

Introduction

Revival After The First World War: Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform

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2018 marked the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918. Ironically, “the war that would end all wars” turned out to be a war whose end was long anticipated but “that failed to end” nevertheless.¹ For some, the end of the war was already in sight in 1917: the Russian revolution, the American entry into the war, the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (signed in March 1918 between Germany and Russia) had the potential to turn the tide. Nonetheless, new complexities extended the war by another year. While the conflict was still ongoing and the final offensive came into view, reconstruction was prematurely on the agenda. Concrete initiatives, such as the rebuilding of the first of the burned homes in the “martyred city” of Leuven, anticipated large-scale post-war reconstruction initiatives. At the same time the rhetoric of responsibility, sacrifice, gratitude and economic compensation – that would reach its height in Versailles in 1919 – was already a common trope across the media and civil societies.

The Great War brought about a dramatic and comprehensive political, social and economic disruption. In the 1920s soldiers and civilians alike had to recover, rebuild, repair, reform, while keeping and cultivating – almost compulsively – the memory of that great human disaster of the Great War. The official commemoration of war – ceremonies, cemeteries, monuments – prioritised military casualties. Civilians – the millions of family members of millions of killed soldiers and many others not at all involved in war politics... – have been very much forgotten, if not ignored. Only rarely did commemorative events and war memorials in the 1920s pay attention to them. The same is true for war historiographies, still dealing very much with military power and political tactics as a breeding ground for political regimes that fundamentally did not testify to humanising and civilising intentions. The emergence of a cultural history of the Great War since the 1990s –through the work of research centres such

as the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne (France) and initiatives such as the *International Society for First World War Studies* in 2001 (with the publication of the *First World War Studies* journal since 2010) – explicitly extended “war studies” from the strictly political and military to a global and comparative perspective on the war and its international consequences, thus substantially expanding the scope of research in chronological, geographic and topical terms. The present publication is another testimony to these research reorientations, with “distinctive approaches and perspectives” and “without preconceived chronological, geographical or topical constraints”, focusing above all on the recovery of daily life in all its facets against the background of major political, economic and societal transformations.²

History: past and present

The First World War set off a war machine that threatened never to stop and eventually never really did. The breakthrough of a brutal militaristic culture, in combination with a radical nationalism and revolutionary violence, remains a crucial legacy of the First World War.³ The revanchist spirit in countries which had lost the war – or those countries that believed that they did not get their fair share in the peace settlements – and the violence that accompanied the transition from war to peace in many parts of the world were in more than one way accountable for the rise of aggressive dictatorships that eventually led to the Second World War.⁴ Yet, historians have stressed the complexity of the relationship between the First and the Second World Wars and pointed rather at the importance of factors such as imperialism and geopolitics.⁵

When assessing the post-war era, one should not overlook the fact that the First World War also occasioned a strong dissemination of international cooperation that favoured a peaceful, tolerant and non-violent attitude, aiming at a humanitarian solution for conflicts in the future. But these new or renewed international movements were also confronted with nationalist and authoritarian ideologies and regimes. It is safe to say that international solidarity regularly came under pressure with the erosion of post-war democratisation processes as a consequence.⁶ The war was not just the cause of such disruption; the constant threat of further armed conflicts and military violence across Europe and beyond also continued to hamper society’s recovery in the 1920s in a context that remained particularly fragile and uncertain.⁷ The economic crisis from 1929 onwards further brought whatever recovery had been achieved to a de facto standstill. An international debt crisis, massive unemployment, impoverishment and aggravated political unrest further fed the ongoing struggle to survive between one crisis and the next and created an ideal breeding ground for another

war. In parallel to that, European colonial powers were already confronted, in the 1920s, with worldwide independence movements that finally led to the definitive loss of their “colonial possessions” after the Second World War. Also, the construction of the post-colonial world and the decolonisation of minds and politics can be considered a difficult and still ongoing process to rebuild, remember, repair and reform.⁸

The global political consequences of more than a few issues that emerged during or after the First World War are still palpable today. Nevertheless, the official commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armistice – at least in Western Europe⁹ – was still predominantly the expression of “a no longer contested friendship between European nations”. However, in that friendly atmosphere of commemoration “more delicate issues [were] rarely touched upon”, such as the role of the First World War in sustaining European imperialism and colonialism.¹⁰ We could, to cite only one example, refer to the global political consequences of the Sykes-Picot treaty of 1916 and its significance for the making of the modern Middle East after the Second World War, to understand its ultimate impact on the contemporary problems in the region and worldwide, “to understand that at least a few of the issues raised but not solved by the Great War and its immediate aftermath are still with us today”.¹¹

Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform

When considering the ravages wrought by war, material rebuilding or reconstruction is often the first thing that comes to mind. Bricks and mortar are the tangible prerequisites and thus the starting point for a wider process of societal recovery and revival of daily life in all its aspects: housing, healthcare, education, labour and leisure, culture We like to think of the post-war era as an era of “reconstruction”, as rebuilding is probably the most perceptible result of that process. In the first instance, this notion of reconstruction refers to the rebuilding or reassembling of something demolished or broken – as in a building or a city, but also in relation to the human body (think of reconstructive surgery). Another meaning of the word is of course “to re-create or reimagine (something from the past)”, with the aim of gaining an “accurate understanding” of a particular occurrence, event or process: history as (re-)construction, as constructed narrative.¹² This reconstruction is usually based on thorough research of physical evidence and source material, an activity in which those involved in historical research have special interest and skill. So, when we speak of “reconstruction” in relation to the post-war era, we speak not only of buildings, but also of bodies and of narratives, processes, practices and events that can be uncovered by historical research. The editors chose to streamline these issues along thematic lines of action. The already long tradition of “reconstruction history”,

mainly as part of architectural and urban historiography, is used as a blueprint. Accordingly, next to the topic of “Rebuild” the themes of “Repair”, “Remember” and “Reform” are taken as anchor points in this volume. These particular fields of action are all essential to the overall societal recovery after total disruption through war; to its reactivation, reanimation, restoration, *reveil*, renaissance, rehabilitation, revivification, revitalisation, to its... revival.

