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TEACHING THE FIRST WORLD WAR: The French and British Perspective in Comparison

By

Lauren Jannette

There is much discussion surrounding the influence education has on the creation of nationalistic sentiments. As children, one of the first encounters we have with the idea of the nation comes via the pages of our history textbooks. By detailing decisive moments in a nation's history, these books influence the perception of ourselves, our nation, and the relationship we have to the world around us. Taking advantage of this pivotal role played by education, government officials often seek to control the narrative presented to students. The manipulation of historical events to suit the contemporary national agenda remains a contentious aspect of public education to this day. Considering the importance of this influence, it must then be asked, how do different nations present the same event? In this paper, I aim to answer this question by comparing the presentation of the First World War in the history textbooks of the two main Entente allies: the French and the British. Looking at textbooks published during the Interwar years, I analyze how each nation's textbook authors, in accordance with official government approval, transmitted and solidified the characteristics which were seen as quintessential to the nation. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how the collective memory of both nations was filtered through the history textbook in order to create a nationally nuanced Myth of the War Experience. This myth satisfied the need to commemorate the heroism and sacrifice of individual soldiers, pay homage to the collective suffering of the nation, and justify the decisions made by military and government officials during and after the war.

Discussing the legacy of the First World War, historian George Mosse states, “the reality of the war experience came to be transformed into what one might call the Myth of the War Experience, which looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event.”¹ Transforming the reality of the death and destruction of war into a myth of sacrifice, honor, and glory was a key policy of European governments during the interwar period. In conjunction with war memorials, films, official war histories and journals, governments looked to shape the history and memory of the war for future generations through educational policy, focusing intently on the content contained in history textbooks. Government officials understood that one of the first perspectives of a nation’s past was, and still is, presented to the public through the pages of history textbooks. In his discussion on the study of textbooks, John Issitt stated that “as an essential site of learning, the textbook is a key mechanism for the production and reproduction of ideas.”² Providing a comprehensive, if at times simplified, overview of what was considered by the authors, publishers, school-boards, educators, and governments as the most vital aspects of a nation’s past, textbooks provided the foundation for understanding the values, principles, and geopolitical position of the nation. While the specific lesson plans and teaching exercises utilized in classrooms have often been lost to history, textbooks have continued to provide a consistent, government-approved starting point from which individual educators could create their lesson plans and disseminate official version of the Myth of the War Experience to future generations; an experience which maintained heroism, sacrifice, and service to the nation as the central components of the war.

This study looks at how the Myth of the War Experience was depicted for students with no memory of the war in the textbooks of the victorious nations of France and Great Britain. Starting with the months preceding the outbreak of the war in 1914 and ending with the Armistice of 1918, these texts relied on the battles, technological advancements, and personalities of the war to tell the story of each nation’s war experience. Nationally specific experiences of the war were reflected in the textbooks, with French texts maintaining a Western Front perspective and British texts relying on a global viewpoint to discuss the experiences of the British Empire at large. In comparing the history textbooks of these two nations, this study aims to highlight the ways in which these texts both shaped and reflected the collective memory of the war in each nation. It also examines the differences between the national canons in order to better understand how the national characteristics, values, and symbols deemed important by governments were transmitted through the Myth of the War Experience to future generations.

Justifying the War

Attempting to explain why the nation went to war in the Summer of 1914, French and British textbooks sought to absolve themselves of guilt for the outbreak of the conflict. The textbooks provided students with an overview of the international events which preceded the official declarations of war, focusing primarily on the various crises on the African continent and in the Balkan States. These conflicts during the early years of the 20th century outlined the aggressively expansionist nature of the newly formed German Empire. This representation of Germany's aggressive nature before the war confirmed the post-war myth that Germany was solely responsible for the outbreak of the war. Textbook authors in both nations discussed this aggression, stating, "the giant expansion and uncontrolled ambition of the new Germany made her a danger to Europe. Her bullying and threatening manner in international disputes, 'rattling the sabre,' as she called it, made peaceful settlements more difficult," and "engorged by her richness and her power, her Government found, in July 1914, the occasion for war, which she hoped, would give the Germans the domination of the world."³ Both France and Britain emphasized Germany's unrelenting desire for territorial expansion and presented it as a direct threat to their economic and national security. More importantly, it was discussed as *the sole* reason for the outbreak of the First World War.

While agreeing on Germany's guilt in starting the war, French and British textbooks differed in their discussions of the reasons as to why Germany was a threat to their nation. The French canon focused on the continual territorial threat the German Empire posed to France, a threat which had already been proven by the German annexation of the Alsace-Lorraine territories following the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. The best-selling textbook author of the period Ernest Lavisse summed up these sentiments, writing, "all these terrible things occurred because Germany wanted to become the mistress of the world. Because of this desire, she wished to destroy France."⁴ French textbooks maintained that the complete and utter annihilation of France was the goal of the German Empire on the eve of the First World War, and it was these intentions which made the First World War a fight for the survival of France itself.

