The Great War Remembered: Commemoration and Peace in Flanders Fields

Maarten Van Alstein

Flemish Peace Institute – Flemish Parliament, Brussels
maarten.vanalstein@vlaamsparlement.be

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1 Introduction

In 2014-2018, the centenary commemoration of the First World War will take place. Traditionally, war commemorations have been interpreted as being, on the one hand, about reinforcing nationhood and restoring the political order brutally upset by war, and, on the other, about families and societal groups trying to cope with the losses suffered as a consequence of the war. Nevertheless, commemorative practices are complex and can take many forms. For example, as Jenny Edkins has pointed out, because of its political character the trauma of war can open up spaces where memory is used not to restore the established order but, on the contrary, to promote change and, in a more subversive move, to challenge the political systems that produce the violence of wars in the first place. In this paper I will study peace-minded commemorations as an emancipatory form of memorialisation of the violent past, as it uses the memory of war to challenge the system of militarized interstate rivalry, to avoid future wars, and to actively promote a culture of peace.

The focus of the paper will be on the case of Flanders. In its preparations for the upcoming centenary commemoration, the Flemish government has stated that transmitting a peace message will constitute one of the main objectives of the event, besides stimulating tourism and enhancing the international visibility of Flanders. Of course, as many historians and other scholars have pointed out, the path of governments who engage in the field of collective memory and remembrance is strewn with risks and dangers, such as the instrumentalization and manipulation of history for political aims. On the other hand, however, commemorations also offer opportunities for emancipatory and transformative moves, such as promoting peace. In this paper, I will critically assess the challenges and possibilities of linking commemorations of the First World War with a peace message, as well as offer some normative reflections on the critical preconditions under which governments and other remembrance agents can engage in pro-peace war commemorations. The paper will first offer an historical overview of First World War commemorations in Flanders, where the pro-peace narrative has always been a salient element in the memorialisation of the Great War. This historical introduction will set the framework in order to better understand the historical links between war commemoration and a message of peace, as well as shed an introductory light on the complexities of remembrance. I will also point to current developments in the field of remembrance such as the memory boom. In the second part, I will take a closer conceptual look at some of the intricacies linked to pro-peace war commemoration. Specifically, I will address two issues. First I will engage with the question of how peace-minded commemorations can deal with the complexities of remembrance and collective memory, such as their diversity and inherently contestable nature. I will argue that the recognition of difference seems to be the most peaceful way to mediate the complexities and the contestable character of social memory. Secondly, I will take a closer look at the thorny issue of the relations between history and memory, or, in other words, between scholarly historiography and public remembrance. This will lead me to introduce two logics of how commemorations can refer to – or make use of – the past.
2 Commemoration of the First World War in a Historical Perspective

2.1 The nation, mourning, and resistance

The wounds inflicted by wars heal very slowly and leave behind deep scars. This holds true not only for relationships between the states or groups that were each others’ enemies during the conflict, but also for the social fabric of societies afflicted by war; for veterans who have to come to terms with traumatic wartime experiences; and for the countless families who have to cope with the loss of slain relatives or the mutilation of loved ones. The First World War raised this issue in an especially acute form. The losses brought about by this war were massive and unprecedented. What is more, it was not professional armies who fought a life and death struggle for four years in the trenches, but armies of the people, composed of ordinary citizens who were dispatched or drawn to the front in the name of powerful nation-states and colonial empires. Many never returned. Those who did return, as well as the many civilians who suffered because of the war, were scarred by the traumatic experiences of violence that warfare always entails. After the war, some sense of meaning for this gigantic loss of human life had to be found, not just by the nation and society – where the war sometimes caused internal rifts – but also by the veterans and the families of the dead and wounded. Commemorations and various forms of remembrance practices played a crucial role in this. In the years immediately following the war, a key question for the various societies involved in the conflict was how the war and its many victims should be commemorated. The very diverse answers given to this question generated a wide diversity in the forms of commemoration. As a result First World War commemorations and remembrance sites to this very day are characterised by great historical and sociological complexity.¹

Historical, sociological and political science research into the commemoration of the First World War has approached this complexity in various ways. T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, for instance, distinguish two important historiographic schools, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of the commemoration of the war.² A first school interprets war commemorations as a political practice that is closely related to the rituals of national identification and the construction of collective national identities. The First World War presented an enormous challenge to the nation-state. In the 19th century, the nation-state had grounded its power of attraction and its strength in the promise of well-being that it would provide for its subjects. Then came the war, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and citizens lost their lives in the name of the fatherland. Once the hostilities were over, it was thus also vital for the nation-state to give some meaning to this wholesale death. This was done by representing the deaths of frontline soldiers as a sacrifice for the nation, a patriotic martyrdom that the soldiers took upon themselves to save the fatherland from the existential threat of the enemy. One of the best-known examples in the literature of this imputation of meaning is Benedict Anderson’s interpretation of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. For Anderson, this tomb is the prime example of a symbol of national solidarity; it evokes not only the sacrifice that the citizens may be asked to make as the price of that sense of community, but also the means by which the nation-state seeks to persuade its citizens to die for the national cause, among others by eternalising its gratitude for that sacrifice in stone.³ After the war, similar tombs were erected in many countries throughout the world. The underlying idea was that the body of the unknown soldier could in principle be that of any fallen soldier who remained missing. If the unknown soldier could be ‘anyone’, he could also transcend differences of political opinion, social class, language or ethnic group, and thus serve as the ideal symbol of national unity. Consequently, when selecting an unrecognisable (and thus unidentified) body to be placed in the tomb, careful attention was always paid to ensuring that the soldier in question at least had the ‘right’ nationality.⁴ There are myriad examples of war memorials that are nationally and patriotically inspired. One such example is the monument à la victoire in Verdun, an imposing monument in the centre of the fortified town symbolising the memory of the battle as a glorious and heroic victory of the French state over Germany. The famous words of General Pétain, “on les aura”, still adorn the monument.⁵ Similarly, written on the Menin Gate in Ypres – originally conceived as a triumphal arch but eventually established as a memorial in honour of the British war dead – are the
inscriptions, ‘pro patria’ (for the homeland) and ‘pro rege’ (for the king). Thus elements of a patriotic-imperialistic idiom found their way onto this monument that was dedicated to the memory of the British war dead.\(^6\) In Belgium, the patriotic discourse of commemoration takes concrete form for instance in the Cross of Fire medals presented to every soldier who came under fire at the front. The slogan, ‘salus patriae, suprema lex’ (the good of the country is the supreme law) occupies a prominent place on the medal. The same slogan can also be found on some local war monuments. While the commemoration of the First World War has radically evolved over the course of the 20\(^{th}\) century, elements of this national, patriotic and imperialistic discourse of commemoration remain present even today in the commemorative landscape, often in the petrified form of war monuments and memorials.

A second historiographic approach distinguished by Ashplant, Dawson and Roper interprets First World War commemorations firstly as expressions of mourning. One important author is this school is Jay Winter, whose research into war commemoration investigates how groups of veterans, families and relatives – often on a small scale – attempted to give meaning to the massive scale of death and suffering caused by the war. According to Winter, all too much attention has been given in the literature on commemoration to the interpretation and manipulation of war memories by political and cultural elites. Rather, he points out that many of the remembrance initiatives within societies – particularly after tragic events – happen spontaneously, in bottom-up fashion, not merely guided from above. These spontaneous remembrance initiatives result from exchanges among members of social networks, which sometimes existed before the war but were often created as a result of it. According to Winter, the rituals and objects emerging from these forms of remembrance and commemoration should not be seen as reflections of political authority or of a general consensus (although they could sometimes be this as well), but as an amalgam of profound expressions of the strength of a society. It is for this reason that he focuses his attention on the remembrance initiatives by families and groups of veterans, whom he sees as “small-scale agents of remembrance”, ordinary people who came together to reflect upon what happened to them, their loved ones and their particular social environment when the war so brutally intervened in their lives.\(^7\) This emphasis on small-scale local and family ‘remembrance landscapes’, which attempt to establish a relationship between living and dead, past and present by means of rituals, objects, sites and texts, can also be found in the work of Johan Meire who studied war commemoration around Ypres.\(^8\)

