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Peter Farrugia

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# A Small Truce in a Big War

## The Historial de la Grande Guerre and the Interplay of History and Memory

Peter Farrugia

It is a story with which most students of the First World War are familiar. On that first Christmas Eve of the Great War – the one by which everyone had been promised they would be sipping their beverage of choice in the enemy’s capital – the thoughts of British soldiers were interrupted by an other-worldly sound: the familiar tunes of carols drifting across no-man’s-land but with German lyrics. The extraordinary truce that broke out across the line was indelibly etched on the minds of many veterans who participated in the suspension of hostilities, even though, in the vast panorama of 1914-18, it represented a momentary lull, a small truce in a big war.<sup>1</sup>

In its own way, the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, the leading French museum dedicated to the Great War that opened in 1992, has resembled that singular moment in the First World War. Its founding was marked by a suspension of hostilities, as academic historians and museum professionals collaborated across vocational and national boundaries in order to create an institution with a unique interpretive stance. It was also characterized by a *rapprochement* between history and memory, with the Historial’s museology recognizing both the value of the historian’s craft and the power of individual memory

**Abstract: History and memory have often been portrayed as implacable enemies, particularly when attempting to understand the Great War. The creation of the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, France saw a conscious attempt to enforce a “truce” between the forces of history and memory, symbolized most clearly in the collaboration between academic historians and museum professionals in the elaboration of the museum’s philosophy and museography. This collaboration produced a coherent vision of the War that stressed the emergence of “war culture” and the gradual consent of citizen-soldiers to the demands made of them. By the late 1990s, a conflicting view of the war, emphasizing state coercion and resistance, emerged. The ensuing debate between these interpretations of the War’s meaning has underlined the implications of these theories and called into question the durability of the truce established with the Historial’s founding in 1992.**

in shaping visitors’ responses to the collection. In the space created in Péronne, new sub-fields were explored, new voices encouraged and an innovative overarching theory of the war elaborated. Nevertheless, the conflict between history and memory in the study of the Great War could not be held in abeyance forever. It was on the issue of violence – and the deeper question of whether the mounting ferocity of the fighting was the result

of gradual individual acclimatization or of intensified state coercion – that the Historial staked out its most distinctive claim. The emergence of the “war culture” interpretation of violence in the Great War sparked a reopening of hostilities, manifested in an historiographical battle that continues to pose the question of the relative merits of history and memory in making sense of the past.

### History, Memory & Museums

We are in an era when memory holds a certain fascination for and exercises a degree of influence on people around the world. Geoff Eley, has suggested that the “interest in memory massively exceeds...[the] professionalized discourse, saturating large areas of entertainment, popular reading, commercial exchange, and many other parts of the public culture.” He suggests that memory “offers a crucial site of identity formation under this contemporary predicament, a way of deciding who we are and of positioning ourselves in time, given the hugeness of the structural changes now so palpably and destructively remaking the world in the present.”<sup>2</sup> Memory confirms the value of the individual in an age that increasingly suggests meaninglessness. It is a bulwark against the dizzying pace of change

in our world and a link to a past that some fear is being obliterated.

The contemporary interest in memory can be traced back to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the first to speak of collective memory. He argued that "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."<sup>3</sup> This notion was picked up by Pierre Nora in his multi-volume study of the touchstones of French national identity, *Realms of Memory*. He asserted that "The equilibrium between the present and the past is disrupted....Our consciousness is shaped by a sense that everything is over and done with, that something long since begun is now complete."<sup>4</sup> It is this sense of rupture that leads to the social construction of sites where past and present can be reconnected. These *lieux de mémoire*, as Nora terms them, include "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."<sup>5</sup>

A number of more recent students of memory have questioned elements of Nora's analysis. Some have rejected the simple binary that sees history and memory as perpetually in opposition. Raphael Samuel has contended that "History has always been a hybrid form of knowledge, syncretizing past and present, memory and myth, the written record and the spoken word. Its subject matter is promiscuous."<sup>6</sup> Jay Winter has gone a step further, proposing the abandonment of the term "collective memory" in favour of what he labels "collective remembrance." He defines this as "the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The 'public' is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it. What they create is not a cluster of individual memories;

the whole is greater than the sum of its parts....When people come together to remember, they enter a domain beyond that of individual memory."<sup>7</sup> For Winter, the critical element is human agency. Certain sites may indeed affect us powerfully but we remain active participants in the construction of our memories. This conviction underpinned the museographical work that produced the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*.

Clearly, concern within the historical community persists regarding the definition of memory as well as how it can be integrated into a fuller understanding of the past. What are the implications of these debates for the study of museums? Michelle Henning, for example, has suggested that the notion of auratic memory, first developed by Walter Benjamin, can help us understand the role of museums effectively. She points out that Nora's concept of archival memory has been correctly labelled as a "contribution to the neo-liberal reaffirmation of French national identity" and contends that Benjamin's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory is more useful.<sup>8</sup> Voluntary memory is "the memory of the intellect. It gives information about the past but retains no trace of it" whereas involuntary memory – most famously represented by Proust's *madelaine* stirring up childhood memories unexpectedly – involves a chance encounter which "vividly conjures up a past experience." Benjamin's approach to memory "associates the pre-modern period with a unity of voluntary and involuntary memory, and the modern period with their splitting."<sup>9</sup> This tearing asunder has been an issue of considerable concern for more reflective museum professionals for some time. It is mirrored in the divide between the academic discipline of history and museum practice. The editors of an anthology exploring the future of museums in France decried the