The British canon, on the other hand, emphasized the threat Germany's growing naval power posed to Britain's physical and economic dominance of the seas.⁵ As Jan Rüger discusses in his comparison of British and German navies during the early 20th century, the British Royal Navy played a central role in physically and symbolically uniting the vast reaching parts of the British Empire.⁶ By continuing to engage in a naval arms race with Great Britain, Germany, in the eyes of contemporaries, became not only a threat to the Royal Navy, but also a direct threat to the unity, strength, and preservation of the Empire. While both British and French textbooks noted the assassination of the

Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 as the “match that lit the fuse,” the threat Imperial Germany posed to the economic and national security of France and Britain remained the main underlying causes for the war.

In these opening comments concerning the outbreak of war it is interesting to note that the British canon relies on the monarch as a symbol for the nation at a specific point in history, reflecting the centrality of the monarchy to British identity. Following this tradition, some of British textbooks included descriptions of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his behavior to better explain the events which preceded the war. Certain authors accentuated the aggressive nature of the Kaiser, stating in one instance,

Lacking the essential qualities of statesmanship, he [the Kaiser] relied upon what he called “the mailed fist” as the method of establishing German prestige. In this spirit he acquired colonies, and enormously strengthened his navy in order to protect them and to safeguard German commerce. More sinister than German power in itself was the volcanic nature of the Kaiser, for no one could foresee in what direction his next eruption would take place or what use he would make of his power.⁷

By vilifying the Kaiser, British textbook authors were able to lay the blame for the war and the devastation it caused at the feet of the Kaiser, thus absolving the German people of their part in the war. This emphasis on the Kaiser’s responsibility for the war permitted British government officials to justify their soft stance on German reparations in the interwar period, as it was the Kaiser, not the German people who were responsible for the war. This individualistic interpretation of the outbreak of the war was absent in French texts as the national tradition of Republicanism saw the nation as a whole responsible for its actions, thus justifying the harsh stance French officials took towards German reparations in the interwar era. Just as the French nation in its entirety was responsible for winning the war, the entirety of the German nation was responsible for its outbreak.

Summer 1914

The differences between the national textbook canons became more profound as they began to recount the events of the war. While the threat posed by Germany was discussed by both nations, each nation used a specific event as the definitive moment which forced them to enter the war. For the French, the invasion of their homeland provided the catalyst, allowing this war to become a defensive one, aimed at saving the French nation from a barbaric invading arm and simultaneously reunite the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine with the rest of the nation.⁸ Emphasis was placed on overcoming domestic political divisions to form *L’Union Sacrée* (the sacred union). Lavisse wrote, “our homeland was in danger. The French forgot their political and religious quarrels. They united like brothers to

defend France. This is what one called *l'union sacrée*.”⁹ Another French author similarly noted, “the entire nation responded to the call with a calm and resolute style. To defend France, all the parties were unanimous [...] Thanks to patriotic enthusiasm, the mobilization of the reserves was done promptly.”¹⁰ References were made to the patriotic fervor of the French people during the general call to arms in 1792, linking this new war with the historic ideals of the French Revolution and the success it achieved in protecting the nation from outside invaders.¹¹ For the French national canon, this new war was one which aimed to right the wrongs of the Franco-Prussian War forty years earlier, defend the homeland from another German invasion, and unite the nation under a common cause.

Unlike their French counterparts, British textbooks avoided overt discussions of the patriotic surges of war enthusiasm in 1914, selecting instead to focus on the nation’s extreme reluctance to involve itself in the conflict on the continent. Although Britain had “understandings” with France and Russia under the Triple Entente alliance, textbooks wrote, the preservation of Britain’s “splendid isolation” was of the utmost importance during this period, as it had kept the nation from entering costly, often futile, wars on the continent throughout the previous century.¹² The work done by the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey to prevent the outbreak of war in the last days of July 1914 was highlighted in several British textbooks, with authors writing, “Sir Edward Grey was doing his utmost to confine hostilities to the Balkans, and so to prevent the outbreak of a general European war,” and “again Sir Edward Grey intervened on the side of peace.”¹³ Inevitably, however, the efforts of the Foreign Secretary were described as failing to pacify the belligerent nature of the Kaiser and his Empire.

Whether or not they discussed these attempts at maintaining Britain’s “splendid isolation,” all British texts described the invasion of neutral Belgium as the event which prompted the British to join the war effort. Unlike their French counterparts, who often underscored the “atrocities” committed by German soldiers in Belgium, the British focused primarily on the breaking of the 1839 Treaty of London, under which Britain, France, and Prussia had guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium.¹⁴ As one author noted, “many people connected with the Government and the Army had long guessed that Germany intended to take this short cut to attack France, but to the general public it came as a terrible shock. [...] The German Chancellor protested to the British ambassador, in words which afterwards became famous, against making war ‘for a scrap of paper.’”¹⁵ The dismissal of the Treaty of London as a “scrap of paper” was repeated throughout British textbooks as justification for the British Empire’s entrance into the war.¹⁶ For the British, the First World War was not fought to protect their physical homeland, but to protect the world at large from a hostile, expansionist Germanic Empire and maintain the sanctity of international law and order.