“Reconstruction architecture” and actual post-war planning and building have been the subject of ample academic research.¹³ The latter shows that the war was not only a serious dislocation of industrial society, but was also seen as a challenge and unique opportunity for architects, urban planners and industries. The war functioned as an accelerator for new policies and practices for urban planning.¹⁴ These “new” pathways were often based on principles that had already germinated before the war, but for different reasons had not blossomed. Rebuilding meant creating a solid material infrastructure that would not only allow society’s restoration but also stimulate future-orientated social progress and profound modernisation. At the same time, rebuilding was anchored in the present moment and needed to be meaningful for its dramatically dislocated contemporaries. The sight of familiar buildings and cities, and the good and comforting memories they invoked, offered consolation and perspective.

When the armistice was signed, the war did not disappear. It was over but not forgotten. The “past” put a heavy burden on the present and the future.¹⁵ It was felt in almost every daily activity: working, family life, education, leisure activities... Very quickly, a certain kind of “normalcy” had forced itself upon people. But how do you live and rebuild your life with the heavy weight of the war on your shoulders? Commemorative practices in different social and cultural arenas played a massively important role in this. To remember is to recollect, interpret and narrate the past to bring it into the present. Commemoration practices are fixed on the hinges between the past and the present. They are necessitated by the past, shaped through the prisms of the present, and made instrumental for the future. In that respect they strongly resemble the material reconstruction of society. Ever since the publication of seminal works such as Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1972) and Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, sites of Mourning* (1995) memory has been on the agenda of First World War scholars.¹⁶ Recently, stimulated by the development of Memory Studies as a thriving academic field, scholars have started to investigate the ways in which the war has been commemorated, remembered and represented in terms of mediated memory or post-memory.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the first scholarship on memories “a hundred years on” and the centenary commemorations is being published.¹⁸ It has become almost unthinkable to speak about the post-war period without considering remembrance and commemoration, the bulk of which took place while cities were being rebuilt and landscapes healed. Commemoration practices – religious and civil

ceremonies, inauguration of monuments, pilgrimages – are not restricted to dedicated moments and activities. They are implicitly or explicitly present in people's daily lives, in educational programmes or leisure and cultural activities. All these experiences and practices have to be studied in order to understand how the war influenced and became constitutive of individual and communal identities thereafter, constructing the past in order to prepare for the future.

The scholarly interest in remembrance and commemoration practices is only one emanation of the increasing attention to the more intangible aspects of post-war reconstruction. In recent years, the daily physical and mental, individual and communal experiences of people attempting to reclaim and reconfigure their daily lives in dramatically changed circumstances have been put on the research agenda.¹⁹ The war had caused human suffering on an unprecedented scale and this continued to affect society significantly for many years after: the loss of a substantial, young and male part of the population; the social care for widows and orphans; the re-integration of servicemen and prisoners of war in the community, the family and the workforce; the challenging care for those suffering mental and physical mutilation, etc. Of the innumerable questions triggered by the return and presence of invalid or traumatised soldiers many had to do with the social. How to reintegrate a mutilated man into the family he left in one piece?

Like architectural reconstruction, the political devastation after the Great War was seen as an opportunity to reinvigorate political and social reform, both in countries directly involved in the war and in those which were not. Many political, economic, social and cultural reforms taking shape in the late nineteenth century were drastically halted in 1914. The war affected ongoing change and reform. At the same time the scale, global repercussions and overall impact of the war stimulated renewal and reform once it was over. Despite a profoundly changed context, many pre-war reforms were also taken on again or revived. The book sheds light on how the dislocation of the war as well as the manifold processes of physical, social, political, economic and cultural reconstruction inspired post-war reform in and beyond the former belligerent countries. On the one hand, political discussion and reform frequently revealed nationalist and revanchist tendencies within the societies of the former belligerents. On the other hand, the war led to initiatives aiming at strong international cooperation. The League of Nations and similar initiatives fostered peaceful, tolerant and non-violent attitudes and advocated humanitarian solutions for future conflicts. Recent studies on humanitarianism and the implementation of such policies after the war show how they were increasingly confronted with authoritarian ideologies and political systems.²⁰ Radicalisation, political violence, authoritarianism and populism, imperialism and colonialism put serious pressure on post-war democratisation and reform processes and the international peace movement. These processes were initially successful but soon turned out to be dramatically powerless:

“the war that would end all wars [...] but that ultimately failed to end”, recalling Robert Gerwarth’s conclusion.

