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# ‘Football Remembers’ — the Collective Memory of Football in the Spectacle of British Military Commemoration

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This article examines two major rituals of contemporary national life in the UK: association football and military commemoration. It explores the ways in which remembering is enacted and performed within UK football and how these processes are related to issues of power, agency and identity in Britain today. Employing the concepts of collective memory and spectacle, this article argues that ‘memory entrepreneurs’ have sought to embed football as ‘site of memory’ in the performance of military commemoration. It concludes that this has contributed to the transformation of military commemoration, from a ritual that is observed to a spectacle that is consumed. This paper thus contributes to emergent debates on the militarization of civilian space, the shifting nature of civil–military relations in the twenty-first century, and the role of military remembrance in the reproduction of Britishness.

**KEYWORDS** remembrance, commemoration, football, nationalism, memory entrepreneurs, collective memory, spectacle

## Introduction: the ‘collective memory’ of the poppy

This article examines the development of football as a site of memory in the performance of British military remembrance. In examining these trends, the article develops a novel theoretical account of the relationship between military remembrance, football and politics in the UK since the end of World War I. The decisions taken about national commemoration, opposed to private grief, are always political (Danilova, 2015). Collectivized grief generates symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2018) that can legitimize purposive political action and consolidate or reinvent national

solidarities (Rose-Redwood, 2009). The relationship between the sociology of collective memory and the phenomenology of individual memory is complex and contested (Ricoeur, 2004), and beyond the scope of this article. The focus here is on the collective memory of large groups (such as national populations) in a relational sense. This is not to deny the memories of personal experience, but rather to situate memory in its inherited social context. Put another way, commemoration, unlike private grief, has a social bases; it is practiced communally in a social group, who mobilize spaces, artefacts and images as cultural resources to publicly represent the past to themselves and to others (Conway, 2010). This article operationalizes the concept of collective memory via an analysis of the communicative power of the (red) poppy, as a mnemonic device that ‘institutionalise[s] the past in our everyday lives’ (Conway, 2010: 444).

First introduced to Britain in 1921, at the behest of Field Marshall Douglas Haig, the red poppy has become a ‘well-know and well-established symbol’ of national life (Royal British Legion, 2021). The origins and meaning of the poppy have always been contested, however. From its very inception, the poppy has drawn upon different themes — from peace and sacrifice to gallant victory and heroism — and evoked various meanings and responses. Poppies remind the British people of the nation’s darkest moments, but also its ‘finest hour’, when it was victorious, valiant and resilient (Harrison, 2012). The fluid nature of the poppy is demonstrated by its various descriptions, as the: Flanders poppy; Earl Haig poppy, and; memorial or remembrance poppy. The poppy is far from a universal and apolitical symbol, therefore. Despite the contested meaning of the poppy it has come to occupy a central place in the annual rituals of remembrance observed every November in Britain. One of the most prominent contemporary public displays of the poppy is in sport, particularly football. Employing the concepts of collective memory and spectacle, this article provides a cultural history of the poppy, as a commemorative symbol, in football and critically analyses the national, masculine and martial narratives, values and ideologies that have been performed in this sporting context. Using a qualitative content analysis the research was able to trace the changes and continuities in the practice of military remembrance in English football and evaluate the processes of its narrative (re)construction.<sup>1</sup>

The burgeoning field of memory studies (Olick & Robbins, 1998) has shown that commemoration is informed by present issues and concerns as much as historical continuity (Schwartz, 1982; Olick, 1999). As Halbwach describes, collective

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<sup>1</sup>This qualitative content analysis focused on texts and images within the English press between 1998 and 2019. A directed approach using a combination of key words (including ‘English FA’, ‘Royal British Legion’, ‘the poppy’, ‘remembrance’, ‘commemoration’, ‘sacrifice’) as a guide for initial codes and units of analysis was adopted to generate pertinent newspaper and online articles relating to the discussion and interpretation of military remembrance and the military vis-à-vis football. This deductive application of this coding frame enabled the analysis of the discursive use of pertinent themes and patterns to better understand the (re)construction of the narrative surrounding the practice of military remembrance in sport. A cross-section of six daily newspapers were subject to this interpretive analytical approach from 1st August 1998 and 31st December 2019. These include both tabloid (*The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Mirror*) and three broadsheets (*The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*). Overall, thirty-two articles were subject to analysis.