Following these explanations as to why they went to war, each nation looked to the opening offensives of 1914 as definitive moments which ultimately defined the type of warfare which followed. While the defeats at the Battle of the Frontiers were briefly mentioned in selected textbooks in both nations, the Battle of the Marne was commemorated as the battle which saved both France and the war effort from total annihilation. Always referred to as “The Victory of the Marne” by the French authors, the battle was remembered as saving not only France from utter destruction, but also as saving the world from German domination.¹⁷ This victory, in the eyes of the French, redeemed the nation’s honor and prestige following the losses incurred during the Franco-Prussian War. The symbol of a renewed France rising from the Battle of the Marne was solidified within the textbooks. France was once again a global military power capable of defending herself and her allies from foreign enemies.¹⁸

The British canon, while noting the significance of the Battle of the Marne, focused more on the First Battle of Ypres as the precursor to the “race to the sea.” This period of the war was deemed of great importance to the British as it permitted them to secure the vital port cities of Calais and Dunkirk, through which troops and supplies were ferried across the Channel throughout the war. As one author wrote, “France was saved by the heroism of her own armies at the Marne and by the dogged resistance of the English regular army at the first battle of Ypres.”¹⁹ The presence and resistance of the regular army, colloquially referred to as the “Old Contemptibles,” during this campaign was a source of pride for the British both during and after the war. As the only belligerent nation without compulsory military service at the start of the war, these opening moments of the war showed that Britain could hold her own against overwhelming odds, with one text noting, “the ‘Old Contemptibles’ had played their part as the advance guard of the nation, giving time for the organisation of new armies in England.”²⁰

These new armies, known as Kitchener’s Army, quickly became a symbol of the heroism and military might of Britain.²¹ The explosion of enthusiasm among the volunteers in Britain became part of the national Myth of the War Experience due in large part to their overwhelming presence in post-war literature. George Mosse describes this phenomenon, writing, “upper-class claims to leadership were taken for granted, and the common soldier was idealized because of his simple strength, trust, and patriotism.”²² The volunteer “Tommy” as depicted in school textbooks became the symbol of true “Britishness” as he was ready to do his duty, defend the nation, and bring peace to the world. The mythology surrounding Kitchener’s Army was cemented in the British national consciousness through these depictions in school textbooks. These opening sections dedicated to the first few months of the war served, in both Britain and France, to justify each nation’s entry into the war, while simultaneously reinforcing the place of the individual common soldier within the national pantheon of heroes. From

this point forward, war was no longer exclusively the realm of great men and the elites, but of the common man, his brothers-in-arms, and the nation which gave everything to support them.

The European versus Global Perspective

Following these introductions to Germany's role as the sole aggressor in the war and the glorious actions of the common soldier during the opening months of battle, the textbooks shifted their focus to look at the years of tedious, unrelenting, disastrous warfare which followed. The French gave little attention to the campaigns of 1915 which failed to not only produce the same style of glorious victory which occurred in 1914, but also resulted in the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands of men. These sections of the textbooks instead were used to demonstrate how terrible and costly war had become by introducing students to a new weapon of war: toxic gas.²³ The fact that toxic gas was first used by the Germans during the war allowed French textbook authors to reinforce the idea of "atrocities" committed by the Germans, justifying the official government stance on harsh reparations and use of force to obtain them following the peace accords of 1919.²⁴

As French troops remained entrenched all along the Western Front throughout 1915, the actions on the Eastern Front remained brief, if they existed at all, in French textbooks. Actions occurring on the Eastern Front in 1915 were the concern of their allies and failed to influence the situation of the French on the all-encompassing Western Front. The British texts, however, discussed at length the events and movements of British troops along the Eastern Front in 1915. For the British, the campaigns of 1915 were the direct result of the failures of the Russian army to maintain their ground in face of the better equipped, better organized German war machine, with one author dismally noting, "the repulse of the Russians had demonstrated their woeful lack of organization and munitions – only a small proportion of the soldiers could be supplied with rifles, the others being armed with sticks."²⁵ It was these failures which prompted the British military and government leaders to push for an offensive on the Eastern Front as a way of opening communication and supply routes to aide Russia, eventually selecting the Dardanelles in present-day Turkey as the target of their operations.²⁶

Named for the landing point of British imperial troops in the Dardanelles, the Gallipoli Campaign came to exemplify the heroism and perseverance of the imperial soldier in the British collective memory. It was the moment in which the Empire, particularly the Australian and New Zealand troops, came to the aide of the metropole and its European allies.²⁷ Descriptions of the Gallipoli campaign within textbooks utilized such language as, "deeds of valour unsurpassed in the annals of warfare (in which the Australian troops bore a distinguished part),"²⁸ and "the Gallipoli adventure seemed to have accomplished nothing, except in leaving to the world an example of unequalled

heroism.”²⁹ Warner and Marten’s textbook, one of the best-selling British history textbooks of the interwar period, solidified the image of Gallipoli within the nation’s collective memory, stating,

Thousands of the bravest and finest men from Great Britain, from Australia and New Zealand, fought and died together on that blood-stained shore. But their heroism was fruitless. [...] The British failure at Gallipoli was perhaps the greatest disappointment of the war. Yet the thousands who died there cannot be said to have died altogether in vain. The expedition had put fresh heart into the Russians, it had kept the large Turkish forces from being used elsewhere, and it at any rate postponed for five critical months the entry of Bulgaria into the war.³⁰

The Gallipoli campaign was collectively remembered as having saved the Entente war effort. By selecting to focus on the deeds of the British forces, while simultaneously leaving out any mention of the French presence at Gallipoli, the campaign became a place of memory and mourning solely for the British Empire. For the students of British history, Gallipoli came to serve as a quintessential representation not only of the strength and heroism of the soldiers, but also of the unity of the British Empire.³¹

