# ARE THERE MORAL REASONS TO REMEMBER THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

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*2014 marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. This paper considers whether there are moral reasons to remember wars. It is argued that the most convincing reason for remembering wars is that they provide valuable lessons about human nature. The First World War elucidates several aspects of human nature, including our tribalism, sheepishness, drive for honour and over-confidence. Taking heed of these lessons may help avert future conflict.*



The First World War was a gruesome conflict in which more than eight million people were killed and almost twice as many were injured. It came to involve nations as far-flung as Canada, Turkey, India and Australia. Whole landscapes on the Western Front were converted into lunar-like stretches of mud, mines and human remains.

Over the next three years thousands will flock to former battlefields and war memorials to commemorate WWI and those who died fighting in it. But an important question is this: why should we bother to commemorate the war at all?

## Why Remember Wars?

One reason to study and commemorate great historical events is that they are interesting – they help us imagine a time foregone, and to situate ourselves in and understand the world today. Historical fascination is no bad thing, but it seems a weak justification for the kind of society-wide

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commemoration ceremonies and remembrances we'll see over the next few years. Are there more substantial reasons? In her forthcoming book *Cosmopolitan Peace*, the Oxford philosopher Cecile Fabre considers whether there are *moral* reasons to remember wars and their dead.[1]

One possible argument, which Fabre sketches, is that we owe an obligation to commemorate past benefactors, or to recognise past wrongdoing. One problem for this argument is that our relationship with the past becomes more tenuous as the years progress. The extent to which contemporary Germans owe an obligation to be repentant or provide reparations for the Holocaust, for instance, is a vexed question. It is even more difficult when the historical episode is the First World War. Do new migrants to Britain owe a duty of gratitude to remember fallen Allied soldiers? The extent to which they owe their quality of life to these soldiers is unclear. If the key question is the extent to which those who fought wars benefitted us, the British may owe just as great an obligation to remember those who died in the Battle of Hastings, as they do for those who died in WWI. This argument for commemorating the war is weak.

A second argument is that we should commemorate events such as WWI in order to strengthen our present ties with our compatriots. This is a nationalist reason to remember war. This seems to be partly how many countries *do* commemorate WWI. For instance, in Australia much emphasis is put on the campaign at Gallipoli – an attempt to land in Turkey (which had sided with Germany) and capture Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Despite the failure of that campaign, stories about it have become an important part of Australia's folklore. Many Australians consider the values displayed by soldiers in Gallipoli as foundational to the country's identity.

The potential to strengthen communal or national bonds may be one reason to remember war, but it has its difficulties. As Fabre invites us to ask, what if the relationships being sustained are not morally valuable? Many

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dictatorships seek to heighten patriotic sentiment by commemorating military successes, real or imagined. Perhaps the greatest concern, however, is that this justification for commemorating war encourages us to distort history, or to focus only on particular aspects. If all we choose to remember of a war is how laudable or gallant our forebears were, and we choose to ignore their wrongdoings, we may lose sight of some of war's larger lessons.

In my view, there are at least two *good* moral reasons to remember wars. Firstly, there is a moral good in ensuring that we never forget the horrors of war. Secondly, there is a moral good in learning about human nature through the lens of history. Fabre expressed the first justification when she noted in a talk earlier this year that history records the best and worst of what we are capable, and if 'commemorating the First World War serves as a reminder of the horrors of war in general and helps us to keep in view the moral requirement not to senselessly sacrifice lives, then of course we should do so'. The second justification was well expressed by David Hume in the 18th century, when he wrote that the chief use of historical study 'is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature'.[2] The minutiae of battle movements may not teach us much. But a broader understanding of WWI can teach us something about ourselves.

