ?finest hour?, it was a tragic moment for the French. Britain developed a ?special relationship? with the United States (p. 200), whilst France favoured European integration following the war (p. 203). Many of Reynolds? other points, which summarize the development of the mythology of the two world wars in both countries are, as he admits, ?familiar ground?. Nevertheless, he makes the important point that the experience of the Second World War impacted upon how the first conflict was viewed in both countries. In

Britain, for example, the Great War appeared as a futile prelude in contrast to the triumphant second conflict (p. 194). Ultimately, the chapter?s broad sweep, which covers memory and policy in both Britain and France, and in relation to both world wars, provides an effective conclusion to the collection.

Taken together, these essays are an excellent advertisement for comparative history: this approach sheds further light on the relationship between war and memory in both countries. Considering both world wars in one collection is also valuable. The First World War and its memories greatly influenced policy during the Second World War, and these memories would shift and develop as a consequence of the second conflict. There is still much work to do, particularly in this latter area, and hopefully this collection will pave the way for future research in this respect. Perhaps most importantly, this collection demonstrates that approaches in military and diplomatic history can effectively incorporate elements of cultural history, and vice versa.

Such a broad and ambitious collection inevitably has its weaknesses. This book would perhaps benefit from a more secure theoretical foundation, and terms such as ?truth?, ?myth? and ?memory? could be more clearly defined in relation to each other. In a similar fashion, the first two sections of the book, which deal with the ?truth? ? that is the diplomatic and military history ? often deal too fleetingly with the ways in which these events were remembered. Structurally, however, the book at least partially addresses this problem, with the final section dedicated to memory effectively tackling many of the issues raised earlier in the book. Finally, some of the authors could be more precise about exactly *who* is remembering or forgetting in each instance. When a nation is said to have forgotten or remembered, it is not always clear whether this includes the historical profession, for example.

The aims of the book, however, are commendable. As Robert Tombs notes in his introduction, Britain and France ?owe each other far more than we generally recognize? (p. 14) and the collection underscores this point. With the upcoming centenary of the First World War, I hope there will be further opportunities for the often damaging instances of historical amnesia presented in this book to be corrected.

Notes

1. Samuel Hynes, ?Personal Narratives and Commemoration?, in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 206?7.Back to (1)
2. See, for example: Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War ? Myths and Realities* (London, 2002) and Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain?s Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002).Back to (2)
3. See, for example: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge, 1995) and *Remembering War: The Great War between History and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2006).Back to (3)

The co-editors thank Dr Trott for his thoughtful review and have no comment.

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