memory is ‘a reconstruction of the past [that] adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present’ (1941: 7). From this perspective, Remembrance Weekend, ‘as an annual event that asks that soldiers are popularly and annually remembered in collective public sites [...] serves as “connective tissue” through which Britons can orient present practices of war remembrance to those of the past’ (Basham, 2016: 884). National commemoration — as a type of memory work — is inherently political as it involves the agency of both private and public actors (including the state) and has the potential to divide as well as unify. For example, in 1987 an IRA bomb killed eleven people at a Remembrance Sunday ceremony — sometimes referred to as the ‘Poppy Day massacre’ — in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. The wilful blindness to both the ‘biography and history’ (Mills, 2000) of the poppy and military remembrance in the context of UK territorial politics, let alone its wider relations in the world, is striking.

This type of ahistoricism will be familiar to critical observers of sportive nationalism (Brentin & Cooley, 2016). Recent diplomatic spats over the poppy between the English Football Association (FA) and British government, on one side, and FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) as the international governing body of football, on the other, offer a case in point. On 12 November 2011, the English national football team played a friendly match against Spain at Wembley stadium. The fixture coincided with Remembrance Weekend, scheduled between Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday — the two days in November each year when the UK pauses to remember the British and Commonwealth servicemen and women killed in conflict. In the days preceding, the FA had requested permission from FIFA to allow the national team to wear shirts embroidered with red poppies during the match. FIFA refused. The world governing body’s decision rested on the assumption that the poppy represents a political symbol and as such contravened Law 4 of the Rules of the Game banning political, religious or commercial messages on shirts or equipment, which is designed to ensure ‘the neutrality of the game’ (FIFA, 2010).

The decision was met with a vehement response from both the British government and press. FIFA was lobbied by both Prime Minister David Cameron — who claimed it was ‘absurd’ and ‘outrageous’ to claim that ‘wearing a poppy [...] is a political act’ (BBC, 2011) — and Prince William, acting as President of the English FA, who requested, somewhat paradoxically, for the governing body to grant ‘an exception in this special circumstance’ despite stating that the poppy was a ‘universal symbol of remembrance’ with ‘no political, religious or commercial connotations’ (The Guardian, 2011). In a recurrence of this controversy in 2016, a journalist commented: ‘Sport cannot be separated from remembrance because there has *always* been a link between the fields of battle and the fields of play’ (Hitt, 2016; *my emphasis*). Yet, before 2011, the display of the poppy on the shirt of the national team had been a non-issue for the English FA. Indeed, when England played Brazil at the same time in November two years earlier, the embroidered poppies that in 2011 were deemed to be sacrosanct in the traditional ritual of remembrance in

Britain were neither worn nor requested (Fox, 2014). The match against Spain in 2011 represented the thirty-seventh time the English national team had competed in an international game between 1st and 15th November since the end of World War I; in none of the 36 previous occasions did they take to the field with the adornment of the poppy (FA, 2019).

This presents a puzzle: why had the poppy been elevated to such a totemic symbol in English football in 2011, when previously it had been considered a non-issue? What were the antecedents to this change? This article interrogates these questions to analyse how football has emerged as a prominent site of military commemoration and memorialization, or what Nora (1989) calls *lieux de mémoire*. It considers the recent set of commemorative practices adopted in football, such as the wearing of the poppy on football shirts, to be an ‘invented tradition’; that is, a ‘set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). The English FA have themselves observed the change in practice, recognizing the ‘greater focus [...] given to the level of support and respect shown by the national teams’ (BBC, 2011) in recent years to military remembrance. The request to wear the poppy on the shirt was justified on the basis of this ‘growing commitment [...] to show our respect and support’ (BBC, 2011). This article traces the process of this ‘growing commitment’ to promote the use of football in the spectacle of military commemoration. It also draws attention to the increasing mediatization and commodification of military remembrance, and *inter alia* identity, via sport to show how military remembrance and the associated ‘poppy paraphernalia’ is consumed to demonstrate a sense of belonging (Basham, 2016: 888).