In his essay “Experience and Poverty” (1933), the German philosopher Walter Benjamin focused on the condition of loss that marks modernity. An old, authentic mode of inherited experience (*Erfahrung*), passed on from one generation to another through parables and tales, had become fractured by the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of a contemporary society, one propelled by mass-consumed technology. This entanglement of an eroding *Erfahrung* and a rapidly changing *Erlebnis*, Benjamin argued, had reached its zenith with the war of 1914-1918:

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. [...] A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.²¹

Benjamin’s analysis of the complete disjunction between the authentic, yet fractured and quickly eroding *Erfahrung* of the war and the lived *Erlebnis* can be used to unpack the layered phenomenon of post-war “rebuilding”.²² Rebuilding, then, means to build in such a way that it works effectively in its own time and to dialogue, integrate or even evoke modern impulses in the process. Yet, rebuilding can also stand for an attempt to return to the “good” situation before the war. Here, a restorative mode, a desire to embrace *Erfahrung* set the agenda. This double movement of “looking forward” while (sometimes literally) “building on the past” is not limited to material reconstruction, but can be traced in numerous facets of post-war society. From very large social and political reforms through which societies were coming to terms with themselves and with others to more idiosyncratic reforms on the level of, for instance, individual hospitals or schools dealing with traumatised returned soldiers and their families. In this volume we extend this idea of what it means to rebuild a society to remembrance practices, physical and mental recovery of those involved in the war and larger social and political reforms.

The Book: A Social History Without Borders

While the main focus of this book is the post-war era, roughly the 1920s and 1930s, the date this story of recovery begins is not necessarily Armistice Day in 1918, nor

the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. One could argue that the process of repairing, rebuilding and even remembering in (former) war zones took off almost immediately after the war started: ruins were cleared, the first war hospitals opened, emergency housing was built, and the first houses rebuilt, infrastructure repaired, the first provisional monuments erected. Pre-war reforms in all areas, dramatically stopped in 1914, were taken up again already during the war, as far as the extremely difficult conditions allowed. Nevertheless, it was only after the war – when the military action had stopped and international relations had been sufficiently restored – that reconstruction and overall recovery could develop fully and for the better. Along the same lines, the impact of many of the processes and policies analysed in this book extends far beyond the 1930s and the Second World War.²³ More than by a clearly demarcated timeframe, this book is characterised by its focus on issues of recovery and further development, transcending the usual chronological borders.

Not only did the war itself have a considerable impact far beyond the theatres of military fighting in Europe, but so did the post-war developments. While many of the chapters in this book focus on the former belligerents in Western Europe, attention is also paid to how the war played out in regions that were not (or not to the same extent) or were only indirectly involved in and affected by military actions during the war. What kind of influence did the processes of physical, social, political, economic and cultural reconstruction of the 1920s and 1930s or their perception have beyond the former main belligerents and beyond Europe? Whether we want to study the 1920s and 1930s as a period between two wars in which overcoming the first one seamlessly blended into preparing for the next one or we want to assess the 1920s and 1930s as the decades logically following the 1910s will depend among other things on the geographical focus chosen.²⁴

The book explores a variety of developments in society in the 1920s and 1930s worldwide, in relation to the wartime destruction and disruption, and post-war recovery in Europe. “Rebuild”, “Remember”, “Repair” and “Reform” are the sections of this book, hereafter further introduced as to each theme and as to the articles in each section.

Rebuild

The first section of the book defends the idea that the development of a city or building that had been damaged or destroyed lined up with multiple temporalities, like the transition from “*Erfahrung*” to “*Erlebnis*” described by Benjamin. In the essays collected in this section the topics Benjamin pointed at, “fragile bodies” or “annihilated landscapes”, are present, be it sometimes in a more implicit way. Next

to that, the epistemological problem Benjamin raised in “Experience and Poverty”, namely the post-war disconnection with clear stories, left an imprint here as well. As we now know, historians will, despite their tremendous and highly varied efforts, never succeed in turning the war’s massive madness into a unified narrative of what happened and why.²⁵ Or as the historian Lucian Hölscher sharply remarked: can one ever understand the lives of so many people who went through the rupture of the war? Would it therefore not be better, he wondered, to develop a “hermeneutics of non-understanding”, bringing the limits of understanding more sharply into focus?²⁶ The essays in the Rebuild section present surprising entry points for understanding the material rebuilding of a world “in which nothing was the same, except the clouds.”²⁷

If the First World War turned villages, towns and cities into battlefields, their damage and rebuilding are only the visible results of the “complex geographies and temporalities” which intertwined local, national and transnational decisions and policies. In his chapter “Catastrophe and Reconstruction in Western Europe: the urban aftermath of the First World War”, Pierre Purseigle clarifies how discourses of reconstruction oblige historians to “rethink and redefine national projects and identities”. Reconstruction offered an opportunity for an ambitious programme of urban modernisation that he proposes to consider against the background of an all-encompassing narrative of sacrifice and symbols, as well as material and social efforts or political decision making. As there is no single perspective from where this can be written, multiple networks and organisations operating across national boundaries are to be envisaged.

In “Reflections on Leuven as Martyred City and the Realignment of Propinquity”, Richard Plunz is looking over the historian’s horizon for the boundaries between historiography, historical interpretation and contemporary criticism. Forty years ago, this American urban planner and historian wondered about the architectural and urbanistic meaning of the rebuilding of Belgium’s villages and towns after the war. He initiated important research on this, at the time unexplored, topic. Plunz moves from initial interrogations as “why this largest single urban initiative in Europe in the 20th century” was not included “in the canons of 20th century urbanism”, to the question whether this reconstruction could be understood as a “modern project”. The exercise Plunz is undertaking here is to cross temporal and disciplinary borders and to continue to question, if not to re-question, the meaning of urban reconstruction in a contemporary context. Realignment ideals of propinquity, “as key to encouraging diversity”, are today more than relevant in terms of community, space and place. With Sarajevo, Mosul, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and Palmyra in mind, the author wonders “if the most profound remembrance can be to acknowledge that uricide is alive and well”. The rupture Walter Benjamin so powerfully disclosed is definitely not just a faint memory.