While both historiographic schools – given their specific focus – fail to shed light on all relevant aspects of war, they are not mutually exclusive. Ashplant, Dawson and Roper try to integrate the insights from both paradigms by stressing the interconnectedness and politically loaded nature of remembrance and commemorative initiatives in all their forms: both the patriotic commemorative practices of the national elites, and the grief felt and expressed by families and veterans. War remembrance, they suggest, is made up of the complex interactions between individuals, society and the state. While some commemorative narratives gained a dominant role in the process, others remained ‘oppositional or marginal’.\(^9\) The numerous war memorials erected in many towns and communities after the war provide an example of how these mechanisms have worked. These monuments, where the individual names of the fallen are recorded, gave public recognition to the suffering of the families. They created a medium through which the afflicted could share there feelings of sorrow with other afflicted families as well as with the broader local community. By setting up monuments, the community was able in turn to demonstrate its gratitude to the fallen and to their families. At the same time, the personal loss and suffering of the bereaved were also linked to the state.\(^10\) This is clear from the idiom used in many of the local memorials. Traditional and familiar romantic and religious elements, such as the female figures tending to a fallen soldier, are combined with patriotic symbolism, such as the inscription ‘salus patriae, suprema lex’.\(^11\) Thus local war monuments were not only able to offer solace to mourners, but also offered them a way to transform the feelings of sorrow and loss into feelings of pride because of the contribution they had made to local and national solidarity.
In her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins explores in greater depth the political dimensions of the remembrance of war and political violence. Edkins argues that traumatic war violence and the memory thereof within society may lead to the formation of resistance and emancipation movements (or bring their existence clearly into focus), and may also create specific possibilities for social groups to oppose centralised political power. More specifically, she describes how the remembrance of traumatic violence may be used to promote change and to challenge the political systems that produced the violence of war in the first place. Commemoration thus can generate transformational movements. Because official commemoration sites such as monuments and memorials are closely interwoven with the values that the sovereign state seeks to promulgate, they are often precisely the places where people wanting to resist dominant commemorative discourses or state power choose to organise themselves. This effort for resistance or emancipation can take various forms. Resistance movements can be very explicit, such as the student protest at Tiananmen Square in Beijing – an important place in the Chinese commemorative landscape. Other versions of liberation are more subtle or implicit. Edkins describes, for example, how the quiet serenity of the Vietnam memorial, designed by Maya Ying Lin and strategically located on the Mall in Washington (the pre-eminent memorial site in the United States), distances itself from the patriotic heroism promulgated by many other national war monuments. Another war memorial she extensively discusses is the Cenotaph in London, designed by Edwin Lutyens in 1919. That monument, too, does not convey any explicit national symbolism, but rather emphasises the trauma of the war and the mourning by veterans and surviving relatives. While the British Government foresaw only a secondary role for the Cenotaph in the commemoration ceremonies to mark the end of the war and the British victory, the monument would eventually come to play a very significant role the British culture of remembrance. This had everything to do with the unprecedented success of the monument among veterans and grieving surviving relatives. They were better able to recognise themselves in the simplicity of the Cenotaph than in the ceremonies the government had planned, which were intended to be joyful and to celebrate the military. Edkins calls both monuments – the Cenotaph and the Vietnam Wall – exceptional because they seem to respond to some desire other than the need to celebrate and re-narrate national glory in the aftermath of trauma. Both monuments refuse to be readily incorporated into the national myth of glory and sacrifice for king and country. The Vietnam Wall, for instance, gives visitors no easy answers, yet, according to Edkins, it is a site that prompts acceptance of the reality of death rather than the myth of sacrifice.

Edkins’ insights are interesting in the context of Belgian commemoration. After the war, the Flemish struggle for emancipation, which had gained momentum with the Flemish ‘Front Movement’ during the First World War, developed its own tradition of commemoration in the Westhoek region (in English known as Flanders Fields). The Yser Tower, where an annual pilgrimage would come to be organised, was built in Diksmuide in the Yser plain which was defended by the Belgian army during the war. The tradition of pro-Flemish commemoration challenged the patriotic commemoration narratives of the Belgian nation-state. Thus gravestones special to Flanders were designed that differed from official Belgian gravestones, whose inscription, ‘*Mort pour la Belgique* (‘Died for Belgium’) was seen as offensive. The Flemish Movement generated its own Association of Flemish Veterans (VOS); and the war experiences of Flemish frontline soldiers are remembered in terms of a sacrifice for the Flemish cause: “Here our blood, when our rights?”. In this way the pro-Flemish tradition of commemoration played an important role in the struggle for Flemish self-rule and the formation of Flemish national awareness.

The emancipatory and transformative potential of war remembrance that Jenny Edkins writes about can also be found in *peace-minded* forms of commemoration. Until now, these have not been given a great deal of attention in the historical and sociological literature on war commemoration. Nevertheless, from the immediate post-war up to the present, these ways of commemorating have always been a part of the commemoration of the First World War, however much they might have come under pressure from the more patriotic and militaristic-inspired display of remembrance.
2.2 Pacifist war commemoration

During the interwar period various commemorative practices arose, on the initiative of both veterans and civic organisations, that linked the commemoration of the war with the message, ‘No More War’. The experience of the horror of war was transformed into a call to avoid and banish war for ever. If the war of 1914-1918 could signify the end of all wars, then at least some meaning could be found for the tremendous slaughter of the war, and the sacrifice of the frontline soldiers would not have been for naught. These initiatives not only distanced themselves from patriotic and militaristic forms of commemoration, they also often constituted a passionate plea for a far-reaching transformation of the international state system. Pacifists argued that this system necessarily led to war because it was based on the military-imperialist rivalry between sovereign states and on an intensive arms race. These wars only benefited powerful elites and rich industrialists. As an alternative to this old, war-addicted system, the focus was placed on newly founded international institutions such as the League of Nations and the supremacy of international law. Pacifist forms of war commemoration arose in various European countries in the 1920s and gained popularity in the 1930s when the prospect of a sustainable peace was clouded by the rise of revengeful and warmongering fascist dictatorial regimes. They were reinforced by a wave of sometimes extremely critical and bitter war novels by soldiers and veterans such as Henri Barbusse, Gabriel Chevallier, Erich Maria Remarque and Robert Graves. These books were received with great interest by the public, but also ran into controversy.

In Great Britain in the 1930s, for example, the Co-operative Women’s Guild, which was established in 1883 and had joined the international peace movement in 1914, developed the initiative of the White Poppies. With these poppies, the Guild hoped to introduce a pacifist alternative to the annual Red Poppy Appeal of the Royal British Legion, the largest organisation of British veterans. In 1926 the Guild had suggested that the British Legion should place the inscription “No More War” on the red poppies in place of the imprint “Haig Fund”. This proposal was rejected. A few years later, the Cooperative Women’s Guild therefore decided to design their own – white – poppy with the inscription “No More War”. The white poppies first appeared on Armistice Day in 1933. The Guild did emphasise that its initiative was in no way meant as an insult to the fallen. The campaign quickly received the support of other peace organisations. The following year, the newly established Peace Pledge Union committed itself to the distribution and promotion of the white poppies. The white poppies still exist, but have been involved in their share of controversy. The mainstream of traditional British commemoration is rather reluctant to link war remembrance explicitly to contemporary political statements such as a message of peace; in 1988, when the Peace Pledge Union again asked the British Legion to take over the production and distribution of the white poppies, the Legion once again refused. Nevertheless, the connection between war remembrance and the cause of peace received broader support during the inter-war period in Britain than from the peace movement alone. This can be seen, for example, in a statement by George V during his tour of the battlefields: “In the course of my pilgrimage, I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth through the years to come, than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war.”

During the interwar period in France various pacifist-inspired commemoration practices emerged, often created and supported by veterans. In 1919, for example, writer and veteran Henri Barbusse established the Clarté movement, a movement of leftist-pacifist intellectuals including members such as Anatole France and Stefan Zweig. The movement could also for a while count on support from communist and pacifist circles in Flanders. Most French veterans’ groups, to which approximately half of the French veterans belonged in the early 1930s, explicitly turned their backs on militarism. According to Antoine Prost, the remembrance liturgy of the French veterans was characterised not only by funerary elements, but also by peace-minded elements:
“Elle ne comprend ni Marseillaise, ni défilé militaire ou prise d’armes, ni discours des autorités : chacun doit s’effacer, se taire et méditer. Devant l’immensité du sacrifice commémoré, la paix s’impose comme valeur suprême, par-delà les égoymses et les orgueis nationaux.”

In Verdun, the most important national symbol of French commemoration of the First World War, veterans organised gatherings with a markedly pacifist colouring. Thus on 12 July 1936 – at a time when a new war was casting its dark shadow – twenty thousand veterans, including Germans and Italians, came together in Verdun. There at the immense Douamont cemetery, each veteran took his place at a grave, and together they took a vow of peace. After that, flowers were placed at the large ossuary in front of the cemetery. In Germany, the pacifist style of war remembrance was embodied inter alia in the efforts of Ernst Friedrich, founder of an anti-war museum in Berlin. Friedrich gained notoriety with his book Krieg dem Krieg! (War Against War!) in which he printed photographs of mutilated soldiers with the idea of avoiding another war by showing the essence of war in all its horror.