A nascent body of research has emerged in recent years that examines the politics of military remembrance in the UK (Danilova, 2015; Kelly, 2017). These studies are often situated in wider debates on the growing militarization of popular culture in the contemporary post-9/11 era (Butterworth, 2014). Yet, despite the scholarly attention on the militarization thesis, there have been few attempts to understand the growing links between association football and the military in the UK (cf. Penn & Berridge, 2018). To date, no research study has sought to explain, as well as document, this changing relationship. This article addresses this gap in the existing literature by investigating the ‘placement’ of the poppy and other rituals of military remembrance within professional football. It analyses this process and examines its relationship to a growing sense of crisis in British national identity. The analysis is organized into four sections. The first explores how the increasing emphasis on remembrance in football fits into wider patterns of consumption via the concept of spectacle. The second, theorizes the relationship between football, military remembrance and British nationalism, identifying the points of tension as well as symbiosis in this nexus. It also acknowledges the prism of masculinity through which both war and sport are perceived and analyses how this shapes military remembrance. As a corrective to the ahistorical accounts

above, it examines the antecedents to the contemporary spectacularization of military remembrance, such as the Falklands War, as critical junctures in the relationship between football, remembrance and nationalism. The fourth analyses the turn to history and commemoration in British football and society more generally, in order to understand the specific catalyst for change. The fifth section provides a rejoinder to the core question: why does football 'remember' and whose interest does this remembering serve?

### The 'spectacularization' of military remembrance in UK football

Together with the notion of collective memory, the concept of the spectacle (Debord, 1992 [1967]) lies at the heart of this analysis. The last fifteen years have witnessed an increasing 'spectacularization' of remembrance in British football. The spectacle of remembrance is consumed. Since the 1980s there has been a growing emphasis on commoditization of memory and 'spectacular' episodes of recent history in popular culture and entertainment: the Holocaust, World War I and II, and the sinking of the Titanic. As these events move further into the past they are less about *remembering* and more about *consumption*. Or, in Halbwach's (1992 [1941]) terms, what we are engaging in is collective memory — a socio-political construct that constitutes a privileged version of the past selected to be remembered by a given community (or more precisely particular agents within it) in order to serve predetermined agendas and reproduce a particular self-image — rather than autobiographical memory (recollections of those events we ourselves experience). As Neiger et al. (2011: 5–6) observe: 'This process of reconstruction requires sites that serve different agents as the ground on which they build their ideas and versions of the past that are mediated to wider audiences'. Intersecting both the theories on spectacle and collective memory is a core focus on the fundamental role of mediation and the dominance of social construction (Neiger et al., 2011). The imbrication of military remembrance within the sport-media-entertainment complex is essentially a twenty-first-century phenomenon. The changes in the collective memory of military remembrance should be analysed with reference to the wider relations of power in society, including the interface between the power of dominant political discourses on the nation and military and the hyper-mediatized global spectacle of football.

It is unsurprising that football came to play a bigger role in this (re)construction of military remembrance, given its position at the pinnacle of the contemporary mediated spectacle (Goldblatt, 2019). The strategic use of the sporting spectacle to appease or distract the public has a long lineage, dating from the bread and circuses of the chariot races and gladiatorial games in ancient Rome (Guttman, 1986; Belanger, 2008). The concept of spectacle is also invoked in critical and Marxist perspectives on sport, which emphasize its use as an instrument of ideological framing and acquiescence by the state and other prevailing elites (Hock, 1972; Brohm, 1978). Despite its widespread usage in both, the media commentary and academic

writing on sport, the *sporting spectacle* is rarely explicitly theorized (cf. Tomlinson, 2002). At its most simple level, it refers to the fact that a phenomenon (in this case football) is spectated, in person or more likely on the TV or other digital screen. Top-level professional football, particularly the English Premier League, with its galaxy of ‘stars’ and global brands is consumed by millions of viewers worldwide. Surpassing even the reach of Hollywood cinema, football is the most globalized and conspicuous media industry, occupying a critical intermediary position in the cultural logic of late capitalism (Belanger, 2008). As David Goldbatt says: ‘In the twenty-first century, football is first. First among sports themselves, but it also now commands the allegiance, interest and engagement of more people in more places than any other phenomenon’ (2019: 2).