If Gallipoli symbolized the heroic sacrifices made during the First World War for the British, then the Battle of Verdun in 1916 served a similar function for the French. In the French collective memory, the Battle of Verdun was, and remains, “France’s greatest triumph in the war, fought alone, without help from England.”³² As the sole battle in which the overwhelming majority of the French battalions were forced to serve, it demonstrated the perseverance and bravery of the common French soldier in face of the unspeakable, and at times indescribable, horrors of war.³³ While language similar to that of the British descriptions of Gallipoli discussed the bravery and valor of French troops at Verdun, the French authors steered away from any language which discussed the futility of the campaign, as it would have tarnished the memory of those who fought and died there. The tremendous losses suffered during the ten-month battle, the longest of the entire war, rendered the site sacred to the French nation. Reinforcing the sacredness of the site in the French collective memory were descriptions in textbooks of the infamous “voie sacrée” (sacred path) leading to the front lines, along which fearless French soldiers unquestioningly travelled to do their duty to defend the nation.³⁴ Testimonies from French soldiers describing the hell-on-earth conditions and the losses they suffered were added to the textbooks, strengthening the emotional importance of the battle within the French national memory.³⁵ The seemingly endless number of heroic sacrifices made by French troops at Verdun allowed the battle to become the turning point in the war, as the unbreakable French spirit on

the field of battle shattered German confidence in their ultimate victory. One French author wrote, “our great victory of Verdun, which put an end to the renowned invincibility which the terrorized world had accorded to the Kaiser’s army, definitively broke the German plan: ‘The Allies, on all the immense fronts, had now the freedom to defeat the Germans.’”³⁶ In the months and years following the battle, legends surrounding the heroic endurance of the soldiers at Verdun crystalized their place in the national pantheon of heroes in the French collective memory. Describing the conditions soldiers faced at Verdun, historian Antoine Prost explains,

Like Auschwitz during the Second World War, Verdun marks [...] a transgression of the limits of human condition. The soldiers were delivered without defense from shells, on a barren soil, ravaged, devastated, inhumane. Cut off from human society, abandoned to the elements – the rain, the snow, the wind, the cold – without the means to satisfy their most basic needs, they found themselves reduced below human civilization. [...] a week at Verdun, it’s a voyage to the extremes of human condition, beyond all that you could have imagined.³⁷

The brave men who endured these conditions came to symbolize the never-failing determination of the French soldier to defend his homeland from an invading force no matter the sacrifice ultimately demanded of him.³⁸

The atrocities seen at Verdun were so significant to the experience of the First World War that British textbooks likewise accorded it a place of honor within their national discourse, with many authors commenting on the bravery and tenacity of the French forces. The overwhelming devastation and loss of life at Verdun also brought about the need to create, in the eyes of British commanders, a diversion of German forces in order to prevent the French military from capitulating. The Battle of the Somme, the great British Western Front battle of 1916, was the result of this diversionary need. British textbook authors noted that while the Battle of the Somme was ultimately inconclusive in its objective for territorial gains, it forced the German lines to withdraw from around Verdun and to regroup and reinforce their lines further north, thus aiding in the eventual French victory at Verdun. Post-war testimonies taken from the German General Ludendorff were included in these portions of the texts as proof of the British contribution to the victory at Verdun.³⁹

Discussing the Battle of the Somme, one author explained, “this was perhaps in magnitude, in numbers, and in fury the largest and most ferocious battle which has ever been fought, and was a clear trial of strength between the German army whose organization was the growth of two centuries and the English army which had sprung into existence in two years.”⁴⁰ The new English army discussed here

was primarily made up of new conscripts as the volunteer enthusiasm of the previous years had waned, resulting in the establishment of conscription laws in 1916. The reinforcement of the image of the new army as strong and united was of particular importance as protests against the newly imposed conscription laws and a rebellion for independence in Ireland threatened to derail the British war effort throughout 1916. Despite these divisions at home, textbook authors emphasized the ability of the troops on the front to stay together and continue their efforts to save their allies and defeat the German Empire.

Seeking to emphasize its place as the premier maritime power of the era, British textbook authors dedicated portions of the 1916 section to discussing the only navy incursion of note throughout the entire war. The Battle of Jutland was remembered as an important moment for the eventual Entente victory and as a reflection of the prestige of the British navy worldwide. Although ultimately indecisive, the battle reaffirmed the unfailing continuation of the British command of the high seas throughout the war. The depictions of the “courage and ingenuity of the British sailor [who was] willing to go to sea again and again after being torpedoed in ship after ship” reflected in the British texts descriptions of the French soldier at Verdun, demonstrating the centrality of the navy to the British national and imperial identity and its place of importance in the British war experience.⁴¹ Praise was given to the navy’s ability to keep the German High Seas Fleet in harbor for almost the entirety of the war. Authors discussing the Battle of Jutland detailed how,

The British lost six-cruisers and eight destroyers, while two super-dreadnoughts were badly damaged. The German losses were less than this, but their claim to have won a victory was nevertheless absurd. Henceforth, while the German fleet remained confined to port, the British were free to go where they would. That was the real answer to the question of who won the Battle of Jutland.⁴²

This emphasis on the strategic role, power, and bravery of the navy underlined the connection between the British national identity and its maritime forces. Not only did the Royal Navy physically unite the island of Great Britain with the rest of her Empire, it also symbolically bridged divisions created by geography and class by allowing every member of the Empire to take pride in its power and global preeminence.⁴³ The Battle of Jutland was immortalized in textbooks both as a defining moment for the prestige of the British Navy and also as the dividing point between the old style of one-on-one naval warfare and the new modern style in which submarines and convoy systems became of the utmost importance.