In Belgium as well, soon after the war’s end pacifist tendencies emerged in the remembrance of the First World War. This was not just a bottom-up trend involving civil society or veterans’ associations, a pacifist interpretation of war remembrance also had support from various movements in the Belgian political landscape. The link between the message of peace and the remembrance of war thus found its place in a broader revival of internationalist and pacifist ideas which had started to develop before the war, throughout Europe and across all parties – from Catholic anti-militarism and socialist international pacifism to liberal notions of the importance of international law. On the outbreak of hostilities this way of thinking was abruptly pushed aside; but following four years of the atrocities of war, the pacifist, anti-militarist and internationalist ideas once again gained ground. This occurred within all political movements. The pro-Flemish veterans, for instance, played a crucial role in reviving the anti-militaristic way of thinking within the Catholic group. It found expression inter alia in the commemorative practices of the Flemish movement, which alongside its Pro-Flemish and Christian elements was also characterised by an explicitly pacifist message. On the Yser Tower, consecrated in 1928, the words “No More War” were inscribed in four languages. Between 1929 and 1934, the Yser Pilgrimage Committee attempted to promote the Yser Tower as an international pacifist war memorial. The socialists committed themselves to the international peace movement War Resisters’ International, which was established after the war and adopted a broken gun as its symbol. Socialists were also active in the actual field of war remembrance. In the 1920s, Belgian history textbooks were characterised by a heavily patriotic and explicitly anti-German tone. As Minister of Education, Camille Huysmans issued a directive in which he not only asked educational institutions to devote attention to the peaceable ideals of the League of Nations during history lessons, but also to ban those history textbooks that preached hatred against other peoples. On Armistice Day, 11 November 1930, the Belgian Union for the League of Nations also intervened in the area of remembrance by making peace the central theme of the commemoration ceremony, thereby introducing a pro-peace message into the commemoration of the war. This initiative was supported by the liberal Minister of Education, Robert Petitjean, who in the following year encouraged all Belgian educational institutions to participate in the propaganda week of the League of Nations which was organised from 8 to 15 November 1931.

The pacifism of the 1930s was eventually overshadowed by the rise of fascist regimes in Europe and by the outbreak of the Second World War. Furthermore, the war of 1940-1945 strongly influenced the remembrance of the First World War, which faded into the background in the decades following 1945. This happened not only because there was a more recent conflict to remember (which furthermore numbered more civilian than military casualties), but also because the sacrifice of 1914-18 seemed to have failed as a warning against war.
Starting in the 1970s, and certainly in the 1980s and 1990s, in many countries the interest in the First World War increased. In Flanders it was a peace-inspired remembrance that strongly came to the foreground. The Flemish peace movements played a prominent role in this development. These movements have always promoted the message “No More War” as the central lesson and legacy of the history of the First World War. Furthermore, the history of Flanders and Belgium as one of the most important battlefields of Europe played (and still plays) an important role in the Flemish peace movements’ thinking. This history, in which the First World War of course plays a prominent role, is often invoked as an explanation for the attachment of the Flemish people to peace, referring to Flanders’ direct experience of the horror and suffering of war.

In the 1970s, this peace-minded approach to the remembrance of the First World War received a significant impulse from a very local culture of remembrance in the Westhoek region. A short history of the Eleven November Group from Heuvelland, a small community south of Ypres, can clarify this. While in 2014-2018 the First World War will be commemorated throughout the country, in the context of this paper it is interesting to take a closer look at the local culture of remembrance in the southern part of the Westhoek region.

2.3 Eleven November Group

At the end of the 1970s, after decades of relative silence, the local remembrance of the war in the region south of Ypres was once again promoted by two notable projects: the publication of a book entitled *Van den Grooten Oorlog* (On the Great War) and the performance of a play *Nooit brengt een oorlog vrede* (War never brings Peace). The book and the play were the work of the Eleven November Group, which was established in 1977 in the context of a regional development project seeking to promote not only economic development but also local cultural initiatives. Young people from the region engaged in starting up the group were looking for alternative ways to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the First World War, which a year later was to be celebrated in Ypres with the usual military splendour. They came up with the idea of talking to elderly people in their families and villages about their experiences during the war. These testimonials were compiled in a book, which was published on 11 November 1978 under the title *Van den Grooten Oorlog*. The book told the stories of some fifty people who had lived at or behind the front, either as a soldier or a civilian: stories about the outbreak of the war, about being a refugee, about the many nationalities who stayed in the region during the war, about the violence of war, and about post-war reconstruction. The significance of the stories, which are almost literally presented in the vernacular of the storytellers, lies with their local and familial character; the book took stories that were normally told within the context of families and the villages and introduced them in the public sphere, giving them a place alongside the official history written by the state and formal historiography. Thus the book was indeed a people’s history. It showed how war was an everyday lived reality of ordinary people.

The Eleven November Group transformed the stories from the book into a play entitled *War never brings Peace*, which was performed by local people. The performances took place from 11 to 15 November 1978 in a forge in Kemmel that had been converted into a theatre. The play was again performed several times in 1979, in Ghent and in Brussels. The play consists of a series of scenes that shed light on various aspects of the experience of war, such as life behind the front, the relationships between soldiers and civilians, and the conversations among soldiers about the meaning of war. The play is anecdotal insofar as it presents various local, ‘ordinary’ stories about the war; at the same time, however, the purely anecdotal is transcended precisely because in the telling of local stories, the general human dimension of the experience of war surfaces. Although this was not an explicitly stated intention, the play additionally has a peace-minded undertone. Moving in reverse chronological order from 1918 to 1914, the play begins with an exposition by a representative of the Krupp company which sold weapons to both sides during the war and then, after the armistice, offers its services as producer of artificial arms and legs and of machines to remove scrap metal left behind.
by the war. During the play, the company representative appears on stage on several occasions, at the end confronting Jean Jaurès, who continued to plead for peace even in the summer of 1914. Furthermore, the prologue of the play claims that the the subject of the play – the First World War – stands for all wars, while the epilogue, immediately after the murder of Jaurès, suggests that war and arms races are not inevitable but result from human decisions for which there are always alternatives. In the context of the late 1970s, at a time when the placement of new nuclear weapons in Western Europe was imminent, this ending conveyed a broader message. For this reason many interpreted the play as political and pacifist consciousness-raising theatre. According to Marieke Demeester, one of the initiators of the Eleven November Group and heavily involved in writing the play, this had not been their original intention:

I would not describe our play as political consciousness-raising theatre. That was not the intention. We started out from the observation that it is unfortunate that we have forgotten what happened to local people here during the Great War, and that we now have to do something about it. But of course, when you hear all those stories, you begin to reflect and wonder: yes, but why? It is terrible what happened to those people in the war, and what has it gotten us? And I think that, as human beings, we have to continue to ask that question. But that is something very different than saying that it was ‘theatre with a message’. Our intention was to bring it to the ‘here and now’ so that people would finally think about it.32

The work of the Eleven November Group signified an important turning point in the way the area around Ypres approached the history of the war. The history and commemoration of the Great War had until then given little attention to the perspective of ordinary people. The book On the Great War and the play War never brings Peace introduced a new approach. By telling the stories of the people who actually had lived through the First World War, this perspective both raised the local roots of the memory of war as well as the universal-human dimensions of this memory. This approach would profoundly influence the how in the following decades the war was to be remembered in the Westhoek region. The In Flanders Fields Museum (IFFM), which opened in 1998, radically chose for a similar perspective.33 The central idea of the museum is that war is primarily a reality experienced by people – soldiers and civilians alike. As Piet Chielens, one of the inspiring forces behind the museum, expresses it, war is a people’s history. By taking this idea as its premise, the museum moreover is able to be both universal and relevant in a contemporary context.34 The museum proceeds from a collection of diverse, local, and individual stories rather than from a collection of objects or a specific message. Thus the museum transcends outdated national narratives of allies and enemies. For example, the allegorical figures representing frontline soldiers do not wear recognisable uniforms; rather, their uniforms are made of mud-coloured burlap, illustrating the common fate of all frontline soldiers. Because the emphasis is squarely on human experience, the museum only indirectly touches upon the overarching historical story of the war, for instance with interactive modules. Throughout the museum tour, the visitor is not provided with an explicit moral lesson (with the exception of the end where it is mentioned in how many wars the Red Cross has been active since the end of the First World War). This does not mean that the museum avoids morality. On the contrary: as Johan Meire has pointed out, the problematic morality of war is brought to the foreground precisely by presenting war as a human reality. The museum is arranged in such a way that it encourages many visitors to pose moral questions about war. Thus they can also be incited to reflect upon peace. This is why many people leave the museum with the feeling that they have visited a peace museum, while the museum nowhere mentions peace as such or advances an explicit message of peace. The IFFM also makes a conscious effort not to profile itself as a peace museum. According to Piet Chielens, the museum would likely lose some of its effects were it to do so:

In order to talk about peace we have to talk about war, and then the thought of peace will come spontaneously. […] If people think about peace when they leave, then you can be pleased. Without mentioning the word even once.35
The focus on locally-rooted memory by the Eleven November Group did not stand alone; at the same time, in the course of the 1970s, it was accompanied by efforts emerging within the local government of Ypres. These efforts aimed at placing the peace message centre stage as the most important legacy of the First World War. This movement, which was supported by the call for peace pronounced by Pope John Paul in 1985 in Ypres, became stronger in the 1980s and certainly in the early 1990s. The city of Ypres began profiling itself as a ‘City of Peace’, appointed a ‘peace official’ responsible for coordinating peace initiatives, and started organising an annual Peace Prize. The province of West-Flanders also joined these efforts. In 2002, the provincial administration decided to have actions and efforts concerning the First World War coordinated by a provincial network under the name ‘War and peace in the Westhoek’. The network starts from the idea that the history of the Westhoek region is “both local as well as universal, both past as well as present and future,” and that “what actually remains of the ‘Great War’ in this region is the idea of peace”, “the unrelenting search for peace”. The effort to foreground the idea of peace as the principal legacy of the First World War is supported by many partners in the region. Over the last few years, for example, also the Yser pilgrimage committee in Diksmuide has decided to emphasize even more strongly the message of peace, inter alia by organising the annual music festival Tent Vrede (For Peace). Furthermore, in 2011 the Flemish Parliament recognised the Yser Tower not only as a memorial of Flemish emancipation, but also of Peace.

The renewed interest in the remembrance of the First World War – initiated in the 1970s by local groups such as the Eleven November Group – only gained momentum and scope in the following decades. Especially in the 1990s and the first decade of this century this trend has become more salient. The great interest in the remembrance of the First World War stands not alone; it is part of an increasing interest in remembrance and commemoration in general, which can be observed all across the world, and which can be called remarkable, if not spectacular. In what follows we will delve deeper into a few characteristics of this ‘memory boom’ in order to better understand the socio-cultural framework in which the centenary commemoration of the First World War will take place.

2.4 The contemporary memory boom and the Centenary of the Great War

The increasing interest in remembrance and commemoration is known in the literature as the ‘memory boom’. In recent years, scholars in various disciplines including historians, anthropologists and political scientists have studied this boom. Duncan Bell, for example, has remarked that:

Memory seems impossible to escape. During the closing decades of the twentieth century it emerged as a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe, a trend that looks set to continue for the foreseeable future.

Exploring this memory boom in great detail would be moving too far beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it seems relevant to point out some of its defining characteristics.

Jay Winter connects the current memory boom with an earlier wave of remarkable cultural and social attention for history and memory which he situates in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century. In this period history and memory were rising stars in science as well as in literature: historians dedicated themselves to national historiography, sociologists such as Maurice Halbwachs developed their theories of collective memory, while Marcel Proust conscientiously reconstructed his personal world of recollections. Also politically and socially, history and social memory played crucial roles in forging and reinforcing national and imperial identities. In the contemporary age, these identities, constructed during the first memory boom, have become increasingly fragmented. Consequently, the unity and certainty of the former age have also disappeared. Present-day people are confronted with hybrid and multiple forms of identity construction. This has resulted in a renewed attention for remembrance and heritage, which are seen as remedies for the loss of old, overarching
certainties and as ways to forge not only individual identities but also shared identities and a sense of community in times of fragmentation. In the words of Allan Megill: “As identity grows more problematic, so memory becomes more important.”

Daniel Todman in his turn interprets the two memory booms as reactions to the ‘wounds’ of modernity, wounds that in the 19th century were caused by the rupture with traditional, locally embedded and community-bound relationships with the past, and at the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century are brought about by the disappearance of ‘Grand Narratives’ in times of postmodernism, globalisation and fragmentation. Pierre Nora, the French pioneer of the literature on sites of memory, seems to concur: in his opinion, the boom in interest in lieux de mémoire must be understood in terms of the disappearance of the – previously as familiar and self-evident experienced – milieux de mémoire of the nation.

In a similar vein the Flemish writer Joris Note has written that “a world without utopias” inevitably turns to the past – an observation that might be complemented with the thought that, in turning to the past, late modern people also have to proceed without any grand narratives to give meaning to that past. This last remark can help us understand the prominent role that personalised, individualistic approaches play in contemporary memory culture (see below).

The present-day memory boom obviously occurs in a different socio-cultural context than the first boom of the late 19th and early 20th century. Four trends can be distinguished as typical of the way in which remembrance and commemorative practices are currently played out.

First, over the last decades the memory of both world wars increasingly has been framed in terms of peace, reconciliation in the context of European integration, and global discourses on human rights. With regards to Flanders Fields, I already mentioned above how the message of peace has come to the forefront of war commemorations. Another example in the Westhoek region is the Irish Peace Tower in Messines, inaugurated on 11 November 1998. The tower commemorates Protestant and Catholic Irish soldiers who fought and died together at the Battle of Messines in 1917. The remembrance promoted in Messines thus resists the way the memory of the war has been used for decades in (Northern) Ireland: to intensify oppositions between Catholics and Protestants.

In recent years, the commemoration of Irish efforts during the First World War has been increasingly placed in the context of the reconciliation process. Similarly, people in New Zealand have also started to frame the commemoration of the First World War – specifically on ANZAC Day – as a moment to reflect upon questions of war and peace. This evolution began in the 1970s in the context of the war in Vietnam.

Secondly, a striking characteristic of contemporary remembrance are its individualized and personalized dimensions. This goes both for the ‘supply’ and the ‘demand-side’. On the one hand, many recently established war museums and commemoration projects about the First World War work with individual soldiers’ and civilians’ testimonies and stories. By telling their personal experiences of war, an attempt is made to make the history of the war more tangible. On the other hand, contemporary remembrance tourists and visitors of war museums seem less moved by an attempt to contribute to the construction of national identities than by a desire to locate their own complex individual identities within broader narratives of family, generation, community, and nation.

Thirdly, remembrance and commemoration are still instrumented by politics and society. This currently occurs in a specific context. Identity politics is still part of the order of the day, mainly as a way to try to strengthen social cohesion, sense of community, and national identities in times of fragmentation and globalisation. Additionally, war remembrance also plays a role in education, for instance in remembrance- and peace-education projects. Fourthly, it must be pointed out that the economic dimension of remembrance and heritage practices is becoming increasingly important. French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky notes that in the field of remembrance, which used to be primarily mobilized for the cult of the nation and the public cause, the emphasis is put more and more on the economic impact and direct or indirect profitability of heritage preservation. In his view, the field of heritage and remembrance is becoming ever more subject to a market logic and commercialism.

Indeed, there are large amounts of money involved in remembrance and heritage. Not only do
Governments provide sizeable budgets for commemorative and heritage projects, and the economic importance of remembrance tourism is significant, certainly in former battlefields regions. The popularity of First World War tourism has grown spectacularly over the last decades. Whereas in the 1970s, the Last Post under the Menin Gate in Ypres was sometimes sounded without a single spectator present, in recent years it has become a popularly attended ritual.

As the examples above show, the commemoration of the First World War has been part of the wider evolutions marking remembrance and heritage culture over the last decades. A fortiori, this also goes for the large-scale commemorative project “2014-2018: The Great War Centenary” that is currently being worked out by the Flemish Government. This is also apparent in the project’s aims formulated by the government:

The objective of the project ‘The Great War Centenary (2014-2018)’ is to give Flanders international visibility in the period 2014-2018 and thereafter, by playing out this commemoration, in all serenity, as a top-event in Flanders and throughout the world.

The activities’ programme for the commemoration of the centenary anniversary of the First World War should ensure that the name Flanders acquires international visibility and is permanently linked with the peace theme. Another objective is to sensitise current and future generations in Flanders concerning themes such as tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and international understanding in light of an open and tolerant society and an active international orientation. Finally, a considerable increase in peace tourism in (West) Flanders will be pursued.

Enhancement of national identity, community development and promotion of economic impact thus seem to be important motives behind this project. Furthermore, the government explicitly wants the project to convey a present-day message of peace, which fits into the broader international trend to frame war remembrance in terms of peace and human rights. Thus a complex multitude of motives come together in the commemoration project’s lay-out, which is reminiscent of the complexity of remembrance as a historical and sociological phenomenon.