Spectacle also evokes the grandiose, heroic and absurd: the increasing glitz and theatrics of opening ceremonies of successive Olympics and Football World Cups being a case in point. The sporting spectacle offers a ‘symbolic space’ through which national ideologies and identities can be reproduced and reimagined through performance (Edensor, 2002). Building on Butler’s (1993) concept of ‘performativity’, Edensor conceptualizes national identity as ‘an ongoing performance, continually in process [...] informing and (re)constructing a sense of collectivity’ (Edensor, 2002: 69–71). Using Edensor’s concept of performance, the rituals of Remembrance Weekend can be seen as a ‘grandiloquent pageant’, in which ‘solemn and precise formations of movement are laden with high production values, where the nation and its symbolic attributes are elevated in public display’ (Edensor, 2002: 74). Whereas the disciplined rituals of military remembrance were once confined to specific national (the Cenotaph and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier) and local (town war memorials) sites, they have increasingly been ‘staged’ in more informal, less traditional sites, including sports stadia. The ‘decentring’ of remembrance ‘amidst the people and places it affects’ (Rech et al., 2014: 11), or what Nora (1989) terms the pluralization of commemoration, has been accompanied by more outlandish modes of remembrance.

Over the last decade, the rituals of military remembrance in British football have grown evermore in scale and ostentation, in stark relief to its origins in Victorian solemnity. They are often overtly militaristic. Military personnel in full uniform (both historic and contemporary) invariably accompany proceedings. Glasgow Rangers and Hearts of Midlothian have employed an artillery gun to commence the obligatory minute silence. The military heritage of World War I and II, such as a Mark IV tank and Spitfire plane, have been displayed outside stadia, including the ‘British Army Fun Zone’ (complete with ‘live music, a giant dartboard and inflatable slides’) at Meadow Lane (Notts County FC, 2018). Beyond silent reflection, fans are increasingly incorporated into this spectacle, active participants in the display of ‘tifos’ of giant poppies and messages of remembrance across entire terraces. Other invented traditions surrounding Remembrance Weekend — sardonically referred to as ‘Poppy Season’ and ‘Poppy Pulooza’ — are so absurd they are almost beyond parody. Amongst the many examples included ‘Poppy Man’: ‘a

man in a giant poppy suit and inexplicable clown shoes at Tranmere [a League One football club in Merseyside, England] was the moment it all became clear — this great festival of public respect has lost all sense of self-awareness' (Cooney, 2019). Football clubs have engaged in an 'arms-race' of remembrance, in a bid to outdo each other with increasingly incongruous 'displays of pantomime respect' (Cooney, 2019). Moreover, the kitsch nature of these displays is embedded alongside the more conventional assemblage of other 'disciplined' forms of commemoration, such as the minute silence. In short, the ritual of military remembrance in British football has become spectacularized. It can be defined as a spectacle due to its performative quality: its symbols, practices and actors are performed for those 'watching or gazing' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 78). It is wrong to dismiss this spectacularization as merely pastiche and nostalgia. It reveals something deeper with the national collective psyche: although the structures of British nationhood have been challenged and started to fragment, 'the ideal of nationhood [...] continues to exert its hold over the political imagination [and] it continues to be reproduced as the cause worth more than individual life' (Bilig, 1995: 158).

A contingency of events is important in explaining this change. British military deployment since the 1980s — particularly the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan — and the public's attitude to the involvement of British armed forces in those wars — have shaped the approach of military and political actors to the practice of remembrance (Hines et al., 2015). Acts of remembrance are key to how populations come 'to collectively understand and react to military institutions, practices, power and force' (Basham, 2016: 884). The incidence of notable anniversaries, particularly the centenaries of the start and end of World War I in 2014 and 2018, have undoubtedly provided added focus and prominence. But there is a broader, more underlying, process of reimagining observable in the context of a crisis of British national identity. UK football offers a useful case study to explore the performance and projection of remembrance and how this impacts upon notions of collective identity.