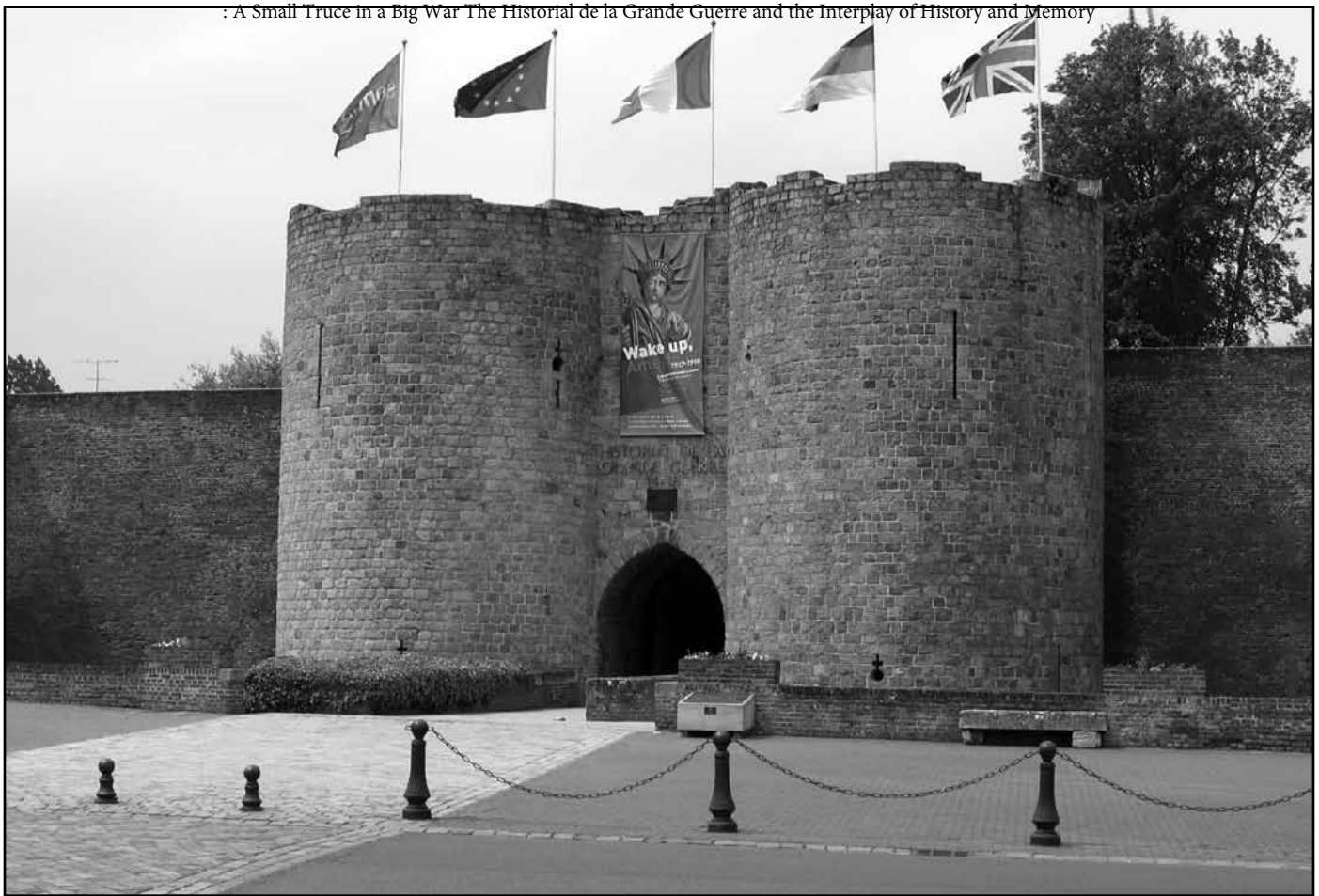
"discrepancy between historical research and museums of history which often having nothing more to do with history than their name and do not reflect the discipline of history."<sup>10</sup> During the "memory boom" it has sometimes seemed that there is an unhealthy disconnect between museums and academic historical discourse.

### The Founding of the Historial de la Grande Guerre

Few museums have found themselves caught up so squarely in the relationship between history and memory as the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne, France. To fully appreciate the uniqueness of the enterprise, a brief look at the treatment of the Great War prior to the inauguration of the *Historial* is required. Before 1992 in France, an uneasy peace between the forces of history and memory remained in force for decades. Perhaps it was less a peace than a missed encounter, as armies slid by one another unawares in the night. Academic historians tended to concentrate on diplomatic history or grand strategy. There appeared to be little need of the perspective of the *poilu* when puzzling over Sarajevo, the Entente or the Schlieffen Plan. At the same time, the museal landscape was dominated by countless small public and private museums, which sprang up like the poppies that marked the battlefields of northeastern France, as well as a handful of larger ventures. Most significantly, there was almost no communication between those who practised in the academic field of History and those responsible for museums.

Occasionally, the conflict between history and memory did bubble to the surface. One such moment was when Jean Norton Cru's analysis of accounts of the Great War, *Temoins* was first published in

Photo by Mike Bechthold



The main entrance of the Historial de la Grande Guerre.

1929. In a way that would prefigure elements of the war culture debate 70 years later, Cru's compendium of soldiers' accounts of the war aroused conflicting evaluations of the merits of eyewitness accounts. Still, however much the figure of the *poilu* was significant in memory, he was much less significant in historiography. One academic team exploring the historiography of the Great War went so far as to characterize the result as "A history of the war without soldiers" and declared that "Trench soldiers were not forgotten; they were excluded...the soldiers played no part in what most professional historians of the time considered as history."<sup>11</sup>

On the museum front, France lacked a premier institution dedicated exclusively to the Great War. Nationally, the first museum to attempt to interpret the Great War was the Bibliothèque de documentation

internationale contemporaine, which was founded by industrialist Henri Leblanc in 1917.<sup>12</sup> The museum was initially part of a larger undertaking that was dominated by its library function. Despite this, the museum proved powerfully evocative. The critical response was highly positive. One expert, commenting on a visitor's reaction to a set of war era postcards, noted that the visitor's "exaltation in the face both of objects and the memories they evoke, differs significantly from the reasoned analysis that the founders of the Bibliothèque-musée ostensibly sought to produce."<sup>13</sup> The earliest attempts to construct Great War museums, then, can be seen to have been confronted with the history/memory conundrum. The key difference from contemporary efforts to understand the war was that there was not a *conscious* effort to reconcile history and memory.

This would change with the arrival of the Historial.

