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Reviving the Legacy of World War I

Students research what Americans remember and have forgotten about the Great War



February 13, 2015 | Kevin Terbush '15

BRISTOL, R.I. – When reflecting upon World War I, it's most common for Americans to recall soldiers bogged down in muddy trenches for weeks or months at a time and to picture the gas masks worn by troops and civilians in the advent of fighting with deadly gases.

In fact, there was far more to the war than endless trench battles and chemical warfare.

That's according to Tori Bodozian and Kellie Dean, students at Roger Williams who, as part of a collaborative Honors Program project, researched the legacy of the century-old Great War. This generic recollection seemed to plague Europeans as well, the sophomores noted while studying abroad last summer in London and Paris.

The Battle of the Masurian Lakes is a great example – a fast-paced campaign fought over 70 miles of Russian soil, the victory for the Allies served as a major turning point in the Eastern Front.

They had to dig into historical texts to unearth this piece of history; within popular culture, Dean and Bodozian could not find anything noting the battle. Much of the war conducted in the Eastern Front has faded from memory, they concluded, replaced by images from the Western Front.

On Feb. 4, Dean, a math major, and Bodozian, a visual arts major, presented their research – “Forgetting the Past: A Discussion of the Myth and National Memory of WW-I” – in the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center in the Roger Williams University Library.

Launching the presentation by asking what audience members remember about WW-I, the students received responses they had expected – trenches and mustard gas. When Dean asked if anyone envisioned thousands of soldiers mobilizing quickly and advancing hundreds of miles into enemy territory, there was silence in the room.

These images are how many people remember the war. Dean and Bodozian explained – the battle lines along France and Belgium that remained stationary and claimed thousands of lives comprise much of the collective memory of the war for Americans and Europeans alike.

“There’s no one left alive who remembers the war,” Bodozian said. “And without direct contact, there’s a loss of interest.”

The centennial of America’s entry into the war will be marked in 2017, and Dean and Bodozian said they fear apathy among the public reaction to the anniversary. While there may be a spotlight on a morning news channel, or a moment of silence dedicated to the memory of the war, the students say it may rekindle interest for a short time before fading even further from memory.

Counteracting this effect will require better education in schools, they concluded. For Dean, she remembers “quickly glazing over World War I history in grade school” and never again returning to the topic until college.