In conclusion of this first part of the paper, it is possible to point out that a long historical tradition of peace-minded war commemoration exists, but also that it should be emphasized that this form of remembrance, given the complex multitude of other commemorative motives and practices, is not as self-evident as it might seem at first glance. Commemorations aiming at conveying a peace message will indeed have to position themselves in a field where a wide variety of commemorative forms and practices are played out. Given this complexity and diversity, peace-minded commemorations run the additional risk that its message will be mortgaged by ambiguities. Therefore it is necessary to critically examine this complexity in closer detail. In the following sections I investigate which position those who seek to link war commemoration with a peace message can take with regards to other forms of commemoration, as well as how they can reduce the risk of ambiguities in their own message. This analysis in the next chapter also leads me to address another important problem that cannot be left untreated in this discussion: the relationship between memory and history. This relationship must certainly be critically examined when it is the government who engages in the field of remembrance.
3 Conceptual and normative reflections

3.1 The complexity of war commemoration and collective memory

The complexity of war remembrance can be pointed out in two ways. First, an analysis of lieux de mémoire (sites of remembrance) from the First World War shows that the complex multitude of commemorative motives and practices is still present at these sites – in petrified or in ritualised form. I will clarify this in the first section by means of a description of the Flanders Fields’ commemorative landscape. Secondly, I will address the complexity of war commemoration by looking at social memory theory and specifically at the characteristics of what French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has called ‘collective memory’.

3.1.1 The many faces of the commemorative landscape in Flanders Fields

The specific historical context from which commemorative practices Flanders Fields emerged has resulted in various commemorative traditions and forms in the region. The tradition of the British Commonwealth, which not only includes the commemorative traditions of the United Kingdom but also of its former dominions and colonies, is the most visible tradition in the region – certainly in the southern part of Flanders Fields (with Ypres as its centre). As Johan Meire writes, the British remembrance tradition is centred on commemorating the (individual) dead. This is in keeping with the mourning function of commemoration. This is illustrated by the numerous British cemeteries in the region with their uniform white headstones and Stone of Remembrance, as well as the apparently endless list of names on the Menin Gate in Ypres and at Tyne Cot Cemetery. The British are traditionally rather reluctant to explicitly link remembrance of the war dead with political messages, such as, for instance, peace. None the less, the Commonwealth tradition still invokes elements of a national, imperial and military idiom, linking the death of soldiers to themes of patriotic sacrifice. Research into the way how British tourists experience their voyages to former battlefields shows that these elements are still ‘active’. Jennifer Iles, for instance, has pointed out that some British tourists experience Flanders Fields as a sort of ‘home away from home’ and that their visits to the region enable them to experience a feeling of historical association with an imagined collective past. As Iles observes, they indeed come to a landscape that is not only permeated with physical traces of their society, such as the remains of British soldiers, but also with the perceived values of the British nation.

A national and patriotic idiom can also be found in the ‘Belgian-patriotic’ tradition of commemoration in the Westhoek region. For example, the inscription ‘Mort pour la Belgique’ or ‘Died for Belgium’ is still found on graves in Belgian military cemeteries, while a little shield with the Belgian tricolour figures prominently on the headstones. War memorials such as that of Albert I in Nieuwpoort are also characterised by patriotic symbolism. Belgian historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver has noted that the Belgian tradition of commemoration, which she typifies as “at its last gasp, crumbling and ambiguous”, has been reduced to silence for generations, particularly in comparison to the British tradition. Nevertheless, in recent years the Belgian Federal Government has taken new commemorative initiatives, such as the restoration of the ‘Trench of Death’ in Diksmuide, an annual four-day hike organised by the Belgian Army, and a series of remembrance projects organised by the Belgian Institute for Veterans.

The Flemish-national tradition of commemoration is strongly present in the Northern Westhoek region, with Diksmuide as its centre. As I showed above, this tradition weaves Flemish-nationalist symbolism with a pro-peace message. The interweaving of these various elements emerged almost immediately after the war when, during the first ‘Yser Pilgrimage’ to Diksmuide in 1920, the threefold message of the pilgrimage was announced as: “No More War, self-rule, and the truce of God”. The Yser Tower and the Peace Gate, built by the Yser Pilgrimage Committee, also display the interwovenness of these
different messages. During the Second World War the Yser Tower and the Committee engaged in the collaboration with the German occupier. As a result, to this day the Yser Tower and the Flemish-national commemoration tradition remain tarnished for some groups in Flanders and Belgium. In the words of historian Bruno De Wever: “the association of the Yser Tower with fascism has cast a long shadow after 1945. To some extent, in the opinion of the French-speakers and the Flemish left, the fascist connotation will never disappear, no matter how the [Yser pilgrimage] committee has tried its best to move beyond this history.” In the last decade, the Yser Pilgrimage Committee initiated a move to once again focus on the roots of the remembrance of frontline soldiers, inter alia by translating its old threefold message in the new slogan “peace, freedom and tolerance” and by organizing pluralistic peace-education projects and initiatives such as the music festival For Peace.

In order to complete this portrait of Flanders Fields’ complex commemorative, it is necessary to refer to locally-rooted remembrance initiatives such as the Eleven November Group, the In Flanders Fields Museum, and Ypres as a City of Peace (see above). Of course, also the German and French traditions of commemoration must be mentioned. These traditions are less prominent in the Westhoek region than the British. With regards to France, this can be explained by the fact that the French army was less involved in military operations in Flanders than the British. German remembrance of the First World War on the other hand is still not self-evident, not only because Germany lost the war, but also because the memory of the Second World War still overshadows that of the First. Furthermore, German cemeteries are not as visible as the many British graveyards because after the war, the many small cemeteries of the German Army were concentrated into four larger cemeteries: Langemark, Hooge, Menin and Vladslo, where the statues of the mourning parents by Käthe Kollwitz are located.

3.1.2 Collective memory

The complexity of war remembrance cannot only be explained by the historical genesis of different traditions and practices. The nature and characteristics of social memory also plays a part in determining the complexity of commemoration. This has to do in particular with 1) the social character of remembrance, 2) the fact that remembrance is always ‘something of the present’ and normative, and 3) the potentially contestable character of remembrance.

It was Maurice Halbwachs, the pioneer of the sociology of collective memory, who was the first to extensively analyse the social character of memory. He stressed that personal memory is always constituted in terms of social frames belonging to a specific socio-cultural and temporal context, such as language schemes and cultural systems of meaning. Larry Ray explains this as follows: “Memory is social because every memory exists through its relation with what has been shared with others: language, symbols, events and social and cultural contexts.” This vision also implies that memory and memories are not immutable, but constantly evolving. Notwithstanding his emphasis on the social character of memory, Halbwachs clung to the individual basis of collective memory, implying that when the last survivors, the last witnesses of a particular event disappear, also the memory of this event disappears beyond the horizon of collective memory, instead becoming history. This of course raises the problem of how we can continue to write about social ‘remembrance’ of the First World War now that the last witnesses of the First World War are disappearing – the individual ‘living’ memory of the war disappearing with them. Some scholars follow Halbwachs’ vision. Daniel Todman, for example, poses the question: “Does it make sense to talk about what a society ‘remembers’, when there is no physical location for those memories except the brains of individuals?” According to these authors, it is therefore better not to talk about (collective) memory when it refers to contemporary ‘perceptions’ of the past without any direct experiential link with that past, instead preferring the terms remembrance and commemoration. Other authors, such as Jeffrey Olick, follow a different path and expand the social dimensions of collective memory. This is also the path that I will follow in this paper. This approach makes it possible to talk about social memory even when ‘living’ memory has disappeared or, formulated otherwise, to talk about the collective memory of a society. This is not to say that
society as an entity remembers something, but rather that, in a society, the memory of a historical event is passed on by means of rituals, memorials and historical narratives. This ‘intergenerational transmission’ of the collective memory of a society does not occur automatically. It presupposes active ‘remembrance practices’ in order for later generations to accept the remembrance of a certain episode or event in the past as meaningful. Over the last few decades, the channels through which this transmission occurs have changed; they now not only include commemorative rituals and memorials, but also education, tourism, culture, and entertainment.

While social memory refers to events in the past, it is always a phenomenon that takes place in the present. A memory appears when people in the present remember something that occurred in the past. In light of this observation, Halbwachs also noted that memories are to a great extent reconstructions of the past on the basis of elements borrowed from the present. In other words, memories always write contemporary scripts about the past. Of course these scripts evolve together with developments in the socio-cultural and political context. Furthermore, in collective memory, the past is ‘used’ in two ways: first as a model of the present, and as a model for the present. This means that on the one hand memories articulate mentalities and social structures of the present, and that, on the other, elements from the past may be used in the effort to change these mentalities and social structures. These observations imply that social remembrance always has normative overtones.

Because of this normative character, social remembrance inevitably is always potentially controversial or contestable. This of course also goes for public remembrance sites, the meaning and appropriation of which can become subject to protest and conflict. It is in this sphere of potential conflict, buttressed and structured by complex power relations, that the political tug-of-war of social memory comes into play. All of this implies that often various and even conflicting interpretations and narratives about the past exist. This certainly holds for the memory of wars and political violence, where elements such as traumatic suffering, resentment, nation-construction, resistance, as well as reconciliation and peace are important.