### The Creation of the Historial de la Grande Guerre

The larger intertwining of memory and history regarding the First World War in France is suggested by the forces that inspired the creation of the museum at Péronne. It was amidst preparations for the marking of the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme in 1986 that the Conseil Général de la Somme began working on a project designed to commemorate the battle. Its president, Max Lejeune, was the motive force behind this initiative. The main reasons enunciated for this project were the lack of awareness of regional history generally and of the Battle of the Somme in particular, and the dearth of tourist attractions in the area.<sup>14</sup> In May 1986,

a report commissioned by the region concluded that the time was right to found a historical and cultural centre which would include a museum, library and exhibition space. It would examine the whole war and would concentrate on everyday life in the trenches and at home.<sup>15</sup>

Eventually, the project found a home in Péronne, a town of 8,000 about an hour's drive northeast of Paris. There were a number of factors that prompted Péronne's selection. It was here that the British and French armies washed up against one another. The city had suffered a long occupation by German troops. Péronne was within easy reach of Paris and stood at the crossroads of tourist flows from the UK, Benelux, and Germany. It was also situated just off a major autoroute, which enhanced its accessibility. Finally, the donation of a medieval castle bordering on a park made the Péronne site very attractive.<sup>16</sup>

Once the home of the proposed centre was determined, attention shifted to selecting someone to head up this ambitious project. Eventually, the mission was entrusted to Gerard Rougeron, a writer and journalist whose "Péronnais origins and his marriage to an English woman had long since sensitized him to the particularities of the Battle of the Somme."<sup>17</sup> For those like Rougeron with a deeper knowledge of the Great War, the Somme was more than a battlefield. It was:

a "microcosm" reflecting the tragedy of the Great War, the transformations that it unleashed and accelerated. In the Somme, in effect, all the empires of 1914 confronted one another, all the peoples of the world who had intervened on the Western Front confronted one another, populations were occupied and their lives organised around the needs of the occupier, a scorched earth policy and civilian deportations were experimented with, the war of

movement was deployed, and trench warfare caused the worst slaughter on the Western Front.<sup>18</sup>

All of this may have been true. However, for the majority of French people, Verdun remained the ultimate symbol of the Great War. Indeed, it was only with the emergence of Péronne that the Battle of the Somme ceased to be "occluded" by Verdun in popular memory.<sup>19</sup>

Rougeron was a mercurial figure but a highly creative one. He recognized that both history and memory needed to be wielded if a truly remarkable exploration of the Great War were to result from a visit to the Historial. The museum's battlefield location and the determination to let objects speak for themselves testify to the importance of memory at Péronne. Rougeron's efforts to enlist the help of academics from around the world with his project underline that history was not being ignored. Among the historians approached were: Arthur Marwick (Open University); Peter Simkins (Imperial War Museum); Guy Pedroncini (Institut historique des conflits contemporains); and Victor Suthren (Canadian War Museum).<sup>20</sup> However, it was with two others - Jean-Jacques Becker and Gerd Krumeich - that Rougeron had his greatest success.

Jean-Jacques Becker, at the time a specialist in contemporary French history at Paris-X Nanterre, responded to Rougeron's introductory letter enthusiastically, noting that "paradoxically, an event like the war of 1914, which remains fundamental in French collective memory, has not produced up to now achievements of this type." He praised Rougeron's vision because "It refers to modern historical preoccupations by placing the accent on the comportment of men, both soldiers and civilians" and he characterized himself as "ready to help those guiding the project" in whatever ways proved necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Gerd Krumeich, then assistant to Professor Wolfgang Mommsen at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, was similarly supportive, writing that the "fundamental idea of documenting this event, so decisive in the history of the 20th century, in an international manner seems to me most interesting and I would be delighted to be part of an international team working in this regard." He spoke of the proposed site's interest as a centre of research but also underlined that "It would clearly be desirable to gather funds sufficient for the creation of bursaries for researchers from different countries working to make better understood the hows and whys of the disaster."<sup>22</sup> The recruiting of these historians was vitally important to setting the tone for the fledgling institution.

While the alacrity with which Becker and Krumeich embraced this new venture might appear visionary, it is worth placing their support in context. As is often the case, Péronne was an idea whose time appeared to have arrived. The project was part of a larger wave of renewed interest in the Great War that was also manifested in a bumper crop of films and literary works that chose the war as theme, the advance guard of which included Bertrand Tavernier's *La vie et rien d'autre* (1989), Jean Rouaud's *Les champs d'honneur* (1990) and Sébastien Japrisot's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (1991).<sup>23</sup>

Despite this fact, the Péronne project did face significant hurdles. The most serious of these was the lack of a collection. One of the first jobs of those in charge was to amass the artifacts that would tell the museum's story. This was no easy task. As Rougeron himself pointed out "After seventy years, objects in markets had become rare or frequently had suffered manipulations and repairs."<sup>24</sup> That the museum was able to build a credible collection in time for its 1992 opening was largely attributable to the dedication and

skill of Jean-Pierre Thierry, who oversaw acquisitions.<sup>25</sup> A second challenge was crafting a coherent message for the museum; given the way in which the Great War cut across nationality, class and gender, the way in which it touched all aspects of life, this was a huge undertaking. It was a testimony to the passion, dedication and creativity of Rougeron that the museum got off to such a strong start. Jay Winter has spoken of his “romantic, sensitive, powerful, at times grandiloquent vision” and he has credited him with coining the term “Historial” “as a midpoint between history and memorial, between the academy and public commemoration, or (following Halbwachs) between cold, dispassionate, precise history and warm, evocative, messy memory.”<sup>26</sup> There remain many traces of Rougeron’s work at Péronne. The one that arguably best embodied Rougeron’s vision was the statue of a *poilu*, which was destined “to be placed in a transparent telephone booth, and through a simple water-circulating system... was to be made to endure eternally the rain of the Somme.”<sup>27</sup> It now enjoys a much sunnier spot adjacent to the café de l’Historial.