Crisis Turns to Victory

While textbook chapters on 1915 and 1916 served to commemorate the heroism of the soldier on the field of battle and at sea, discussions of 1917 saw authors in both countries discussing dramatic shifts in public opinion towards the war. War-time food and material shortages, the continued loss of life, and the failure of the governments to end the conflict resulted in a drastic loss of popular support for the war effort. The British author Carrington noted, “by this time all Europe was war-weary. The fine enthusiasm and patriotic fervour of 1914 had vanished, giving way to a general mood of ‘blindness and hardness of heart.... envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness’.”⁴⁴ This hardness at home was compounded by the critical loss of their Russian ally due to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which ended hostilities between Russia and Germany.

Briefly commenting on Russia, French authors primarily looked to avoid discussions which would tarnish the image of *L’Union Sacrée*, often minimizing the amount of detail given to discussions of 1917 in their textbooks. The horrific realities of the Battle at Verdun compounded by the subsequent losses at Chemin de Dames only a few months later resulted in the wearied French troops mutinying in the spring of 1917.⁴⁵ Occurring simultaneously alongside industrial strikes on the Home Front, these mutinies were seen as incredibly detrimental to the morale of the French nation and were erased from the French collective memory during and directly after the war.⁴⁶ This decision to censor and edit the collective memory of the nation continued in textbooks where the mutinies of 1917 were reduced merely to “undisciplined acts” and “worrisome morale.”⁴⁷ The only real discussion of these events was in reference to General Pétain who was remembered as the man who rallied the French troops and re-established much needed order and confidence on both the war and home fronts. The efforts made by Pétain to maintain the morale of the troops, as well as his subsequent victories, ensured him a place in the national pantheon of First World War heroes throughout the interwar era.⁴⁸

The corresponding sections of British textbooks focused on the Battle of Passchendaele. The legacy of the Battle of Passchendaele for the British was dichotomous in nature as it was decried as a battle in which hundreds of thousands of lives were lost for minimal gains, while at the same time it came to hold the same sacred gravitas Verdun held for the French.⁴⁹ One author summarized this dichotomy stating,

All the British gained was about miles of mud and swamp. The terrific bombardment pulverized the ground and smashed the German trenches and all ditches and drains, till, when the autumn rain descended, the whole area became a sea of choking mud in which men, horses, mules, and tanks floundered and perished miserably. The few tracks across

the morass made by the tireless labours and devoted courage of the soldiers were swept by ceaseless shell-fire as the endless columns of transport marched with fortitude along them all night long. The courage and endurance of the British soldier in the long-drawn agony of Passchendaele have never been surpassed in all the long history of England. No campaign in the whole War has caused more criticism.⁵⁰

The criticism surrounding the Battle of Passchendaele reflected the growing discontentment among civilians and troops alike at the persistence of ineffective campaign strategies which sacrificed tens, if not hundreds, of thousands lives for yards of territory. Yet at the same time, for the British collective memory, Passchendaele was the moment where the tenacity of the soldiers on the front ensured their eventual victory. As one author noted it was where “three hundred thousand Englishmen were killed or wounded at Passchendaele [...] not knowing that they alone were upholding the Entente cause, for the truth about France and Russia was concealed from them.”⁵¹ Passchendaele, like Verdun for the French, was the British army’s penultimate contribution to winning the war.

In combination with the heroism at Passchendaele, the actions of the navy in 1917 were again highlighted, reinforcing link between Britain and its self-identification as the preeminent global naval power. The proclamation of unrestricted submarine warfare by the Germans in 1917 threatened the very survival of Britain. Quoting Winston Churchill, then Minister of Munitions, one author wrote, “without the unquenchable spirit of the Merchant Service nothing would have availed.... Merchant-seamen three of four times ‘submarined’ returned unfalteringly to the perilous seas, and even in the awful month when one ship out of every four that left the United Kingdom never came home, no voyage was delayed for lack of resolute civilian volunteers.”⁵² The resolve of the British sailor in the face of ever-present and increasing danger continued to be a source of pride for the British collective memory of the First World War. The successful efforts of the navy to keep the German High Seas Fleet in harbor, maintain the blockade of Germany, and ensure shipments of supplies reached the British Isles during the German submarine campaigns, solidified its importance as a key aspect of the eventual Entente victory. For without these efforts, as many authors noted, Britain would have likely starved, and the war would have ended much differently.⁵³

For all the dread caused by the increase in U-boat attacks, Germany’s declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare did have one positive effect: the American declaration of war against Germany. French and British textbooks gave a great amount of attention to the American intervention in the war on their behalf. The French commemorated the moment, stating, “the new submarine warfare, depriving neutral nations of the right to free navigation, had a nearly immediate effect: the entrance of

the United States of America into the war against Germany,” and “our new allies sustained us with their immense resources, while they created at all haste a powerful army, remarkably equipped. [...] By this moral reinforcement and the offensive force she brought us at the moment when our forces were exhausted, the American army was to decide the outcome of the war.”⁵⁴ British authors likewise commented, “for the arrival of fresh American armies on the scene, just when the man-power of both sides was weakening, put fresh heart into the Allies, and had a corresponding effect of depressing the Germans.”⁵⁵ The arrival of the American troops to help the British and French was a much-celebrated moment in the war. After three long years of grueling, murderous, futile warfare, the exhausted populations of France and Britain were given hope that the presence of a perceived limitless number of new troops would finally bring the war to an end. The collective memories of both nations commemorated this moment as the turning point from assumed defeat to assured victory.