In “Making Good Farmers by Making Better Farms: Farmstead Architecture and Social Engineering in Belgium after the Great War”, Dries Claeys and Yves Segers unfold a microstudy of the Flemish village of Merkem and, by doing so, illuminate how the destruction of thousands of farms in the Belgian countryside near the Western Front paired traditional ideas on architecture with social progress and insights gained from the war experience. In “Rebuilding, Recovery, Reconceptualization: Modern Architecture and the First World War”, Volker Welter zooms in on how architects who had served in the trenches reconfigured their ideas on the integration of architecture in landscapes. Welter tells how the modernist architect Richard Neutra (1892-1970) incorporated his battlefield experiences into his plans for the famous 1946 “Kaufmann Desert House” in Palm Springs, California: also in one of the most important examples of international style architecture, the trauma of the old continent loomed. Claeys and Segers contend that the reconstruction of farms not only tried to serve a regionalist mindset by absorbing local materials and traditional typologies, but also wanted to create hygienic, sophisticated production plants. A material restoration went hand in hand with economic modernisation. In sharp contrast to Neutra’s Kaufmann house where the smooth surface had to please one client, the regeneration of local communities stood central in the reconstruction of the Flemish countryside. Despite significant differences, the chapters both demonstrate that the rebuilding process was very often grounded in very directive, now often largely forgotten texts. Segers and Claeys reveal that agronomists’ model books promoted traditional labour divisions under the roof of newly built farms, while Welter teaches us how combat manuals were sublimated in modernist architecture.

The paper by Maarten Liefoghe takes a slightly different stand. Here, the historian is intentionally not considering the indescribable individual sufferings or personal experiences. Liefoghe – as well as Purseigle – looks at the ways war damage is dealt with from an explicitly collective point of view. Both authors explore how cities and local governments, nation-states and international administrative bodies became mediators between the material conditions and the moral wellbeing of larger collectives. In “C’est la beauté de l’ensemble qu’il faut viser. Notes on Changing Heritage Values of Belgian Post World War I Reconstruction Townscapes” [“It’s the beauty of the ensemble one has to keep in mind”], Liefoghe explores how reconstructed cityscapes can have a commemorative ambition and perform as “memorial landscapes”. He points out that post-war reconstructed towns and cities should be seen as “total monuments”, similar to monuments erected to commemorate fallen soldiers. The particular care taken in making rebuilt urban environments look more beautiful than before the destruction is, in Liefoghe’s opinion, to be apprehended as a commemorative aestheticisation: urban beauty was thought suitable to unlock the reconstructed total landscape as a *lieu de mémoire*. Referring to the work of Austrian art historian Alois Riegl – a thinker who had a profound influence on Walter Benjamin – the author acknowledges in

these rebuilt but historicising urban landscapes “intentional-commemorative values”. The same values also play an important role in assessing and valorising the rebuilt cities as heritage today.

Remember

The essays in the “Remember” section of this book look at a variety of practices and experiences aimed at remembering the war as well as at looking forward to the future from the vantage point of the present. Many of these practices took place at the same time as urban planners and architects were (planning) rebuilding the devastated areas, and similar issues were at stake. The commemorative practices described here are shaped by different – often gendered – war experiences and different geographical, political and social spaces. They speak of remembering and remembrance in significantly diverse but interconnected contexts or arenas of daily life, such as education, entertainment, religion, household economics.... These narratives come to the historian through different sources: from the private diary to the public stage. All four essays focus on what could be called a different “materiality” of remembrance: personal accounts, war memorials, schoolbooks and curricula and publicly performed plays. Tammy Proctor’s essay “Reclaiming the Ordinary: Civilians Face the Post-war World” on how civilians reclaim and negotiate the “ordinary” or the “normal” in the face of the significant obstacles of the immediate post-war era takes individual accounts, diaries and letters as its starting point. Through these accounts she looks at how individuals were dealing with the consequences of the war against the background of political decisions, rules and regulations, (r)evolutions and societal change. In addition to foregrounding non-combatants’ efforts to become visible in post-war society, Proctor pays close attention to the gendered post-war representations of the war experiences of women from all social strata, broadening our understanding of post-war recovery and commemoration.