If there were initially few objects available to illustrate the history of the war, the Historial project at least benefitted from one important advantage: a striking home. Henri Ciriani, a Peruvian-born architect, was chosen by the département in 1987 (he later oversaw a second building project, that yielded temporary exhibition space also). In the interim, the Péronne project was added to the list of “Grands projets du Président en province.”<sup>28</sup> The building created by Ciriani fit perfectly with the emerging vision of the museum. Jay Winter has lauded



Photo by author

**The statue of a lonely *poilu*, now located adjacent to the museum café.**

Ciriani’s design, remarking: “Its simplicity, its use of clear, straight lines and arcs, its purity were clearly distancing devices. No pseudo-realism here; no sounds, no voices, no mimetic recreation, no appeals to the familiar and the comforting. Instead we have a museum which enables people to quietly contemplate...a cruel and violent moment in the past...without being told that they can share the ‘experience.’”<sup>29</sup> The layout was straightforward. It consisted of a central hall with four large display rooms and a small cinema radiating from the central hub. Salle 1 was dedicated to the prewar period; Salle 2 covered 1914-16; Salle 3, with its curving display cases meant to symbolize the gathering pace of violence examined 1916-18; and Salle

4 was dedicated to the postwar era.<sup>30</sup>

A critical decision was made at this time to establish a research centre in advance of the museum. At a historical conference convened in Péronne in 1989 which brought historians from as far afield as the US and Australia, Jay Winter “convinced Lejeune that a museum without a research centre would atrophy. Dust would settle on exhibits which reflected one moment of scholarship, bypassed by students and colleagues bringing new approaches and sources to bear on our understanding of the Great War.”<sup>31</sup> The decision to establish a research centre before the inauguration of the museum was momentous. By creating a space where experts from around the world could gather, those leading the Historial project were creating a sort of *atelier* and were signalling their intent to bring history and memory into contact once again.

As in any large scale project whose gestation extends over many years, changes in personnel take place. Gerard Rougeron eventually left after a falling out with representatives of the Conseil. It fell to others to finalize the museography. After a competition which saw three firms prepare briefs, Adeline Rispal and her Société Repérages were selected to complete the work. There were a number of innovative elements to the museographical design proposed by Repérages. It was clear that this group was the most successful in taking into account the realities of the space they would occupy and the themes that appeared to be emerging. The Repérages submission stressed that designers would need to “take account of the intensity and orientation of natural light” and the Repérages team was



**At the Historial, abundant space and light and the absence of sound effects are meant to encourage close attention to the artifacts on display and to prompt questions rather than furnish answers.**

convinced that it was best to “[b]anish all sham representations” in the new museum.<sup>32</sup>

Rispaal and company had less than two years to finish their work. As a result, they wisely decided to revive relations with the historians associated with the project, most notably through a number of working meetings with the executive of the research centre. The notes from these meetings offer a fascinating glimpse into how the museum truly began to take shape. The first thing that strikes the reader is the breadth of consultation undertaken. In addition to representatives of Repérages, the discussions involved Robert Levy, a philosopher engaged as a consultant

by Rispaal, as well as representatives of the research centre (Jean-Jacques Becker, Gerd Krumeich, Jay Winter, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker), key museum staff (the first curator, Hugues Hairy, as well as Jean-Pierre Thierry) and a representative of the Conseil (Jacques Gronnier). There also appeared to be a remarkable democracy at work, with the interventions of more junior scholars like Annette Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau weighing just as heavily as those of their senior colleagues.<sup>33</sup>

It is absorbing to see how quickly certain historiographical points came to the fore in discussions. At a meeting held on 14 August 1990, the

historians were already emphasizing that this would be a museum about “what the history of the 20th century owes to the war 1914.” It was also going to be a museum that focused on “*mentalités* [and] collective cultures.” These principles are not necessarily shocking. However, others that were articulated were more in advance of contemporary orthodoxy. Thus, Audoin-Rouzeau spoke in order to “underline the investment of populations, civil as much as military, in the war” and emphasized the recruitment of children in particular. Even the concept of “brutalization,” a theme that would figure prominently in the war culture controversy, arose in these earliest meetings.<sup>34</sup>

It is true that there were many points of agreement in these deliberations. But there were also points of friction. For example, Hairy and his staff fretted over their ability to effectively highlight objects of varying sizes in the special display cases designed to show off the Historial's holdings. There was also disagreement surrounding the smaller items among the soldiers' necessities destined for display in the rectangular dugouts planned for each room. Rispal stressed that these tiny items could not make their full contribution to the overall impression "except in the middle of the ensemble" and maintained that an exhaustive list of contents was unnecessary.<sup>35</sup> An even more famous incident took place among the historians regarding whether it was best to place the phrase "German atrocities" in quotation marks. After extended discussion, the matter was deferred and, to the recollection of one participant at least, never adequately settled.<sup>36</sup> These incidents go to show the complexity of the collaboration being undertaken. To return to this paper's organizing metaphor, there were times when the truce across national and vocational lines, or between the forces of history and memory, appeared fragile. However, there were others when it held firm, as with the strategic placement of the cinema so as to ensure that its filmic biography of British veteran Harry Fellowes was a key moment in the visit of each visitor to the Historial.<sup>37</sup>

One fact was inescapable: the collaboration between historians and museum professionals had many advantages. On the one hand, the historians could ensure that there was a thematic continuity throughout the museum and that the most recent historiographical trends were reflected in the exhibits at the Historial. On the other hand, Hugues Hairy and his team could focus attention on important objects in their possession in order to put



Photos by Nick Lachance







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**The calm, country setting of the Historial allows the visitor ample time to reflect on the questions raised by the collection**

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flesh on historiographical bones. One of the best examples of allowing the objects to speak for themselves was the addition of the “fosses,” shallow depressions in the museum floor into which soldiers’ belongings and/or equipment were placed. Rispal herself has emphasized the significance of these spaces, and of the artifacts “which offer testimony to the resistance of the men at the front.”

These were “so many proofs of the extraordinary resources of humans in the most desperate situations.”<sup>38</sup>

The positioning of these fosses – in the floors of the rooms in which they were set up – was not without risks. They were filled with precious and often fragile objects and so there was concern among the curatorial staff that visitors might fall in or that objects might be damaged

or stolen. However, the value of the experiment far outweighed any potential hazards. More than one visitor has been struck by the “funereal quality to these rectangular spaces, in which the uniforms of soldiers are out in a pristine manner. The clean, pure, arranged quality of the exhibit undercuts that the visitor is approaching a grave but the unavoidable impulse to look down changes the angle of vision of visitors and arrests their attention.”<sup>39</sup>

The cumulative effect of the decisions made along the way is impressive. The Historial is a museum that “challenges us with the question, how is it possible to represent battle? How is it possible to represent war? The representations which we have chosen do not answer the questions

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**One of the many striking objects contained in the “fosses,” unique features in Salle 2 and 3 that underline the ingenuity and humanity of the men at the front.**