For the British, the turning of the tide in 1917 with the entry of the United States into the war was supplemented by the victories achieved in Mesopotamia.⁵⁶ Previous sections of British textbooks had ascribed brief statements to the on-goings in the Mesopotamian theatre during 1915 and 1916. Stemming from fears of a “Berlin to Bagdad” railway and the potential loss of control over the Suez Canal, the British viewed the conquest of this territory as vital to protecting their interests abroad, mainly the lucrative trade routes to and from India, as well as securing the movement of troops to and from various points in the Empire.⁵⁷ The British surrender of Kut-el-Amara in 1916, briefly mentioned in the texts, was sidelined in favor of a discussion of the tremendous victories achieved in 1917 by the British forces in the region. The great hero T.L. Lawrence was lauded for his exploits in uniting the Arab tribes of the region to fight against the Ottoman army.⁵⁸ It was during these descriptions of the victories in the Middle East, that the religious undertones prevalent in the British collective memory of the First World War were most heavily portrayed. The recapture of the Holy Land became an important moment for the British public, with one textbook author noting,

In December the most picturesque event of the war took place. After an arduous and careful campaign, which involved laying of a railway across the desert from Egypt and carrying the waters of the Nile by pipe-line to the Holy Land, General Allenby forced the Turks to leave Jerusalem. His entry to the city on foot (December 12th, 1917) seemed like the end of the last crusade, the work of Richard Coeur de Lion at last completed.⁵⁹

This link between the First World War and the medieval Crusades was prevalent in Britain throughout the war and carried over into the post-war era. Deriving from renewed interest in the medieval period during the Victorian Era, the themes of chivalry, spirituality, and the honorable knight fighting for a

noble cause became central motifs in the British collective memory of the First World War. As Stefan Goebel states in his work on medieval inspiration for war memorials, “the Crusades, chivalry and medieval spirituality and mythology provided rich, protean sources of images, tropes and narrative motifs for people to give meaning to the legacy of the Great War.”⁶⁰ These motifs and tropes were utilized by British textbook authors to describe the campaigns in the East, as they created links with heroic figures of Britain’s past.

By using ideas associated with a romanticized version of the medieval period, British textbook authors attempted to reinforce myths of heroism and honor while simultaneously diluting the horrors of the industrial modern-day warfare. Compared with their French counterparts who sought to ensure that students understood the destruction and death caused by the war, British authors attempted to mitigate the horrors of modern war in favor of maintaining traditional ideas centered on heroics and chivalry. This different approach to remembering and teaching the war reflected the reality of the geographical location of the fighting, as it was the French who were forced to deal with the physical destruction of their homeland, while the British homeland remained safely unscathed across the Channel. While the British could uphold traditional ideas of war in an untouched landscape, the French were forced to reckon with the inescapable physical destruction caused by modern warfare.

Victory and Armistice

Although 1917 was the year in which the tide began to turn towards victory, French and British textbook authors noted that the final year of the war commenced with the near destruction of the remaining Entente allies. The German offensive in the spring of 1918, referred to as “Ludendorff’s Hundred Days,” nearly succeeded in ending the war with a German victory.⁶¹ The crushing defeats of the Entente troops on the Western Front during the opening of the 1918 campaign season were remarked as bringing the war full circle, as a seemingly unstoppable German advance swept through the north-eastern part of France nearly taking Paris, only to be stopped with yet another decisive Entente victory at the Second Battle of the Marne. Authors in both nations utilized this moment to highlight the important decision made by the Entente commanders to appoint the French General Foch as the single commander-in-chief of all the Entente forces. The importance of a single commander had been commented on since the Napoleonic Wars of the 19th century, and the lack of one throughout the First World War on the side of the Entente remained an enduring criticism from both civilians and soldiers.⁶² Faced with very real possibility of losing the war, the various Entente military leaders put aside their remaining differences and ensured a victorious end to the hostilities.

The Second Battle of the Marne marked the beginning of “Foch’s Hundred Days,” the final Entente offensive which allowed them to end the war victoriously.⁶³ While the combined efforts of both British and French troops ultimately were needed throughout the offensive, textbook authors of each nation emphasized the efforts made by their troops in these final days, effectively arguing that their nation’s efforts were those which ultimately won the war. French authors commented on the defeat of the British during the German offensive, stating, “the English were put out of action; the Germans advanced 60 kilometers and approached Amiens and Paris. Luckily, French reinforcements were fast enough to aid the English.”⁶⁴ British authors countered, “in these last battles the British army, less worn out than the French, more experienced than the Americans, had the lion’s share of the fighting.”⁶⁵ Both national canons, while admitting to the help provided by their allies, sought to demonstrate how their nation, and all the sacrifices it had made over the past four years, was ultimately responsible for winning the war.