## **The nexus of football, military remembrance and British nationalism**

This is a particularly interesting historical moment to be analysing British national identity. Beset by a range of institutional, political, economic, and constitutional crises (Richards et al., 2014), the British state has been in its 'era of thickening twilight' (Nairn, 1977: 53) since the late 1960s. The relative constitutional resilience of the state belies more profound existential issues: 'regardless of the durability or otherwise of the British state, Britishness is in decline, and increasingly problematic' (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2007).

When faced with such a crisis of national identity, sport offers a significant social ritual that can contribute to the conception of the nation as an 'imagined



community' (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Aside from war, sport is often the primary means a nation can attain its fullest expression (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1994). The interweaving of existing and new rituals of military remembrance into the cultural heritage of football constitutes a potent 'invented tradition', through which a fracturing sense of British national identity can be made 'real' again and re-legitimize the political and military ambitions of the state (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012 [1983]). At first glance sport, and particularly football with its fervent rivalries, seems a peculiar choice as a vehicle of British nationalism. As a multi-national, unitary state with devolved responsibilities, there exists a complex relationship between the 'home nations', involving distinct national identities and asymmetric political settlements. This complexity is reflected in sport. It is the exception rather than the norm that the representatives of the constituent nations of the UK compete under the flag of Team GB. In football, as with most sports, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland compete as separate 'football nations'. Sport is a vehicle for Scotland and Wales (with the accompanying pageantry of national flags, anthems, colours and emblems) to assert their national identity in an otherwise Anglo-centric British state. More latterly, post-devolution, the national football team has come to be seen as the preeminent expression of Englishness. This is captured by Robinson's (2008: 219) claim that: 'the one place where England exists is on the sports field'. In terms of the UK, football seems more of a disintegrative rather than integrative force, undermining rather than reinforcing a sense of Britishness. As Robinson (2008: 220) argues, sport is the place where 'Englishness and Britishness no longer merge'.

The complex territorial politics of the UK accounts for why the wider framing of military commemoration in football is critical. While 'the eleven men in white shirts at Wembley' may represent the imagined community of England (Smith & Porter, 2004: 2), the backcloth of military remembrance serves to reaffirm an underlying sense of Britishness. In the context of a fracturing British state, the melding of football (as a game of British invention) and UK military remembrance facilitates a performance of British nationhood, operating at 'supra-national' level above the submerged identities of the national and club teams on display (Tuck & Maguire, 1999). As Gamble and Wright (2009: 5) conclude, 'The future of Britishness may depend on those institutions which already embody it, and which allow citizens to feel part of the same community'. Military remembrance is unique in its ability to engender a shared sense of Britishness. The exhaustion of the other common enterprises of the UK (religion, Empire, and social citizenship) has seen the British state rely increasingly on military remembrance as the residual element of British national identity: 'the one civic ideology common to all parts of the Kingdom, and crossing partisan boundaries' (Moran, 2017: 83). It is in this context in which military remembrance derives its power: a civic ritual, with unparalleled affective capacity, which unites almost all.

In contemporary Britain, the poppy has evolved to represent several different meanings simultaneously: it combines a potent narrative of meaningful and

worthy sacrifice with underlying sense of victory and moral right, based on the notion that the UK 'only wages war when necessary', and increasingly the veneration of serving military personnel (Basham, 2016: 885–91). The duality of sacrifice and victory that have come to be embodied by the poppy, resonates with the essence and history of football. But, as Bowes and Bairner (2018) observe, the people (both players and spectators) involved in the symbolic embodiment of the nation through sport are invariably envisaged as men and boys. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the whole range of identity markers — including social class, 'race', ethnicity and sexuality — that intersect with the nexus of sport-war-nation. However, it is important to note the relationship between sport and nationalism is gendered, with 'the national sporting arena as one that is constructed by men, for men' (Bowes & Bairner, 2018: 396). The nexus of sport-war-nation is overlain by a masculine hegemony (Burstyn, 1999). All three terms are typically seen as male domains, which valorize predominant heteronormative masculine norms and ideals. Within this masculine nexus, male athletes are framed as 'proxy warriors' (Hoberman, 1984) fighting on behalf of the nation. In both sport and military contexts, it is invariably the achievements and heroic feats of 'our boys' through which the national character can be established and reproduced (Rowe et al., 1998). Despite the significant contribution of women to war (both historical and contemporary), women tend to be marginalized in military commemoration (Abousnoug & Machin, 2011), both within and outwith of sport. They are cast as the victims (grieving widows, mothers, daughters, and sisters), care givers (nursing the wounded), or 'embodied possession of the victorious' on the 'home front' rather than heroes or warriors on the 'battlefront' (Yuval-Davies, 1997: 95). Conjoining remembrance and sport exacerbates this gendering.<sup>2</sup>