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Photo by author

either fully or directly but challenge the visitor to pose them. This sense of history as an unending interrogation is one of the strengths of the design."<sup>40</sup> Of course, there are visitors who crave answers and so react with disappointment or even anger if these are not forthcoming. Historian Susan Crane, in a fascinating article on memory and museums occasioned by her own visit to an exhibit that defied expectations, writes:

Surely individual museum-goers have the right to expect to be educated, since this is part of their desire to visit the museum. And yet, just as surely, it cannot be assumed that education has not transpired, even if the visitor exits angry or feels defrauded. Part of the educational intention of the curators...was to ask visitors to think about how knowledge is constructed, both by curators and by the audience. By challenging visitor expectations, and therefore the memories associated with previous museum visits, the exhibit offered visitors the opportunity to create new meanings for themselves.<sup>41</sup>

However, it is not simply a matter of challenging memory in this manner. While there was considerable talk (understandably) about the groundbreaking partnership with historians and the way in which innovative historiography influenced the Historial's message, "Peronne can neither dispense with memory nor entirely circumscribe it, and the exclusion of memory from the ostensible discourse of the institution makes its reappearance in critical and popular responses all the more

striking."<sup>42</sup> The transaction taking place in the Historial's capacious setting was more complex than perhaps even the experts had guessed.

### The Impact of the Historial

The Historial project had been, from its inception, ambitious in scope. It sought to: end hostilities between the groups responsible for nurturing French understanding of the war; amass a collection of

artifacts and make that collection the star in a ground breaking, trilingual, cultural approach to the conflict; and, in the process, integrate history and memory in a way previously unknown in the museum world of France.

The early reaction to Péronne was encouraging. Typical of the response was a piece written by Dominique Kalifa of *Libération*, which observed that the Historial was unique because "it was born of a firm commitment to



One of the more infamous examples of wartime propaganda. The colour version of this poster shows blood dripping from the soldier's bayonet and fingertips and the word "Hun" is written in the same colour of red.



a comparative approach...this war could not be understood without comparing multiple perspectives and interpretations."<sup>43</sup> While not everyone shared this assessment,<sup>44</sup> the general response to the museum *was* favourable. The public seemed caught up in the excitement also. In excess of 38,000 visitors came in its first three months of operation, though the tally for its first full year of operation was a more modest 65,000 visitors.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, the research centre, which had been operating since September 1989, began to convene conferences and produce works that influenced the historiography of the war. In the first five years of its

existence, the Historial was involved in mounting conferences with themes such as: "War and cultures" (1992); "Mobilizing for Total War: Society and State in Europe 1914-1918" (Dublin, 1993); "The Outbreak of War in 1914" (1994); "War and Transformations" (Trieste, 1995); "The Battle of the Somme in the Great War" (1996); and "The History of the Great War, Does It Need Archaeology?" (1997).<sup>46</sup> During the same period a number of works produced by specialists associated with Péronne were published. These included *Guerre et cultures 1914-1918* and *14-18: La très Grande Guerre*, both published in 1994.<sup>47</sup> This activity quickly established Péronne as

a major centre of production for scholarship on the Great War.

As the Historial's scholarly output mounted, a new historiographical approach emerged that eventually was christened the Péronniste school. Its roots lay in the groundbreaking work of George Mosse in *Fallen Soldiers*.<sup>48</sup> The unique element here was the flipping of the traditional idea that the Great War had produced war culture in favour of the conviction that an emerging war culture had fuelled the Great War. Another characteristic element of this approach was its expansiveness. One all embracing definition of war culture was that it was "the field of all the representations of the war

forged by contemporaries; of all the representations that they construed for themselves of this immense trial, first during the war, then after it."<sup>49</sup>

Despite the historiographical resources marshalled in defence of the "war culture" thesis, however, it was not universally approved. The *poilu* was a much revered figure in public memory and controversy soon arose over the extent to which soldiers in the First World War were willing participants in the carnage around them. One of the central tenets of the war culture thesis was that, over the course of the conflict, average people, both at the front and back home, became acclimatized to the ever mounting demands of Total War and to the violence that resulted. Indeed, the *Péronnistes* argued that civil and military populations *consented* to the violence in the name of national defence. This was a claim that struck some as odd, coming from an institution that proudly proclaimed its European credentials.

It was at this moment that the power of memory asserted itself strongly once again. In November 1998, as the 80th anniversary of the conclusion of the First World War was being marked, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin delivered a speech in which he sympathized with those soldiers who, "exhausted by attacks doomed in advance, refused to be sacrificed" and mutinied in 1917; he also expressed the fervent desire that these men "would be reintegrated into our national collective memory."<sup>50</sup> As Leonard Smith subsequently observed, "The claim was somewhat disingenuous, given that some 49 soldiers executed as a result of the mutinies had never left national memory, as indicated by their sporadic but continued appearance in books and films."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the incident galvanized those who believed that the consent thesis was misguided. For these scholars, consent "amounted to little

more than nationalist coercion under another name."<sup>52</sup> The controversy thus crystallized around the terms consent and coercion.

The disagreement intensified with publication of Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker's landmark *14-18: Retrouver la guerre* in 2000. The authors' aim was more to summarize a decade of new analysis than break new ground. The book was interpreted, and criticized, however, as a manifesto. Even Antoine Prost, by no stretch of the imagination an enemy of *Péronne*, penned a review that included a number of criticisms, entitled "La Guerre de 1914 n'est pas perdue." An important issue that reappeared in this historiographical debate was the relative merits of eyewitness accounts. One of the errors that Prost attributed to Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker was that "they contented themselves with a poorly supported condemnation of Norton Cru and with a disqualification of the principle of 'the tyranny of eyewitness accounts.'"<sup>53</sup>

For their part, many of the *Péronnistes* felt that they were simply providing a corrective. Great War scholarship was in danger of fetishizing the *poilu*, memory was threatening to overwhelm history. Thus, in a 2004 interview conducted with *L'Express*, Audoin-Rouzeau inveighed against the tendency to see the soldiers of the Great War as victims:

We are in the midst of a "contest of victims." In November 1998, the Mayor of Craonne welcomed Lionel Jospin for a celebration of the 80th anniversary of 1918 and declared: "'On the Chemin des Dames the first unpunished crime against humanity was produced.'"...He ignored that the Armenian genocide had taken place previously, in 1915. Not to mention the massacre of the Herero, in present day Namibia, which was perpetrated on the explicit order of the German

command, and which resulted in the elimination of 80% of their population between 1904 and 1906. Never mind; *Le Monde* reproduced his words without any qualification whatsoever... Somehow, the trenches have been rapidly transformed into extermination camps.<sup>54</sup>

Christophe Prochasson, another prominent historian associated with the Historial, asked rhetorically "Is the *poilu* not the perfect republican victim...?" He further noted that truces, which were rare events indeed, were frequently cited as "proof of a generalized rejection of war against the consent thesis."<sup>55</sup>

By this time there was an official opposition to the *Péronnistes*. Dissatisfaction with the consent theory of the Great War had coalesced around the Collectif de Recherche et de Débat International sur la guerre de 1914-1918 [CRID], established on 12 November 2005 and functioning on the basis of "official statutes, internal regulations and a scientific charter."<sup>56</sup> Discord between the two camps escalated with the approach of the 90th anniversary of the cessation of hostilities in 2008. The opponents of the *Péronniste* school were furious when President Sarkozy selected Jean-Jacques Becker to head a team of academics consulting on how to commemorate the anniversary. This appeared to be sanctioning the view of history propounded by the Historial.

When the Becker Report was published, it seemed informed by the view of history operative at the Historial. The committee began by asserting that "The point of departure, which oriented its reflections was the following: it is not a matter of celebrating the victory of 1918, but the end of the last war that was essentially of a European order, even if that war *had some important repercussions in the world.*"<sup>57</sup> This admission underlines the fact

that the committee was operating in a specific, contemporary context: the celebration of the European Union. Becker himself reaffirmed this when he said, in a later interview "The war of 1914-1918 was a war between Europeans, even though the participation of other countries gave it a worldwide impact; however, paradoxically, when it ended, it was the point of departure for the construction of Europe, even if that began to really take shape after the Second World War."<sup>58</sup> This seems a slightly skewed reading of interwar diplomacy. The attempts at détente embodied by foreign ministers Chamberlain, Briand and Stresemann of Britain, France and Germany respectively during the Locarno era were acts of traditional diplomacy motivated primarily by national self-interest; Locarno was more a false dawn than anything else.<sup>59</sup>

The advocates of the coercion school were predictably unhappy with the recommendations of the Becker Report. They noted that, on the one hand, Becker wished to celebrate the new Europe. However, on the other he wanted to honour the choice of combatants to fight in defence of their homeland. As one critic put it, "this commemoration is a means of celebrating reconciliation between European nations while also praising national duty and the just combat undertaken by soldiers for the triumph of democracy: on the one hand they want to celebrate peace and on the other a war that was just."<sup>60</sup>

The critics of Péronne accused their opponents of ignoring the social context in which the soldiers at the front (and civilians) operated. A piece in the online journal *La Vie des idées* in December 2008 suggested that "The story of each combatant is not simply their singular personal story; connected and comparable to those of other soldiers, they are embedded in a social context social that strongly

determines it." The authors went on to advocate for greater quantitative analysis of veteran accounts of their experiences in order to "go beyond psychological judgements regarding the choices made by individuals."<sup>61</sup>

In the pages of this same journal Audoin-Rouzeau responded angrily, first attacking the competence of his critics to even discuss these matters. He refused to be taken to task "by researchers who, as a result of their discipline or their period of specialization...have never seen a single archive issuing from the period 1914-1918. Are we not at the limit of deception here?"<sup>62</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau then finished with an attack on his adversaries' insularity, decrying "their solitude franco-française, their obsession with French soldiers – with the French mutineers... their ignorance of the international dimension of the war... Contrary to their acronym, nothing is less international than this 'collective.'"<sup>63</sup> The mounting violence of the language being used on both sides prompted a report in *Le Monde* that claimed that the field of First World War studies in France "resembles a veritable battlefield" that featured "fortified colloquia, and editorial ambushes, academic assassinations and targeted reports."<sup>64</sup> This was only a slight exaggeration.

### Beyond the War Culture controversy

More recently, the seas have calmed somewhat with respect to the war culture debate. Adjustments of perspective have been made, rhetoric has cooled and invitations to conferences have been extended across party lines. Even more tellingly, some have expressed the belief that the controversy has outlived its usefulness. Pierre Purseigle, himself a former recipient of a bursary from the Historial, has argued that in "crystallizing artificial oppositions, this very French

controversy over the 'war culture' may well have hampered the progress of First World War scholarship."<sup>65</sup>

Purseigle has expressed reservations about the positions assumed by both camps. He does admit that "By refuting the notion that the experience of the conflict was solely one of victimization, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker argue against the grain of collective memory and adopt...a legitimate and necessary stance" but he also adds that "if historians are bound to lose this battle, as they seem to imply, should they content themselves with their splendid isolation?"<sup>66</sup> As for CRID, Purseigle notes that, despite their protestations of attachment to a scientific approach that clearly separated history and memory, "CRID members chose to establish their group and hold their meeting at Craonne, an iconic site in the pacifist memory of the war. In so doing, they appropriated what may be seen as the 'anti-Verdun' in order to reject consensual and patriotic narratives."<sup>67</sup> Purseigle also holds that, though parties on all sides claim fidelity to a transnational perspective on the war, comparative projects have been rare. Finally, returning to the ossification of positions in the consent/coercion debate, he suggests that researchers would be well advised to "focus on the process of legitimation of the war effort, and account for the resilience of the belligerent societies by encompassing the cultural determinants of mobilization and the mechanisms of social domination."<sup>68</sup> This would offer a via media between the consent and coercion schools of thought.

That a respected young scholar, nurtured by the Historial, could envision a compromise of this sort augurs well for the future. It suggests that a durable peace between the forces of history and memory might be in the offing. But just at the moment when hope of a synthesis between historiographical schools

was rising, a fresh challenge appeared on the horizon. In November 2011, a new First World War museum was opened at Meaux in the Seine et Marne region. In a powerful weaving together of history and memory, the new museum was officially opened by President Sarkozy on Remembrance Day. Its birth has occasioned concern among supporters of the Péronniste reading of the Great War. In many ways, Meaux represents a return to more traditional ways of comprehending the conflict. The museum's website lauds its "attractive and innovative scenography" and promises, among other things, a "reconstruction of a battlefield." It boasts the full arsenal of technological enhancements available to museum professionals – including visual projections, sound effects and interactive terminals – and it boasts of "[playing] with the senses of the visitor."<sup>69</sup> Meaux is worlds away from the cool, almost antiseptic environment of Péronne. Its hallmarks are experience rather than reflection, simulation rather than representation, information rather than interrogation.