Conclusion

The histories of the First World War found in French and British history textbooks agreed on numerous points: Germany’s war guilt, the disastrous nature of modern mechanized warfare, and the nearly incomprehensible losses of the war. However, authors in each nation sought to transcribe the events of the First World War in a manner which reflected the national characteristics seen as quintessential to “Frenchness” or “Britishness.” For the French, the concentration of the forces on the Western Front resulted in a perspective of the war which glorified the endurance of the soldier in the trenches. The Battles of the Marne and Verdun saved the nation from complete invasion and reinvigorated the military and political prestige of the nation. Fearless French military leaders had kept the nation together at times of distress and unrest, ultimately delivering the nation from the hands of the foreign invaders and reuniting once lost territories to the homeland. The emphasis in the British canon on the volunteer army highlighted the courageous nature of the everyday man, who answered the call of duty to protect the freedom of the world at large. The power and might of the Royal Navy, although tried and tested throughout the war, remained untouched in the end, reinforcing its place as the symbol for the splendor and might of the British Empire. Important battles on the Eastern Front such as the Gallipoli Campaign and in those fought in Mesopotamia aided in the development of independent national identities within the Empire and strengthened movements for independence in Ireland and India, foreshadowing the eventual end of the Empire.

The First World War provided each nation with unparalleled examples of courageous men willing to show their devotion and loyalty to the nation by sacrificing their lives. These descriptions of

the stout-hearted and courageous soldier persevering in the face of overwhelming odds immortalized him within the pantheon of national heroes. Battles on land and at sea with their unprecedented losses of life were not only important moments in the national histories, but also became sacred sites of collective mourning and memory, where the character of each nation had been tried and tested, and ultimately emerged victorious. The repercussions of the First World War, from the losses of life and property, to the creation of new nations around the world, and the subsequent rearmament and movement towards the Second World War, provided the closing, yet ever-growing chapter to the textbooks of the interwar period. The intermingling of each nation's collective memory and the official representations of the war via school textbooks provided for generations of students a complex story of unprecedented personal and national tragedy, from which they could learn not only the horrors of modern warfare, but more importantly the unique national characteristics which allowed them to withstand the onslaught and achieve victory over their enemies, paving the way for a glorious and peaceful future.

¹ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.

² John Issitt, "Reflections on the study of Textbooks," *History of Education* 33, no. 6 (2004): 688.

³ S.A and R.C. Williams, *The Four Freedoms or The People We Are: A History of Boys and Girls, volume IV: Great Britain and the World 1870-1956, The Age of Competition* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1949), 122; Gauthier et Deschamps, *Cours d'histoire de France: cours supérieur* (Paris: Hachette, 1931), 252. All translations of French texts are my own.

⁴ Ernest Lavis, *Histoire de France: cours élémentaire* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1926), 181.

⁵ Williams, *The Four Freedoms* (1949), 122.

⁶ Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷ S. Reed Brett, *British History 1815-1920: A School Certificate Course* (London: John Murray, 1933), 337.

⁸ The importance of the return of the Alsace-Lorraine provinces to the French nation can be seen through the commemorative recounts of the history of Alsace-Lorraine added to the textbooks in the interwar period. See Gauthier, *Cours d'histoire* (1923), 245.

⁹ Ernest Lavis, *Histoire de France: cours moyen. Première de deuxième années* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1941), 249.

¹⁰ Louis-Eugène Rogie, P. Despiques et H. Mignot, *Histoire de la France et de ses Institutions et Notions sommaires d'Histoire générale* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1932), 528.

¹¹ Gauthier, *Cours d'histoire* (1923), 232.

- ¹² George Townsend Warner and C.H.K Marten, *The Groundwork of British History* (London: Blackie & Sons Limited, 1932), 918.
- ¹³ Brett, *British History* (1933), 345; C.E. Carrington and J. Hampden Jackson, *A History of England, Part III, 1714-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), 735.
- ¹⁴ The exaggeration of German atrocities in Belgium as a means of propaganda for the Entente forces versus the realities of what occurred has been subjected to intense historical study. For more see John Horne and Alan Kramer, "German 'Atrocities' and Franco-German Opinion, 1914: The Evidence of German Soldier's Diaries," *The Journal of Modern History*, 66, no.1, (March 1994): 1-33 and Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).
- ¹⁵ Robert Rayner, *A Middle School History of England: Volume III – 1714-1930* (London: John Murray, 1934), 208-9.
- ¹⁶ See C.E. Carrington and J. Hampden Jackson, *A History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 735; Margaret Elliot, *Our Yesterdays: The Story of the British People Book III* (London: Macmillan & Co., LTD., 1939), 235.
- ¹⁷ Rogie, *Histoire de la France* (1932), 532.
- ¹⁸ Jules Isaac, *Histoire Contemporaine (1815-1936)* (Paris: Hachette, 1943), 175.
- ¹⁹ C.E. Carrington and J. Hampden Jackson, *A History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 737.
- ²⁰ The "Old Contemptibles" was the nickname given to the British Expeditionary Force. Rayner, *A Middle School History* (1932), 423.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 216.
- ²² Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 17.
- ²³ Gauthier, *Cours d'histoire* (1931), 255.
- ²⁴ The use of force to obtain reparation payments refers to the invasion of the Ruhr Valley in 1923 by French troops. For more see: Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ²⁵ Brett, *British History* (1933), 349.
- ²⁶ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 740.
- ²⁷ The Gallipoli Campaign and the soldiers who fought there became cornerstones of the national identities of Australia and New Zealand following the First World War. See Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- ²⁸ Rayner, *A Middle School History* (1932), 425.
- ²⁹ Carrington, *A History of England* (1934), 741.
- ³⁰ Warner, *The Groundwork* (1932), 732-3.
- ³¹ The French presence at Gallipoli has been selectively forgotten in the collective memory of both nations. Colonial troops from France played a major role in the offensives and subsequent occupation of the peninsula. The terrible conditions, and subsequent withdrawal to Salonika, where the French played a more prominent role in the campaigns, have eclipsed the Gallipoli experience in the French collective memory. The importance of the campaign in the British collective memory, as discussed above, has likewise resulted in the exclusion of the French. For more see: Matthew Hughes, "The French Army at Gallipoli," *RUSI Journal* 150, no. 3 (2008): 64-67.
- ³² Mosse, *Fallen Soldier*, 93.