As noted at the end of the second chapter, the crucial question arises how peace-minded war commemorations should address the complexity and ambiguity of commemorative landscapes and social memory as outlined above. Indeed it has become clear that pro-peace commemorative practices have to position themselves in a sphere in which various other forms and messages of commemoration are present. With regards to commemorative practices in Ypres, Johan Meire has remarked:

The idea that the legacy of war is a universal message of peace nourished by the local experience of war as a devastating slaughter may well be promoted by local groups and official institutions, yet it cannot simply be enforced upon everyone. Ypres is in fact not just a local entity: it is also a zone of contact for all sorts of people who find the war to be an important past, but who have very diverse relationships to that past.

Apart from its significance for the matters discussed here, these questions are also relevant for post-conflict and transition societies where the painful and disputed past must be given a place. In the next paragraph I will argue that an answer to this question is to be found in the meaning given to the concept of peace.

### 3.2 Peace as the recognition of difference and an open dialogue

Pro-peace commemorations quite often leave implicit how they precisely understand what ‘peace’ means. If one intends to convey a message of peace with war commemorations, however, it seems important to address this issue.
The concept of peace has a long history, from the *pax Romana* to the ideas of Johan Galtung concerning negative and positive peace. Definitions of peace generally start from a ‘negative’ approach, in the sense that they define peace as the absence of war, violence, disruption, conflict, hostility, etc. Many thinkers however sought to go further in conceptualising peace insofar as a purely negative definition might imply that in some situations peace might entail nothing more than a situation of tensed calm, where outbreaks of violence are kept under control, but structural causes of war and violence are not addressed. Therefore there have been various attempts to expand the ‘negative’ definition with a ‘positive’ complement. Peace is then understood not only in terms of the absence of violence, but also as a situation of order, harmony, justice, or conflict management; or, in other words, as a situation in which violence and war is structurally banned. These positive definitions of peace have in turn received their share of criticism. Specifically, it has been argued that if one expands the concept of peace too widely, the relevance of the concept for scientific analysis devalues: if a concept can mean everything (for ex., also justice), its descriptive and explanatory value significantly decreases. Harald Müller therefore favours a distinction between the concept and the theory of peace. Müller limits the concept of peace to the absence of direct and discursive violence. In order to avoid isolating the concept from its social, political, economic, and cultural context, he complements this conceptualisation with a theory of peace which first of all points out the causes of peace. An analysis of the causes of peace makes it possible to determine in which socio-economic and political-cultural context peace (as absence of violence) can best flourish. In this respect, one may, for example, point to the importance of democracy, a just socio-economic world order, avoidance of arms races and the promotion of disarmament, etc. Secondly, the theory of peace refers to the importance of a culture of peace: i.e. a culture in which the absence of violence is advanced by an active attitude of respect, the pursuit of mutual understanding, recognition of difference and diversity in opinions and attitudes, and the importance of an open dialogue. All this implies that peace is promoted not by denying conflicts (conflicts are inevitable in every society), but instead by actively addressing these conflicts in an atmosphere of open dialogue, preparedness to negotiate, and recognition of difference. In other words: pacifism is not the same as passivism.

In the framework of this paper, this theory of peace is relevant in two respects. First, it indicates how commemorative projects and practices *substantively* can formulate a message of peace: the theory refers to various elements that need to be addressed in every critical reflection upon war and peace, such as importance of a just world order, disarmament, an attitude of active respect, and open dialogue. Second, the theory also refers to a *procedural* approach to peace. This approach indicates how the complexity, diversity, and potentially contestable nature of remembrance and commemoration can be addressed. Crucial here are the recognition of difference and diversity, an active attitude of respect, and preparedness for open dialogue. This implies recognising that people and groups sometimes tell very different stories about the past and hold different interpretations of how to commemorate historical events. This approach further implies an open, dialogic attitude with respect to these different remembrance narratives. In other words: if peace can be understood as being prepared to engage in a dialogue at a negotiation table, then also social memory takes the form of a negotiation table – particularly when we want it to be a peace-minded form of remembrance. As Flemish writer Erwin Mortier puts it, memory is indeed “never a foregone conclusion; it is not an artefact that lies tangibly and, above all, immutably in our hands, having unearthed it from the sands of oblivion.” Mortier also notes that conversations around a negotiation table can sometimes be quite brusque. Nevertheless, in order to have a peaceful culture of remembrance, it is crucial to continue to sit at the table. Social memory, if it intends to be peaceable, thus always must be active, i.e. not ignoring the tensions and hidden aspects of social memories of the past, but on the contrary identifying them and engaging in a dialogue with them. A culture of remembrance that only entails a passive calm, where a sensitive or painful past seems absent or closed because it remains covered under a layer of reticence, is not sufficient to exorcise all phantoms of the past.

What do these insights now imply with regards to the questions that gave rise to this conceptual analysis in the first place, namely how peace-minded remembrance should address the diversity and
contestable nature of war commemorations in practice, and how it can reduce possible ambiguity in its own message. As Johan Meire has noted, the idea that a universal message of peace is the most important legacy of the First World War cannot just be imposed on all forms of commemoration, because at remembrance sites various people and groups come together each bringing with them their own (sometimes very personal) motives and interpretations. In order to be peaceable, commemoration practices must not simply aim to convey their own messages, but also recognise this diversity and complexity. It makes little sense to seek to imprint a message of peace on all remembrance sites, monuments, and commemorative rituals. As argued above, diversity and multiformality are inevitably part of social memory and commemoration. The recognition of this difference is crucial. At the same time, pro-peace commemorative projects should seek to reduce possible ambiguities (as a result of the complexity of remembrance sites and rituals) in their own message. This is possible, for example, by making visitors of commemoration sites aware of their complexity, for instance by respectfully indicating different and divergent messages. In this way, visitors can approach sites and rituals consciously and critically. At the Menin Gate in Ypres, for example, educational staff members of the In Flanders Fields Museum tell schools groups visiting the battlefields that the memorial may come across as strange. On the one hand, as a sort of triumphal arch, it carries a military and patriotic message. On the other hand, the gate is not only the stage for the daily Last Post which – together with the seemingly endless lists of names of the many missing – conveys an intimate message of mourning, it is also the site where a number of peace demonstrations have taken place in recent years. Thus students are not only made aware that commemoration sites do not convey an unequivocal message, but also are able to convey their own pro-peace message in a reflexive manner.

An important observation must conclude this section: the recognition of difference in social memory and remembrance traditions does not necessarily lead to historical or moral relativism. Historical relativism would imply that all commemorative narratives would relate equally ‘correct’ or ‘accurate’ stories about the past. Moral relativism would lead to a situation where one could no longer distinguish between moral and immoral forms of remembrance. As Roland Bleiker and Young-Ju Hoang emphasise, an ‘ethics of difference’ in social memory does not necessarily lead to relativism, nor does it open the floodgates for notions such as ‘anything goes’ or ‘all narratives are equally valid and founded’. There is no reason why recognising difference should lead to the impossibility of morally or historically assessing the contents of commemorative narratives. Various remembrance narratives can be critically examined on their own merits by historians. As Bleiker and Hoang argue, in evaluating narratives about the past it is crucial for historians to indeed recognize and open up the diversity of possible stories about the past. Even more, historians would claim that this recognition is a necessary precondition to arrive at informed and adequate historical judgement. Because historians open up the diversity of various narratives, they decrease the danger of relativism because the number of sources and evidence at their disposal increases. By providing space for confrontation between different testimonies, historians can additionally counter the manipulation of memory, regardless of where that manipulation may come from.79

Bleiker’s and Hoang’s argument is interesting because they call attention to the close relationship between history and memory. This relationship is not, however, unproblematic, and therefore merits due attention in the remainder of this paper. First I will point out the differences between the field of scientific historiography and that of public remembrance. Then I will take a closer look at how commemorations can refer to or make use of the past.

3.3 History and memory

The relationship between history and memory or, to put it more precisely, between scientific historiography and various forms of public remembrance practices is far from self-evident. Stronger still, this relationship is plagued by a number of tensions and risks. On numerous occasions historians
have ventilated their scepticism about the ways the memory boom has taken shape over the last few years. Not in the least, they have ousted critical remarks with regards to remembrance initiatives sponsored by the government. In January 2006, for example, a number of Belgian newspapers published a manifesto entitled “History is more than Memory”, signed by 151 Belgian historians. In the manifesto, the group of historians started out by claiming they were not out to challenge the legitimacy of commemorations per se – whether they are sponsored by governments or not –, nor to deny that remembrance and memory can offer useful answers to certain societal needs. They did however raise serious questions about the specific ways in which history is used in these remembrance projects, as well as about some of the objectives they are to serve. The Belgian historians also pointed out that in their view scientific historiography is under threat both of being pushed aside to the margins of society under the pressure of the public memory boom drawing all the government’s and the public’s attention and focus, as well as being thematically steered by the fashions popping up in contemporary memory culture. In light of these observations, the manifesto expressed concern that scientific historiography would become the plaything of fashion trends and that certain types of research, which cannot count on official support or do not comply with current political priorities, would become come under pressure. In their manifesto the historians do not question the idea that indeed a connection exists between memory and history; rather they claim that they serve different objectives and have to comply with quite different demands. Memory, they argue, is not a gateway to (scientific) knowledge, but frames – or uses – the past in terms of contemporary cultural or political projects. Historiography, on the contrary, claims the status of science. As such it should never have to serve the aims of politics or, for that matter, have anything to do with emotion. The manifesto concluded with raising questions about the way in which some recent remembrance initiatives in Belgium (such as a Holocaust Museum in Malines, of which one of the stated objectives was to combat extreme right wing parties) have used history as a means to serve certain societal and political objectives:

History is not the new catechism of multi-culturalism, a panacea to combat the far right and xenophobia, to promote democracy, European views or world solidarity. An exclusively negative memory, consisting of the enumeration of the Great Tragedies of history, contributes little to the formation of critical reflection. It may even create a feeling of moral complacency: an untroubled present is then indeed contrasted with a past rifle with violence and brutality.