## Some Lessons From The First World War

**1. Our Tribal Nature:** In many ways we are tribal creatures. We are biologically predisposed to care more about the welfare of our friends and family than of distant strangers, and to be distrustful of those considered outsiders. A mild preferencing of our friends and family may be benign. But a more frightening consequence of our tribal nature is a tendency to racism and hatred of outsider groups. When coupled with pernicious ideologies like ethnic nationalism (a belief in racial/national purity or



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supremacy), this tendency can initiate or exacerbate conflict.

World War One provides a clear example of our tribal nature in action. The historian Correlli Barnett writes that many civilians 'burned with a hatred of the enemy that bordered on neurotic fantasy. A Briton pointed out in a newspaper at the time, for example, that "there are only two divisions in the world today – human beings and Germans", while a German argued on the contrary that "The Englishman, indeed, is not to be classed among human beings".[3] According to Barnett, this passionate hatred, coupled with a sense of righteousness on both sides, 'were the fuel that kept every nation's war effort burning'.[4] In Britain there was an explosion of anti-German hatred. Shops with German names were looted and destroyed. The royal family – originally of German extraction – found it necessary to re-label themselves as the House of Windsor (previously the House of Hanover).

The tribal nature of people was also stoked by the romantic patriotism of the age. The historian Michael Howard writes that at the time, 'The nation had become the object of a quasi-religious cult, and young men flocked to its banners as to a crusade.'[5] A strong commitment to country was inculcated by educational programmes aimed at producing obedient citizens.

**2. Sheepishness and Hysteria:** Closely related to tribalism is the human tendency to sheepishness and hysteria. By 1916 the original causes of the war were almost forgotten. A stalemate had been reached. But both sides pushed on, rather than seek a peace. According to Sir Michael Howard, 'popular passions were at least as important as political or military calculations in the determination of the belligerents to press on with the war.'[6] The 'monster of public opinion' lead to the election of leaders like Britain's Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who promised to win the war with a 'knock-out blow', not negotiate a peace. In order to encourage young men to

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volunteer, it was essential also that the public's opinion be continually whipped up. This created a pernicious cycle. As A.J.P Taylor notes, 'this opinion then made it essential to keep the war going. In every country the rulers feared the consequences of ending the war more than they feared the consequences of continuing it'.[7]

Women in London shamed men wearing civilian clothes by presenting them with white feathers, a symbol of cowardice. Hysteria also lead to the suppression of pacifist ideas, which made belligerence seem like the unanimous view. Bertrand Russell, for example, was imprisoned under the draconian *Defence of the Realm Act* for lecturing against America entering the war. Those who disagreed with the dominant view were labelled as 'traitors'. Taking such views out of the public space made pausing for thought seem unnecessary.

**3. Honour:** In his magisterial history of violence, Steven Pinker writes:[8]

> The immediate cause of World War I had been a showdown over honor. The leaders of Austria-Hungary had issued a humiliating ultimatum to Serbia demanding that it apologize for the assassination of the archduke and crack down on domestic nationalist movements to their satisfaction. Russia took offense on behalf of its fellow Slavs, Germany took offense at Russia's offense on behalf of its fellow German speakers, and as Britain and France joined in, a contest of face, humiliation, shame, stature, and credibility escalated out of control. A fear of being "reduced to a second-rate power" sent them hurtling toward each other in a dreadful game of chicken.

A drive for honour, according to Margaret MacMillan, also helps explain Germany's entry into the war. Kaiser Wilhelm had become aware that members of his army had begun to



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refer to him as 'Wilhelm the Timid', due to his reluctance to initiate war in previous crises. Shortly after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Wilhelm reportedly said to a close friend, on more than one occasion, 'This time I shall not give in'.[9]

The willingness of human beings to resort to violence in response to perceived slights, or to vindicate their 'honour', can have disastrous consequences. In this respect, some wars are analogous to duels or bar fights.

**4. Over-optimism:** 'When the statesmen of Europe declared war in 1914', Michael Howard writes, 'they all shared one common assumption: that they had a better-than-even chance of winning it.'[10] In the weeks preceding the war, the leaders of England, France, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire also all predicted that the war would be over quickly. The young men who volunteered to fight in the thousands did not believe they were signing up as cannon fodder – they were sure they would win, and that war itself would be a grand and exciting adventure. Many wrote reassuringly to family members that they'd be 'home by Christmas'.