Proctor’s analysis sets the stage for the essays that follow. The commemorative practices taking place in public space, in schools or on the theatre stage – analysed in the essays by Leen Engelen and Marjan Sterckx, Kaat Wils, and Helen Brooks – are created and lived by those very same people described by Proctor as those trying to reclaim the ordinary. Her interest in the immediate post-war period – the first 18 months after the armistice – is shared by Leen Engelen and Marjan Sterckx in their essay “Expressing Grief and Gratitude in an Unsettled Time: Temporary First World War Memorials in Belgium”. It is commonly known that the First World War led to a flood of war memorials in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Before permanent memorials were constructed, ephemeral monuments and temporary commemora-

tive arrangements such as (flower) shrines and wooden or plaster structures were erected in public spaces. Engelen and Sterckx concentrate on these very first public and material acts of remembrance. In formerly occupied territories, such as Belgium and Northern France, the need to express grief as well as gratitude – which had been suppressed by the occupation regime for over four years – exploded as soon as the armistice was signed. Ideas for monuments surfaced instantly on the national and local levels. Not all of these intentions materialised, and many did so only after a long time because the financial, logistic and administrative structures required to build permanent monuments were often missing. As a consequence, this determination to commemorate resulted in temporary ephemeral memorials. Through the contextualising and analysis of several early examples, the authors demonstrate the agency of civilians in these mostly grassroots initiatives and show that the design of these memorials meandered between existing (national, religious, artistic) traditions and spontaneous ad hoc creativity. Through the ephemeral nature of the memorials, the (literal) fragility of commemoration as well as the importance of the momentum for these practices is laid bare. The moment of their creation is indeed of crucial importance.

This is also true for the British war-themed theatre described by Helen Brooks. In her essay “Remembering the War on the British Stage. From Resistance to Reconstruction” she considers the extent to which the post-war theatre either broke away from or continued wartime theatrical practices. While previous studies largely focussed on the professional London stage, Brooks casts a wider net and argues that looking beyond the British capital and at the full spread of professional and non-professional theatrical activity shows that rather than turning away from the war as a theme, theatre makers repeatedly returned to, remembered and re-staged the war throughout the 1920s. They did so not only through the production of new plays but also through continuing to stage war plays first written and performed during the war. Central to this chapter, therefore, is not simply the recovery of a post-war landscape of war-themed theatre, but rather the analysis of the distinctive ways in which the different types of productions – revivals and continuing productions of wartime plays and new war-themed plays – functioned in the context of remembrance and reconstruction. Productions of wartime plays provided a space of resistance to peace and reconciliation, whilst the production of new plays enabled the exploration of peacetime demands for rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Like Brooks, Kaat Wils shows how different remembrance practices are characterised by different temporalities and (de)mobilising processes. In her essay “A War to Learn From. Commemorative Practices in Belgian Schools after World War I” Wils takes a longer-term perspective on remembrance practices in the educational context. Her focal points are in-school commemorative practices for fallen (former) students (remembrance ceremonies, small monuments) and school excursions to the

former front zone. Considering these two types of remembrance practices, Helen Brooks and Kaat Wils demonstrate that the two practices involved different concepts of memory. In the case of school ceremonies and monuments, the main aim was to link different generations. Students who had died for their fatherland and who had behaved courageously had to inspire the soldiers of the future. In field trips to the front it was not the connection between the dead and the living, but abhorrence at the sight of so much destruction, that was stimulated. Here, the past could not possibly be a model for the future. Because of this “negative” approach, this remembrance practice would survive political and cultural demobilisation and remain meaningful until well into the 1930s.

Repair

All human interactions with the past, commemorative practices and historiography included, necessarily are no more than fragmentary accounts of what exactly took place at a particular moment in time and what these events or processes meant, then and now. Trying to cope with this so-called “mutilated” account of the past is considered one of the most important challenges for contemporary historians, one which becomes very clear when taking a closer look at the third theme of this book, namely “repair”. Confronted with the unimaginable scale of human suffering in relation to the First World War, one can wonder whether the acceptance of “non-understanding” is the only option for us today. Is first-hand experience the only entry point to a true understanding of history? Would it deepen our insight into large-scale human suffering – and recovery – associated with the Great War if we had experienced it at first hand, in the muddy and stinking trenches or fearfully waiting at home? Even if we had lived through all of that, the sufferings, the fears, the dreams and aspirations of all those millions of soldiers and civilians would probably still remain strange to us, intangible as it were.

What the veterans of World War One experienced is forever lost. We, of course, can try to come as close to their experiences as we can, but we will never be able to relive what they went through; we will never be capable of reviving their most intimate emotions, hopes and fears. An important reason for our inability completely to understand the atrocities of the past of course has to do with the fact that the meanings of concepts like “suffering”, “pain”, “happiness” and “boredom” continuously shift throughout time. Different positions are possible vis-à-vis the unavoidable strangeness of the past – as sketched out here. It can be criticised for being the unfortunate heir of postmodern thinking; it can be unmasked as an ultimate attempt to forget about or downplay previous disasters; it can be praised for the implicit epistemological

humbleness or heralded for its aesthetic reconfiguration of time and space. These divergent ways of dealing with the strangeness of our past are not only legitimate, but also necessary; and perhaps also superficial. For is it not the case that whether one now believes that one can faithfully reconstruct the suffering of a veteran bleeding to death in no man's land, or that one is convinced that we can only guess what it was like, that one is capable of or interested in producing a narrative that might inspire the person who reads it; the one to whom it is being told.

The power of history has to do with the inherent capacity of reminding current and future generations of something that one has deemed important enough to safeguard for the future. The presence of those who returned from the war without a leg or two arms, without sound reason, or without the ability to hear was a constant reminder of the war and its stakes. Their presence in post-war society had consequences on an intergenerational level. How does one play with a man who says he is your father and who cannot hit a ball as both his legs were amputated after a shell exploded in the trenches? If these questions already caused a lot of anger, sadness and misunderstanding in the family context, the presence of the mutilated men and the measures taken to repair them also caused a lot of unrest in post-war societies trying to rebuild themselves as a whole. The paying of pensions, the funding of care facilities and special infrastructures, campaigns for reintegration in the workforce, etc. put a heavy financial burden on post-war societies and were often fiercely debated. These mutilated men in a sense can be considered as men that need to be "repaired". Hence the title of the third section of this book. They were repaired in the sense that they were medically fixed and professionally rehabilitated in order to make them "whole" again, the idea being that they would be able to function just as they did before the war. In many cases this complete reparation turned out to be a fiction. In contrast to the material rebuilding of cities and houses, the reparation of people was never an improvement compared to their pre-war condition.