A risk historians want to emphasize in particular is that the use of history in the light of contemporary objectives threatens to result in a one-sided and politically-guided instrumentalisation of history. This warning has also already been expressed with regards to Flanders’ grand commemorative project “The Great War Centenary (2014-2018)”:

Due to the institutional framework and the financing structures, this is now inevitably a univocal Flemish project. This not only creates tensions with the Belgian historical reality of 1914-1918. It could also lead poor forms of remembrance education. The Flemish project 2014-18 could indeed easily become guided by ideological and political objectives. The danger exists that concrete projects and initiatives will be used to intentionally strengthen Flemish identity. This will reveal itself in the selection of projects and initiatives that will receive financing. This is a problem because this will mean that the past will be manipulated to (explicitly) use it for contemporary political objectives.

The risk of one-sided and manipulative instrumentalisations of history of course also exists when the commemorations of the First World War are framed to convey a message of peace. Belgian historians have reflected upon this issue, specifically upon the question whether pro-peace remembrance initiatives ought to leave space for the heroism, or even the spectacle of war, which were indispensable elements of the war experience of 14-18. Sophie De Schaepdrijver addressed this question in an interview:

Politically, I fully agree with the philosophy of the In Flanders Fields Museum, which presents a message of peace. But as a historian I have to recognise that there must remain space for the fascination with war.
Without taking this fascination into account, one cannot fully understand what happened there. Those soldiers, incidentally, were certainly not only victims. There were also adventurers among them, and perpetrators. So yes, leave space in the memory of the war for the idea that some viewed the war as one big adventure.  

Historians furthermore are sceptical with respect to the normative character of remembrance. This critical stance concerns three elements. First, historians are sceptical that the ‘cult of remembrance’ increasingly turns into a ‘duty of remembrance and not forgetting’. This duty is generally invoked by governments and other actors with an eye on present-day political objectives. Scholars however have pointed out that this duty to remember and not forget is not a straightforward matter. Indeed, one should always pose the question what memory people are supposed to remember and how they should do that. Neuropsychologists and sociologists have moreover pointed out that remembering inevitably implies a form of forgetting. It is indeed impossible to represent complex events in their totality. Remembering a war has always just as much to do with forgetting as with remembering. Furthermore, this mix of remembering and forgetting is an inherently political process. Maja Zehfuss, for instance, notes that the argument ‘against forgetting’ – with the associated imperative ‘remember!’ – more often than not implies a move in the struggle about what parts of the past should be remembered and how. In a similar vein, Tzvetan Todorov has furthermore noted that the cult of the duty to remember is not always used for positive aims, as has become clear from the recent history of the Balkan wars. Second, historians remain very suspicious when it comes to moralising forms of remembrance, in which the past is presented as something that should be rejected or praised, and from which a moral lesson must be drawn. The danger exists, for example, that when history is morally or politically activated with a view to current objectives, anachronisms are never far away. Another risk is that, for the majority of people – who mainly come in contact with popular remembrance initiatives but rarely with scientific historiography –, the ‘value claims’ of remembrance obtain the status of historical ‘truth claims’. Finally, while in their manifesto the Belgian historians recognise that organising official commemorations can be a legitimate government activity, they warn for another danger of the ‘duty to remember’. This danger consists in that an official version of history is established which expresses politically correct thinking, and which cannot be questioned. This can lead to a rigid and “sterile tyranny of the cult of remembrance”. This is certainly the case when particular interpretations of history are enacted by law. Tzvetan Todorov takes the example of a French law concerning colonial memory, which inter alia prescribes that school programs must recognise the positive role of the French in North Africa. According to historians, because history by nature is always rather unruly, ambiguous, and must remain open for debate, such legalistic approaches to memory threaten the necessarily dialogic and contestable character of historiography.

These critical remarks of historians with regards to the memory boom and the contemporary culture of remembrance are fundamental. Anyone wanting to engage with commemoration and remembrance can only ignore them at his own peril. As the group of Belgian historians have also indicated in their manifesto, the aim certainly is not to ban or denounce all forms of commemoration and remembrance. On the contrary – as the historians themselves state in the manifesto – this would only attest to “scientific purism and contempt for social needs”. Still, when setting up remembrance and commemoration projects, particularly when they are promoted and sponsored by the government, these critical remarks must be taken into account. They can roughly be summarized in two main challenges: first, the risks entailed by the normative character of memory and second, the danger of one-sided or even manipulative instrumentalisations of the past. In the remainder of this section I will take a closer look at the first challenge; in the final section of this paper I will go into the second.

As indicated by the Belgian historians in their manifesto, it is indeed advisable to clearly distinguish historiography and remembrance. For a good understanding it is maybe even relevant to distinguish three fields 1) the past (or history), 2) scientific historiography, and 3) social memory and remembrance. These fields are obviously closely interwoven. Both historiography and memory refer to the past, while historians of course are important agents in the field of remembrance. Neither
historiography nor memory has a privileged, objective access to the past. Both fields offer interpretations of the past. There are, however, major differences in how the two fields construct these interpretations. Historiography is bound to scientific and disciplinary rules. Critical scholarly debate takes centre stage in order to guarantee and control for the reliability and impartiality of historical work. How social memory and remembrance relate to the past has become clear from previous paragraphs (see 3.1.2). One of the main conclusions was that social memory is inevitably normative; even remembrance practices that claim to enact ‘nothing more’ than commemorating the war dead intrinsically have normative and moral overtones (though these can remain implicit). Also the many risks bound up with the normative character of memory and remembrance have been pointed out above. At the same time, however, as has been shown by the presentation of the various peace-minded commemorative practices, remembrance offers an interesting emancipatory and transformative potential. Tzvetan Todorov recognizes this moral potential when he argues that when in our age the past seems inescapable, it is preferable to use the past and history in an ‘exemplary’ fashion. By this he means using the past with a view to the present, in particular by “learning lessons from previous injustices in order to combat the injustices of today”. Let me paraphrase this as follows: if social memory and remembrance inevitably entails referring to the past in a normative vein, then it is preferable to do this in order to promote peace and justice rather than conflict and violence. Of course, the necessary caution is warranted. The normative character of remembrance will always impose particular demands on those who enter the field of commemoration, such as a willingness to engage in open dialogue and critical reflection. Furthermore, appropriate caution is also required so that remembrance narratives do not approach the past one-sidedly or manipulatively – as announced, I will take a closer look at this in the next paragraph.

A last question that can be raised with regards to the relation between history and memory, is how historians can engage with the field of remembrance and commemoration. Generally speaking there are two possible positions. A first position advocates critical detachment. According to this vision, historians should not enter the field of remembrance, but always remain “in the hedges”, like sharpshooters or francs-tireurs. Operating on the margins, they can retain the critical potential of their discipline. A second position pleads for engaging with the public interested in remembrance and heritage. This entails for example that historians search for ways to reconcile their ‘habitus’ as scientists with the demands posed by the normative, cultural and political character of public remembrance. Historians advocating this second position recognise that they can play a public role – for instance in museums and educational projects – and not only do scientific justice to history but also defend the values of the democratic constitutional state. Both positions are important to the culture of remembrance. From a position of critical detachment, historians can undertake appropriate deconstruction efforts with regards to remembrance narratives that are historically too one-sided or inaccurate. Historians opting for the second position can – always in a critical manner – provide their expertise to emancipatory or educational remembrance projects.

Let us now turn to the question how commemorations can avoid the pitfalls of one-sided and manipulative uses of the past. In the final paragraph I will argue that this can be done by distinguishing between a logic that instrumentalizes the past as a means to serve contemporary objectives, and a logic that frames the past as an impetus to critical reflection and a motivation to work for peace in the present.