Just as most people think they are kinder, smarter, and better drivers than average, so too do many leaders and civilians fall under the delusion of inevitable victory. In *Overconfidence and War*, Dominic Johnson shows that predictions made by leaders on the verge of war are invariably optimistic.[11] Historical data from the past five centuries reveals that countries that initiated wars have ended up losing them between a quarter and half of the time. Human beings seem temperamentally unsuited to remembering Winston Churchill's observation that, 'however sure you are that you can easily win, there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance'.[12]

Another perversely optimistic idea that contributed to the war, but which has thankfully fallen out of favour, was the idea that war was a salubrious activity. Many leading intellectuals believed that war was necessary to 'sweep away'

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effeminacy and materialism, and to bolster wholesome traits like sacrifice and heroism. In 1914 Arthur Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes say of the incipient world war, 'It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.'[13] Studying the history of the First World War surely dispels this notion.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

Over the past century there have been huge advances in the cultural morality of human beings in liberal democracies. Tolerance for most forms of violence has greatly diminished, and as Steven Pinker argues, we are probably living in the most peaceable era of our species' existence. But for all that, we retain a biological inheritance that predisposes us to war – tribalism, sheepishness, over-confidence, and the drive for honour being just a few of our psychological traits. And while violent practices have declined, the risk of violent annihilation may have increased as a result of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the destructive power of which has greatly increased since 1945.

In *Unfit for the Future*, Persson and Savulescu argue that 'It is crucial that we be aware of the moral limitations of our nature, and do whatever we can to correct these limitations, by traditional or new scientific means.'[14] The means might include strengthening international institutions, promoting reason and the free discussion of ideas, or even engaging in moral bioenhancement (which Persson and Savulescu argue for). But one very simple way to counter our pernicious psychological tendencies is to be aware of them - and history provides a particularly rich source of lessons about human nature.

President Kennedy's role in peacefully resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, while his advisors urged hawkishness,



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may have been due in no small part to heeding the lessons of history. Kennedy's senior thesis (and then book), *Why England Slept*, had been on British appeasement to Nazi Germany. The 1930s, Kennedy had written, 'taught us a clear lesson; aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war.'[15] But Kennedy tempered this lesson with another; just before the missile crisis he had been reading Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, about the outbreak of the First World War, and knew that a series of mistakes driven by 'personal complexes of inferiority and grandeur' could lead to catastrophe. He steered a middle course by imposing a naval blockade on Cuba.

There are, then, moral reasons for remembering the First World War. As Jonathan Glover succinctly puts it in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, history enables us to 'look hard and clearly at some monsters inside us. But this is part of the project of caging and taming them.'[16]

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## Notes

[1] This outline of Fabre's arguments comes from a talk she gave entitled 'Remembering War', given as part of Oxford University's 'Changing Character of War' lecture series, and from a printed hand-out that accompanied that talk. A recording of the talk is available at <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/remembering-war>.

[2] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Oxford: Oxford University Press*, 2007), 60.

[3] Correlli Barnett, *The Great War* (London: Park Lane Press, 1979), 62.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 132.

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[6] Michael Howard, *The First World War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40.

[7] A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 163.

[8] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (London: Penguin, 2011), 247.

[9] Margaret MacMillan, 'The Rhyme of History', *Brookings Institution* (14th December, 2013) <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2013/rhyme-of-history>.

[10] Howard, above n 5, 120.

[11] Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[12] Quoted in Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill's World War II Speeches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18.

[13] From Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Our Last Bow'. Available online at <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/doyle/arthur_conan/d75la/chapter8.html>.

[14] Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, *Unfit For The Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133.

[15] Quoted in Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 161.

[16] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2001), 7.



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