The "repair" section brings together scholarship focussing on the ideologies, institutions, individuals and societies behind the "repairing" of war invalids after the war. While the essays of Pieter Verstaete and Marisa De Picker, and Simonetta Polenghi make their case by focusing on the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers from the First World War, Joris Vandendriessche's contribution ("Competition over Care. The Campaign for a New Medical Campus at the University of Leuven in the 1920s") rather aims to unveil the importance of ideology in the reconstruction of hospitals after the war. Despite the substantial amount of new research published in recent years on the history of disabled soldiers from the Great War, the approach taken by Verstraete and De Picker is definitely innovative.²⁸ In their contribution on the rehabilitation of Belgian (physically or sensorially) disabled soldiers ("High Expectations and Silenced Realities: The Re-education of Belgian Disabled Soldiers of the Great War, 1914-1921") they demythologise the contemporary rehabilitative discourse by

revaluing the invalid soldier's agency and by reconsidering the importance of medical sciences for these individuals – as well as for scholars interested in the disability.

The work by Simonetta Polenghi, while also dealing with the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers, takes a more comparative approach. In her chapter entitled “Back to work. Riccardo Galeazzi's Work for the Mutilated Veterans of the Great War, Between German Model and Italian Approach” she reconstructs the international exchanges – in this case between Italy and Germany – that have led to the realisation of concrete educational practices for disabled soldiers.²⁹ She does so by meticulously looking into how the main Italian specialists in the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers drew their inspiration from the German tradition of taking care of so-called “crippled persons”.

If the chapters by Verstraete and De Picker and by Polenghi focus on the repair of bodies and the need to distinguish between the discourse and the reality of rehabilitative practices, Joris Vandendriessche's chapter unravels the complex interplay between hospital reforms and ideologies. Medicine, whether applied to disabled soldiers or sick citizens, cannot be disconnected from ideological debates about what it means to be a human being. Making use of a Belgian case study, namely the restoration of the Leuven hospital facilities during and after the Great War, Vandendriessche demonstrates this ideological embeddedness of the different initiatives that were taken in order to revive hospital care.³⁰ Together, the essays in this part of the book demonstrate how the notion of “repair” is crucial to a wide and comprehensive understanding of the rebuilding of the world after the Great War.

Reform

The chapters in the fourth section testify to the truly international dimension of post-war reform. In the post-war years the global political, socio-economic and cultural imaginaries were more interconnected than ever, yet there were vast geographical differences. Local specificities led to a variety of post-war settings in which socio-economic problems, but in many cases also political instability and violence, played a major role. This was certainly the case in many East Asian or Latin American settings.³¹ Maria Inés Tató's analysis (“An Argentine Witness of the Occupation and Reconstruction of Belgium: The Writings of Roberto J. Payró, 1918-1922”) of writer and journalist Roberto J. Payró's post-war chronicles in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* for which he served as a correspondent in Brussels (1909-1922) focuses on the impact of post-war political and social reform and reconstruction in Belgium on discussions on political and social modernisation and reform in his home country, Argentina. Payró was particularly interested in issues such as social legislation, the

recovery of an industrial economy, social housing policies and political reform, like the concept of coalition governments and the establishment of universal suffrage in post-war Belgium. Tató stresses the importance of the Belgian case in providing tools and examples for economic and political modernisation to young Latin American countries such as Argentina, and thus demonstrates the global reverberations of post-war reform.

The impact of post-war reform beyond the belligerent countries is further explored by Carolina Garcia Sanz. In her contribution entitled “The New Post-war Order from the Perspective of the Spanish Struggle for Regeneration (1918-1923)” she discusses the Spanish public representations of the conflict and the dynamics of reconstruction in Europe from 1918 to 1923. Although Spain remained neutral, the war had a profound impact on Spanish society and indirectly contributed to the implosion of the political system in the interwar years. Social activists hoped that the tumultuous international circumstances would force change in Spain as well. The war had provided statesmen, prominent thinkers, journalists and new societal groups such as the so-called “New Women” with the prospect – real or imagined – of national regeneration. In the early 1920s, public debates around Spanish modernisation in the midst of social conflict and violence leading to General Miguel Primo de Rivera’s coup d’état (1923) intertwined with the post-war reconstruction elsewhere in Europe. The post-war did not just bring recovery and reform. Instability and revolution (temporarily) took hold of many countries.

The Portuguese case, described by Ana Paula Pires, fits the continuum of violence that, according to Robert Gerwarth, characterised the transition from war to peace well into the 1920s and even beyond. Once the Great War had ended, Portugal – having fought on African and Flanders’ battlefields – almost vanished from the international stage (even if present at the Versailles Peace Conference) and was absorbed by political instability and (contra)revolutionary violence. In her chapter, “The Act of Giving: Political Instability and the Reform(ation) of Humanitarian Responses to Violence in Portugal in the Aftermath of the First World War”, Pires focuses on the role and importance of humanitarian aid in times of post-war political instability and crisis. She demonstrates how in post-war Portugal humanitarian aid and medical assistance had to be directed not only to returning wounded soldiers but also to civilian victims of political violence and investigates the motives and implementation strategies of humanitarian aid, more particularly by the Portuguese Red Cross which acted as an intermediary between the government and revolutionary groups both during and after the war.