3.4 War commemoration as impetus to critical reflection and motivation for peace

War commemorations always refer to or use the past from the perspective of the present – that has already been pointed out. This use of the past for remembrance, however, can be done in different ways. A first logic of remembering turns to that past from the perspective of a contemporary objective, thus using it as a means to serve present-day ends, for instance by drawing lessons from history that
can be applied in a present context. A second logic of remembrance, on the contrary, starts out from the complex past itself and, by opening up various stories about that past, remembers it in such a manner that it gives audiences and participants an impetus to critically reflect upon war (and peace) and motivates them to work for peace in the present. It is evident that the former logic of remembrance more easily runs the risk of using the past in a one-sided and manipulative fashion than the latter. I will clarify this further.

The first logic of remembrance starts from contemporary societal, economic or political objectives, for instance a desire to solve current societal problems such as, for example, increasing racism or xenophobia in society. Subsequently, in an attempt to draw lessons from the past that have a present-day relevance, historical facts or events are referred to in order to warn for or educate about the potential destructive effects of racism. It seems inherent to this logic, however, that quite often these lessons are already drawn beforehand, that is: before looking at the past. Needless to say that this instrumental logic greatly runs the risk of approaching the past one-sidedly, in the sense that only those events, developments and interpretations that neatly fit within the framework will be taken up. An example of this instrumental logic of remembrance is the patriotic or nationalistic tradition of remembrance as it developed after the end of the First World War; in order to give meaning to the massive number of fallen citizen-soldiers, the nation-state framed the frontline soldiers’ experience in terms of a sacrifice for the nation and a patriotic martyrdom. Historical events that did not square with this frame were silenced or suppressed.

Traditionally, historians are very distrustful of this instrumental logic of remembrance, not only because it runs counter to an open and reflexive posture towards history, but also because it often leads to moralistic readings of the past. This, however, does not mean that historians are completely unwilling to draw lessons from the past. Their distrust chiefly concerns the instrumentalization of history in order to solve contemporary societal problems. There is, however, another way in which remembrance can refer to the past. In this logic, the past to be commemorated is seen as an impetus to critical reflection and as a motivation or an inspiration to work for something – for example peace – in the present. This second logic of remembrance starts out not from the present, but from the complex past itself, a past of which traces are still present in contemporary society (as in Flanders Fields) or a past of which people consider it valuable to transmit its memory to younger generations. By looking at various aspects of war history and by opening different stories about the war, the past is not only seen as a source of historical knowledge, but also as an occasion for a broader, critical reflection upon war and peace. Thus this reflection can give rise to sensitivity with respect to contemporary conflicts and wars, as well as to a motivation to actively work on the present-day practice of peace. It is this logic of remembrance that inspired the Eleven November Group and the In Flanders Fields Museum; in their approach, the many personal and local stories of civilians and soldiers lead to critical sensitivity for the suffering all wars inevitably cause, as well as an increased appreciation of the value of peace.

Although this logic of remembrance also writes contemporary scripts about the past in the sense that it links the past to a present-day theme, it reduces the risk of approaching the past one-sidedly or manipulatively to a great extent. Indeed, to make critical reflection upon the past possible in the first place, it is necessary that as many stories as possible are told about the war. Taking this approach, for example, the many stories about the multicultural and colonial aspects of the First World War which for decades were pushed aside in traditional nationalistic and patriotic narratives get the full attention they deserve. Also the stories about frontline soldiers as adventurers and perpetrators (see Sophie De Schaepdrijver’s remarks above) and the experience of the war as a great adventure need to be told, as they constitute an integral part of war history.

The distinction between two logics of remembrance also makes it possible to critical assess some of the other objectives of the Flemish government’s commemoration project for 2014-2018. It seems that with regards to some of the objectives, caution is called for. While the forging national identities, the strengthening of a sense of community, or an increase in tourism can be the results of
commemoration projects, the reasoning ought not to be reversed. For example, remembrance tourism may be an interesting medium for strengthening peaceful remembrance, but inversely, using the history of the First World War as a means to promote tourism is not without risks, such as a one-sided and commercially inspired use of history.

END NOTES

1 I will take an in-depth look at this complexity and its impact in Chapter 3.
11 See, for example, the war memorial in Mortsel.
13 For the standard work about Belgium during the First World War, see De Schapdrijver, S. (1999), De Grote Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, Amsterdam: Olympus.
15 See www.pou.org.uk and www.whitepoppy.org.uk.
22 See www.anti-kriegs-museum.de.
26 In 1921, this commitment, for that matter, led to the fall of the government; after the Minister of Public Works, Edward Anseele, participated in a demonstration by the Socialist Young Guard in which a banner bearing the broken gun was carried around, his resignation was demanded; after that, all the socialist ministers relinquished their offices (Vermandere, M. (2001), ‘Door gelijke drang bewogen? De socialistische partij en haar jeugdbeweging, 1886-1944’, Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis, no. 8, p. 231).
As mentioned above, this procedural approach to peacable remembrance is also relevant in transition societies that have to give a place to a participation and innovation” (Feuchtswang, S. (2006), “Memorials to Injustice”, in: D. Bell (ed.), Memory, Trauma and World Politics. Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 178).


Meire mentions that this plurality is demonstrated for example in visitors’ books at cemeteries. Australian and Canadian visitors sometimes display their pride concerning the way the war gave birth to their nation, while the English may regret that British Empire, which presented a united front in the war, is a thing of the past. Some people write about the guilt that Germany feels about both world wars, while for others, political or national differences are irrelevant precisely because they view the war as a general human tragedy. See Meire, J. (2003), De stilte van de Sallent, p. 284.

Brewer writes, for example: “Memory and ‘truth’ represent a challenge to the sociology of peace processes in two senses: remembrance, commemoration and ‘truth’ recovery are difficult peacemaking strategies, and memories of the conflict and recovery of the ‘truth’ about it can be obstacles to reconciliation. Post-violence societies therefore need to find ways of dealing with victims’ experiences in such a way as to permit victimhood to be recognised and victims honoured while moving them and the rest of society beyond the memory. Peace processes thus need to manage two problems: finding the balance between the need to know what happened in the past and moving forward, and encouraging people to see the ‘truth’ from someone else’s standpoint. This allows people to know about the past in such a way as to avoid keeping them locked there.” (Brewer, J.D. (2010), Peace Processes. A Sociological Approach, Cambridge: Polity, Chapter 6, ‘Memory, ‘truth’, and victimhood’, p. 141). See also Jaumain, S. and Remacle, E. (2006), Memoire de guerre et construction de la paix. Mentalités et choix politiques. Belgique – Europe – Canada, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lâng, p. 15-16.


Müller, H., Theories of Peace.


As mentioned above, this procedural approach to peacable remembrance is also relevant in transition societies that have to give a place to a painful past of political violence and conflict. Duncan Bell thus notes that “a focus on the necessarily conflictual nature of historical interpretation provides the first step in creating a political environment in which different group identities can co-exist peacefully. A reflexive and open attitude towards historical claims is essential in order for a plurality of identities to co-exist without the resort to violence.” (Bell, D. (2006), “Introduction: Memory, Trauma and World Politics”, in: D. Bell (ed.), Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 20). Bleiker and Hoang emphasise in this connection the importance of an “ethics of difference”: they thus suggest that “a more tolerant and peaceful future can be constructed only once the notion of a single historical narrative gives way to multiple visions of the past and the future. […] Recognizing the existence of historical differences is a crucial element in the effort to promote a culture of reconciliation. Ricoeur stresses that by ‘acknowledging that the history of an event involves a conflict of several interpretations and memories, we in turn open up the future’. Promoting and protecting such an ethics of difference is an ongoing and inevitably incomplete process.” (Bleiker, R. & Hoang, Y-J. (2006), “Remembering and Forgetting the Korean War: From Trauma to Reconciliation”, in: D. Bell (ed.), Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 195-212). See also Berber Bevernage, who raises the question whether the pursuit of truth commissions like in South Africa and Sierra Leone to pacify the past and bring about national unity does not come at the price of remembrance and justice (Bevernage, B. (2011), Geschiedenis en herinnering aan gewelddadig conflict. Over het onomkeerbare, het onherroepelijke en de productie van ‘afstand’, in: Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift, 45(2), p. 54-65.


Geschiedenis is meer dan herinneren, De Standaard, 25 January 2006.


According to Erauw, it is thus understandable that historians are critical about the memory boom and the duty to remembrance: “Their pursuit of objective knowledge of history is of a completely different order than the emotional relationship with the past in the cult of remembrance. Historians are also wary of the overzealous feelings that go together with this and for which the duty to remembrance may give occasion for slogans such as ‘never forget’, ‘never again war’, ‘never again Auschwitz’. ” See Erauw, W. (2006), ‘Herinneringscultuur, herdenkingsplicht en de historici in onze democratie. Over de omgang met de geschiedenis van twintigste eeuw en de erfenis van het totalitarisme’, Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis, n° 17, p. 253.