- ³³ For more on the Battle of Verdun see: Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ³⁴ Rogie, *Histoire de la France* (1932), 536.
- ³⁵ A. Aymard, *Histoire de France: cours élémentaire et moyen programmes de 1945* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1932), 149.
- ³⁶ Gauthier, *Cours d'histoire* (1923), 238.
- ³⁷ Antoine Prost, "Verdun," in *Les Lieux de Mémoire* vol. 2, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 1775.
- ³⁸ The popular myth of the "Trench of the Bayonets" reflects this belief. The premise of this myth is based on a battalion of French troops who were supposedly buried alive by shell-fire while standing guard during the battle. The site of the supposed trench has become a sacred site of remembrance, as well as a popular tourist attraction. For more see: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99-102.
- ³⁹ Warner, *The Groundwork* (1943), 945.
- ⁴⁰ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 742.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 746.
- ⁴² Brett, *British History* (1933), 357-8.
- ⁴³ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 10.
- ⁴⁴ Carrington, *A History of England* (1945), 748.
- ⁴⁵ For more on the French mutinies of 1917 see: Guy Pedroncini, *1917: Les Mutineries de l'Armée française* (Paris: Julliard, 1968) and Nicholas Offenstadt, *Les fusillés de la grand guerre et la mémoire collective (1914-1999)* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1999).
- ⁴⁶ These strikes were a response to low wages, high work hours, food shortages, and a general war-weariness which had taken over the nation. For more see: Philippe Olivera, "La bataille introuvable," in *Le Chemin des Dames, de l'expérience à la mémoire*, ed. Nicolas Offenstadt, 36-46 (Paris: Stock, 2004).
- ⁴⁷ Rogie, *Histoire de la France* (1932), 537.
- ⁴⁸ There is a point of interest here concerning the descriptions of Pétain found in French textbooks. Following the fall of the Vichy regime, of which Pétain was the president, the post-World War II re-editions of textbooks either erase Pétain completely from the text, or greatly reduce his presence and contribution to the First World War. This disassociation of the Fourth French Republic from the Vichy Regime would go on to greatly influence the collective memory of the Second World War until the present day. For more see: Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- ⁴⁹ See Peter Hart and Nigel Steel, *Passchendaele: the Sacrificial Ground* (London: Caswell, 2001).
- ⁵⁰ Williams, *The Four Freedoms* (1949), 134-5.
- ⁵¹ Carrington, *A History of England* (1945), 750.
- ⁵² Williams, *The Four Freedoms* (1949), 132.
- ⁵³ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 746; Warner, *The Groundwork* (1943), 946.
- ⁵⁴ Isaac, *Histoire Contemporaine* (1947), 118; Rogie, *Histoire de la France* (1932), 540-1.
- ⁵⁵ Rayner, *A Middle School History* (1934), 216.
- ⁵⁶ Present day Iran, Iraq, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.
- ⁵⁷ Williams, *The Four Freedoms* (1949), 121; Warner, *The Groundwork* (1943), 918-9.
- ⁵⁸ Carrington, *A History of England* (1934), 751.

⁵⁹ Carrington, *A History of England* (1945), 752.

⁶⁰ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

⁶¹ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 752.

⁶² David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Scribner, 1996). This criticism concerning the lack of a single commander for the Entente forces remains today.

⁶³ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 752.

⁶⁴ Lavissee, *Histoire de France* (1941), 527-8.

⁶⁵ Carrington, *A History of England* (1932), 753.

Author Bio: Lauren Jannette is a PhD candidate at George Washington University. She received her B.A. from Kalamazoo College in 2012, an M.A. from Columbia University in 2014 and from the University of Kent in 2015. Her current research explores how art and literature created by pacifists living in France during the interwar period (1919-1939) reflected the discord and divisions within the movement, and how these divisions ultimately rendered the movement incapable of maintaining public support. She also is working on a digital social network project which traces the movements of noted pacifists and their artistic works during the era. She has previously published articles for *The Activist History Review* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

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