Finally, John Horne’s contribution on reform and peace in post-war Europe can be read as a general comparative reflection on political, social and cultural transformation after the Great War. Throughout a series of case studies he covers a wide spectrum of possibilities for post-war reconstruction. Introducing the cases of the rebuilding

of Salonika (now Thessaloniki) in Greece and the recovery of the universities of Leuven and Paris, Horne shows how in the years following the war architecture and urbanism got stuck between national(ist) aspirations, inter-allied cooperation and international collaboration. From the mid-1920s onwards – influenced by international initiatives such as the Locarno Treaty, the Briand Kellogg Treaty and the League of Nations – reconciliation between former enemies came to the fore. This tendency is visible in the case of Henri Sellier’s plans for the garden district of Suresnes (France), which was an architectural emanation of the belief that peace and social progress were inseparable. In a final case study Horne shows that the impressive and perhaps somewhat pompous neo-classical headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva (Switzerland) are a prime example of internationalism and cultural demobilisation.

Coda

Global conditions today – with massive displacement, climate change and growing ideological and political tensions – force us to reflect upon history, or at least ask questions with regard to the role of historical research. The international refugee crisis today incites parallels with the massive displacement taking place in the First World War, for instance in Belgium, France, Italy and Russia. The question can be raised to what extent historical scholarship related to, for instance, refugees and migrations in the 1920s and 1930s can identify continuities and divergences which might help in exposing structural historical links with current events or can at least challenge them in historical terms. Could critical understanding of this complex issue help to inspire or even define the huge task of restoring disrupted societies the world is confronted with today?

Nowadays, the societal debate frequently refers to “the new 1920s”. Key topics in the post-First World War years – such as disruption by war and recovery, modernisation and traditionalism, internationalisation and globalisation, borders and refugees, radicalism and nationalism, peace and militarism, patriotism and populism, humanitarianism and oppression – are unmistakably present today too. Now, as well as in the 1920s, individual lives are heavily affected by these large, fundamental and comprehensive political, social and economic transitions and disruptions: people have to recover, rebuild, repair, remember and reform as well. A knowledge and true understanding of the 1920s’ and 1930s’ social history of post-war reconstruction and recovery is useful and perhaps essential to understand later and even today’s political events and global developments. Histories and memories are essential also to imagining any possible future.³²

The present book offers a wide scope of recent research that goes beyond the war itself and its military and political strategies and actually focuses explicitly on societal dimensions, particularly dealing with the everyday lives of common people in post-war times.³³ It covers a variety of societal developments in the interwar years and beyond that were prompted by the wartime destruction and disruption, also in countries outside the actual theatres of war, inside and outside Europe. The book is about the ways in which societies were rebuilt or reconstructed – in the largest sense of the word – against the background of complex post-war political, military, diplomatic, social, economic and cultural conditions. The research presented in this book tackles questions that can lead to broader, deeper and more inclusive history-based insights. Beyond mere historical understanding, they inspire us to be critical about present and future global developments, and hopefully help us to take appropriate action. More comprehensively, this raises the question about the aims of historical research and other historical practices, and about its “efficiency” to remember in any relevant way. How and why do we want to remember what about the First World War and its far-reaching consequences?

Notes

- 1 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (Oxford: Allen Lane, 2016).
- 2 “If there is a singular goal of First World War Studies, it will be to cleave the many insular, too often national particularisms, specializations, and disciplinary myopia that permeate academic fields and bring together distinctive approaches and perspectives in order to expand our horizons. This journal will approach the subject of the First World War without chronological, geographic, or topical constraints. It will embrace not merely the period associated with the years between 1914 and 1918, but will extend it to include the diplomatic, political, social, cultural, and military complexities evident before, during, and most certainly after the cessation of hostilities” (Steven Sabol, “A brief note from the editor,” *First World War Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1).
- 3 “Revolutions, the defeat of the Central Powers, and the territorial reorganization of a continent dominated by empires, created ideal conditions for new lasting conflicts – though any explanation for their escalation has to be mindful of the importance of local traditions and conditions, often deriving from much older conflicts, which shaped the violence that emerged after the war [...]. Even if Europe experienced a short lived period of stabilization between 1924 and 1929, the core issues raised but not solved between 1917 and 1923 would return, with new urgency, to the international and domestic political agenda after the onset of the Great Depression. As such, the story of Europe in the years between 1917 and 1923 is crucial for understanding the cycles of violence that characterized the continent’s twentieth century” (Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 1-17.). See also: Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory. Architecture at War*, second expanded ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).
- 4 See for example: John Bourne, Peter Liddle, and Ian Whitehead, eds., *The Great World War, 1914-1945* (New York: Collins, 2000); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); for criticism/nuance of George L. Mosse’s “brutalisation thesis”, see for example: Antoine Prost, “Les limites de la brutalisation. Tuer sur le front occidental, 1914-1918,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*. 81, no. 1 (2004); John Lawrence, “Forging a peaceable kingdom. War, violence, and fear of brutalization in post-First World War Britain,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (2003). The debate has also been reconstructed in historiographic works such as Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d’historiographie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004).
- 5 In *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) Zara Steiner, for example, advocates that 1920s Europe should be assessed rather as an epilogue to the First World War than as a prologue to the 1930s.
- 6 See for example: Richard D. Brown and Richard Ashby Wilson, *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Susan Pederson, *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
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- 8 See: John E. Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996); John Giblin, “Critical Approaches to Post-Colonial (Post-Conflict) Heritage,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, eds. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (London:

- Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 313-328; Walter G. Moss, *An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London: Anthem Press, 2008).
- 9 On the differences between the commemoration in different parts of the world, see: Jay Winter, "Commemorating catastrophe: 100 years on," *War & Society* 36, no. 4 (2017).
- 10 Kaat Wils, "Commemorating War 100 Years after the First World War," *Low Countries Historical Review* CXXXI, no. 3 (2016): 74-75. See also: Ben Wellings and Shanti Sumartojo, eds., *Commemorating Race and Empire in the First World War Centenary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018); Geneviève Warland, ed., *Experience and Memory of the First World War in Belgium. Comparative and Interdisciplinary Insights*, Historische Belgienforschung (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2018).
- 11 "It was not without grim historical irony that the centenary of the great war was accompanied by civil war in Syria and Iraq, revolution in Egypt, and violent clashes between Jews and Arabs over the Palestinian question, as if to offer or that at least proof some of the issues raised but not solved by the Great War and its immediate aftermath are still with us today" (Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 267).
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- 13 Marcel Smets, ed., *Resurgam: la reconstruction en Belgique après 1914* (Brussels: Crédit communal, 1985); Elizabeth Lebas, Susanna Magri, and Christian Topalov, "Reconstruction and Popular Housing after the First World War: A Comparative Study of France, Great Britain, Italy and the United States," *Planning Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (1991): 249-267. For the particular issue of destruction and reconstruction of historic buildings and sites, see: Nicholas Bullock and Luc Verpoest, eds., *Living with History, 1914-1964: Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World Wars and the Role of Heritage Preservation*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011); Jeroen Cornilly et al., eds., *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050: architectuur in de Westhoek* (Ieper: Erfgoedcel CO7, 2009); Bevan, *The destruction of memory*.
- 14 Modern architecture and urbanism, almost absent in post-war architectural and urban reconstruction in Belgium, found a rich field of experimentation in the Belgian Congo from about 1930 onwards, having a crucial role in the implementation of the Belgian colonialist policy (ethnic segregation included). See Johan Lagae, "'Kongo zoals het is.' Drie architectuurverhalen uit de Belgische koloniatiegeschiedenis (1920-1960)" (PhD Diss., Ghent University, 2002); Bruno De Meulder, "Reformisme thuis en overzee. Geschiedenis van de Belgische planning in een kolonie (1880-1960)" (PhD Diss., KU Leuven, 1994). For a broader international perspective: Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, eds., *Urbanism: Imported or exported* (Chichester: Academy Editions, 2003); Enwezor, Okwul, ed., *The Short Century. Independence and Liberation Movements on Africa, 1945-1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).
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- 16 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
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- 18 See for example: Heather Jones, "Romantic Ireland's Dead and Gone? How Centenary Publications are Reshaping Ireland's Divided Understanding of Its Decade of War and Revolution, 1912-1923," *First World War Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 2018): 344-361; Emma Hanna, "Contemporary Britain and the Memory of the First World War," *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, no. 1 (2014): 110-117; Ben Wellings and Shanti Sumartojo, eds., *Commemorating Race and Empire in the First World War Centenary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018); Jay Winter, "Commemorating Catastrophe: 100 years On," *War & Society* 36, no. 4 (2017): 239-255 (this essay is part of a special issue on the centenary of the journal *War & Society*).
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- 21 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings. 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 731-732.
- 22 Studies on the afterlife of the First World War by historians such as Jay Winter or Philipp Blom and Gordon Hughes are explicitly inspired by Benjamin's take on the caesura of 1918. The title of Blom and Hughes' book, *Nothing But the Clouds Unchanged*, is directly derived from the Benjamin quote at the outset of the introduction. Also in Blom's book on the post-war, *Fracture. Life and Culture in the West, 1918-1938*, he uses the quotation from Benjamin to epitomise the post-war era. Winter links his theory of history to the famous Angelus Novus, a 1920 monoprint by the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee, which also stands central in Benjamin's philosophy of history (Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*; Gordon Hughes and Philipp Blom, *Nothing But the Clouds Unchanged. Artists in World War I* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2014); Philipp Blom, *Fracture. Life and Culture in the West 1918-1938* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015).
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- 26 Lucian Hölscher, "The First World War as a 'Rupture' in the European History of the Twentieth Century: A Contribution to the Hermeneutics of Not-Understanding," *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 35, No. 2 (November 2013): 73-87.
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- 32 Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory*; Huyse, *Alles gaat voorbij behalve het verleden*.
- 33 On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War, the City of Leuven organised a city-wide project featuring various events, including an exhibition and, in collaboration with the KU Leuven, an international colloquium (on which this book is based). Both initiatives focused on the post-war revival of the city and the world. See: Joke Buijs et al., eds., *Herleven. Leuven na 1918* (Leuven: City of Leuven, 2018).

Revival after the Great War

Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform

Edited by

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Rajesh Heynickx, Jan Schmidt,
Pieter Uyttenhove, and Pieter Verstraete

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