In the grey pre-dawn of 26 December 1914, the last haunting chords of *Stille Nacht* drifted into the distance. The men, coopers and concierges, tailors and tellers, fathers of three and teenagers just out of school, looked at one another, said their good-byes with forced cheerfulness and made the long, slow walks back to their holes. Tomorrow, the battle would begin again. The struggle between history and memory in the interpretation of the Great War in France appears to be no less enduring than their struggle a century ago.

## Notes

1. This final phrase, from which this article takes its title, was also the title of journalist Michael Jürgs highly successful

- German work investigating the Christmas Truce, *Der Kleine Frieden im Grossen Krieg* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 2003). For English analysis of how the truce was received, see Malcolm Brown "Introduction," in Marc Ferro, et al., *Meeting in No Man's Land: Christmas 1914 and Fraternalization in the Great War* (London: Constable, 2007), pp.1-8 and Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918, The Live and Let Live System* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), pp.24-28.
2. Geoff Eley, "The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory, and the Contemporary," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no.3 (2011), p.556. For the memory boom, see also Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp.276-278.
3. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.38.
4. Pierre Nora, "General Introduction: Between Memory and History" in *Realms of Memory* vol. 1 trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.1.
5. Pierre Nora, "Preface to the English Language Edition," *Realms of Memory*, xvii.
6. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, vol. I, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), p.443. See also Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), pp.9-10.
7. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.6 [emphasis added].
8. Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead, Berks: Open University Press, 2006), p.138.
9. *Ibid.*, pp.140, 141.
10. Dominique Viéville and Marie-Hélène Joly, "Problématique du colloque," in Marie-Hélène Joly and Thomas Compère-Morel, eds., *Des musées d'histoire pour l'avenir* (Paris: Noësis, 1998), p.14.
11. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.83.
12. Daniel J. Sherman "Objects of Memory: History and Narrative in French War Museums," *French Historical Studies* 19, no.1 (Spring 1995), p.54. Interestingly, 1917 also saw the creation of the Imperial War Museum [IWM] in Britain, under the leadership of Sir Alfred Mond. The IWM has frequently been contrasted to the Historial. Its approach to making sense of war differs greatly from what has evolved in Péronne, most notably when it comes to mimesis.
13. Sherman, "Objects of Memory," p.56.
14. Lejeune held his seat for Abbeville in the Assembly from 1936 until 1977 (save during World War II). He served as Senator for the Somme and was, for 40 years beginning in 1947, Mayor of Abbeville (see Douglas Johnson, "Obituary: Max Lejeune," *The Independent*, 25 November 1995). Jay Winter has painted a moving portrait of a man who was motivated in his efforts to build a site dedicated to the war by the memory of his father, "an ancien combattant of the Battle of the Somme, who had returned from the war a troubled man." See Jay Winter, *Remembering War*, pp.41-42.
15. Florence Albaret, "Historial de Péronne: histoire d'un musée d'histoire" (thèse sous la direction de Prof. Krzyztof Pomian, École du Louvre, 1998), p.19.
16. "Extraits du Dossier Programme, Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne Somme" (1986-1987), 1, Archives de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne [hereafter AH].
17. "Christian de la Simone à Didier Boucart, Directeur Général de l'Administration Départementale, le 27 mai 1986" in AH, Carton Rougeron 1988.
18. "Extraits du Dossier Programme, p.6.
19. The language is Winter's, see Winter, *Remembering War*, p.41.
20. "Historial de la Grande Guerre," p.4 in AH, Muséographie Rougeron. This list is fascinating as it includes a) in Simkins, an individual from the IWM, an institution from which the creators of the Historial sought to distance themselves museographically and b) in Pedrocini, an historian whose work was cited by those who would later criticize the war culture theory developed by those associated with the Historial.
21. "Becker à Rougeron le 26 novembre 1986" in AH, Muséographie Rougeron.
22. "Krumeich à Rougeron le 20 novembre 1986" in AH, Muséographie Rougeron.
23. For a fuller list of works treating the First World War, see Pierre Purseigle, "A very French debate: the 1914-1918 'war culture'" in *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1, no.1 (2008), p.9.
24. Rougeron, *Rapport d'activité 1987*, pp.9-10.
25. One coup was the purchase of the van Treeck Collection. It included some 500 posters, 100,000 postcards, 100 press clippings, 30,000 vignettes, 200 books, 300 decorations, 300 bank notes from various countries and 800 stamps. Another key acquisition was a set of Otto Dix eaux fortes, which came to Péronne through Gerd Krumeich. See Albaret, "Historial de Péronne," p.36.
26. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.224. Daniel Sherman insists that Historial was a contraction of histoire and pictorial, see Sherman, "Objects of Memory," p.65.
27. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.224. Rougeron's idea is especially interesting given the debate that would rage over the extent to which poilus were portrayed as victims during the war culture controversy.
28. Henri Ciriani, "L'Historial de la Grande Guerre à Péronne," *Le Moniteur Architecture* 34 (septembre 1992), p.12.

29. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.226. Gerard Rougeron had expressed his disdain for mimesis much earlier, stating, for example, that he had avoided audio commentary so as not to "provoke the hypnotism of the visitor, the classic comportment in museums, which always arouses a certain depression upon the return to reality as well as passivity or disinterest during the visit." See Rougeron, *Histoire de la Grande Guerre: Avant projet d'aménagement intérieur*, 4 in AH Carton Muséographie 1988-89 Rougeron + Projet Ciriani.
30. See Thomas Compère-Morel, *L'Historial de la Grande Guerre et le Circuit de souvenir* (Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 2000).
31. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.225.
32. "Extraits du Concours de Maîtrise d'oeuvre muséographique, Dossier-programme," 27 avril 1990, p.2 in AH.
33. More than one participant has credited Gronnier with providing the necessary diplomatic skills to keep discussions on track. Interview with Adeline Rispal, 24 September 2012.
34. "Compte-rendu de la réunion historique 14 août 1990," pp.2, 3 in AH, carton Repérages 1990-1992.
35. "Compte-rendu de la réunion historique le 7 septembre 1990," p.3 in AH, carton Repérages 1990-1992.
36. "Quelles perspectives pour les musées de l'histoire de l'Europe" (intervention de C. Fontaine)," p.3 in Dossier Association internationale des musées d'histoire, AH 92-95 Presse Historial.
37. "Compte-rendu de la réunion historique le 7 septembre 1990," p.5 in AH, carton Repérages 1990-1992.
38. Adeline Rispal, "La muséographie de l'historial de la Grande Guerre," in Joly et Compère Morel, *Des Musées d'Histoire*, p.180.
39. Winter, *Remembering War*, pp.228-229. It is true that these features may have been over-thought. The minutes of one meeting record a conversation to the effect that the first British fosse should be placed so as to remind the visitor of "the later engagement of the British in the conflict ("Compte-rendu de la réunion historique le 12 septembre, 1990," p.7 in AH, carton Repérages 1990-1992). It is highly doubtful that the average visitor would perceive this subtle difference in placement, let alone make the leap to connecting this with the reluctant entry of Britain into the war.
40. Winter, *Remembering War*, p.226.
41. Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no.4 (December 1997), p.45.
42. Sherman, "Objects of Memory," p.66.
43. Dominique Kalifa, "Le gout de la guerre," *Libération*, le 2 mars 1993.
44. Some of the more common criticisms included the lack of legends for some objects, the absence of seats and plans of the museum, and text that was too small to be read easily. More significantly the last room "was deemed to be disappointing compared to the others" and the "problem of the new architecture juxtaposed next to the old" was raised. Finally, most interestingly, a number of visitors were upset by "the sobriety of the Historial, which did not permit an adequate representation of the horror of war." The museum was deemed to be "too clean to be true." See Albaret, "Historial de Péronne," pp.48-49.
45. "Statistiques Frèmentation, 1992-2010." I am indebted to Mme Caroline Fontaine of the Research Centre for procuring for me these figures.
46. Albaret, "Historial de Péronne," pp.28, 29.
47. Jean-Jacques Becker, Jay Winter, Gerd Krumeich, Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Guerre et cultures 1914-1918* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1994) and *14-18: La très Grande Guerre* (Paris : Le Monde édition, 1994).
48. Elise Julien, "A propos de l'historiographie Française de la première guerre Mondiale" *Labyrinthe* (printemps-été 2004), p.54.
49. S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, "Violence et consentement: la 'culture de guerre' du première conflit mondial," in J-P. Rioux and J-F. Sirinelli, eds., *Pour une histoire culturelle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997), p.252.
50. Lionel Jospin "Ces soldats fusillés pour l'exemple" 5 November 1998; cited on the Inathèque website, <<http://www.ina.fr/presidentielles/phrases-cultes/video/I09083554/lionel-jospin-ces-soldats-fusilles-pour-l-exemple.fr.html>>.
51. Leonard Smith, "The 'Culture de guerre' and French Historiography of the Great War of 1914-1918," *History Compass* 5, no.6 (2007), p.1973. For a more detailed analysis of the Jospin controversy see, Leonard Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.186-8.
52. Smith, "French Historiography", 1974.
53. Antoine Prost, "La guerre de 1914 n'est pas perdue," *Le Mouvement social* 199 (April-June 2002), p.96
54. Christian Makarian, "Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau : 14-18 est l'invention de la guerre totale," *L'Express*, le 8 novembre 2004.
55. Christophe Prochasson, "Les enjeux mémoriels de l'historiographie de la Grande Guerre: Analyse d'une controverse française," Colloque "Expériences et mémoire : partager en français la diversité du monde" (Bucarest, septembre 2006), pp.3, 5.
56. "À propos du CRID 14-18,"; available at <[http://www.crid1418.org/a\\_propos/a\\_propos\\_ini.html](http://www.crid1418.org/a_propos/a_propos_ini.html)>. The emphasis on the credentials of those in the organization is significant because its members – especially those who were veterans or school teachers – felt a lack of respect from their adversaries.
57. *Rapport de la Commission "Becker" Pour la commémoration du 90ème anniversaire de 1918, 19 décembre 2007*, p.2 (emphasis added).
58. "Interview de Jean-Jacques Becker," *Les Chemins de la Mémoire* 180 (février 2008). This sentiment is echoed by the Historial's first curator, see Hugues Hairy, "L'Inauguration de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre à Péronne," *La Revue du Louvre* 4 (1992), p.20.
59. See Peter Farrugia, "French Anti-War Thought, 1919-1939, Contrasted to Its British Counterpart" (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1991), pp.113-117.
60. "Autour du chemin des Dames," available at <<http://chemindesdames.blogspot.ca/2008/01/commemorations-de-1918-une-marche-arriere.html>>.
61. François Buton, André Loez, Nicolas Mariot, Philippe Olivera, "1914-1918: retrouver la controverse," in *La Vie des Idées*, 10 décembre 2008, p.8.
62. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Controverse ou polémique?" *La Vie des Idées*, 5 février 2009, p.2.
63. Ibid.
64. Jean Birnbaum, "1914-1918, guerre de tranchées entre historiens," *Le Monde*, 10 mars 2006.
65. Purseigle, "A very French debate," p.13.
66. Ibid., p.12.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p.13.
69. Musée de la Grande Guerre du Pays de Meaux, "Exposition permanente"; available at <<http://www.museedelagrandeguerre.eu/expositions>>.

Dr. Peter Farrugia is associate professor of history and founding coordinator (2005-2011) of the interdisciplinary Contemporary Studies program at the Brantford campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. His current research interests include war and society, and the interplay of history and memory. Dr. Farrugia edited and contributed a chapter to *The River of History: Trans-National and Trans Disciplinary Perspectives on the Immanence of the Past* (University of Calgary Press, 2005). His most recent publication is "Convenient Truths: History, Memory, and Identity in Brantford, Ontario," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 46, no.2, pp. 122-152. He is working on a comparative study of the interpretation of the Great War at the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne France and the Imperial War Museum in London England.