Along with rugby and boxing, there have been long-established links between men's football and the military in the UK, in both war and peacetime (Mason & Riedi, 2010). Above all, football — which by the 1900s was a dominant feature of working-class male culture — was used by the government as both a mechanism for encouraging recruitment (before conscription in 1916) and a means of establishing morale within the British Army during the First World War (Fuller, 1990). The new dimension of warfare and mass death were acutely felt within the game: a number of 'Pals Battalions' were comprised exclusively of professional footballers, with several clubs suffering multiple fatalities to their players (Harris & Whippy, 2008).<sup>3</sup> These tragedies — along with the now much storied and celebrated images of Captain Wilfred Percy Nevill kicking a football 'over the top' and German and British troops playing a football friendly during the Christmas Day

<sup>2</sup>Basham (2016: 889) discusses how recent remembrance practices within popular culture, such as the 'Military Wives Choir' and winners of Royal British Legion talent competition the 'Poppy Girls' (comprised of daughters of military fathers), perpetuate gendered tropes about the effect of war 'on "our boys" and the women and children they leave behind'. These performances of remembrance serve to reaffirm the social construction that men are naturally linked to warfare, and women to peace (Yuval-Davies 1997: 94).

<sup>3</sup>Over the course of the First World War, Bradford City F.C. lost nine players, Everton F.C. lost five players, Manchester United lost two players and Newcastle United F.C. suffered the loss of seven players (Harris & Wimpey, 2008).

truce of 1914 — has secured the place of football in the popular memory of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> As well as football games and the exchange of parcels, the 1914 Christmas truce, or ‘War Christmas’, also included memorials to those soldiers killed in the first few months of war, establishing a relationship between remembrance, football and Christianity that would later be reprised (Mosse, 1990: 75). An example of this is the decision to sing ‘Abide with Me’ — a Christian hymn written by a Victorian clergyman in 1847 — before the start of the 1927 FA Cup final, apparently at the behest of King George V (Russell, 2008).<sup>5</sup> The choice of hymn was notable; not only did it have connotations of the British Establishment, due to its association with the Anglican Church and the Monarchy, it had been sung in the trenches by Allied troops during World War I (Penn & Berridge, 2018). The nexus between football, military remembrance, and national identity was crystallized in that moment at Wembley (then known as the Empire Stadium): ‘a moment of remembrance that expressed the shared grief of a nation’ (Hill, 2012:12). Henry Garland (1957: 126), the hymn’s historian, observed:

There has been much boisterous singing of popular songs, but when ‘Abide with me’ was announced by the conductor, there fell on the vast crowd an immediate silence; compared with its moving intensity to the sudden silence at the Cenotaph on Armistice Day. It first struck me that it out of place to sing a hymn so sacred as ‘Abide with me’ at a football match, but that feeling soon went as the Band of Guards played the opening chords. The volume of singing increased with each verse until the stadium became like the nave of a great cathedral. It was deeply affecting experience bringing a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes.

This orchestrated, collective singing of a restricted repertoire of ‘national’ songs, hymns, and music of the First World War, usually led by a marching military band, became embedded in the cultural fabric of football from the mid-1920s (Russell, 2014).<sup>6</sup> It displayed the community-creating potential of football, and the indispensable role of history, remembrance and memory in that process (Herzog, 2015). The elision of sport and the military in British consciousness from 1914 onwards provided fertile discursive ground for the creation of heroic figures of hegemonic masculinity that embody the nation’s collective identity.

Sport offers a structured social space to represent and animate abstract ideologies, such as masculinity and the nation. Given the rhetorical links between masculinity, war, nation and football, it is perhaps unsurprising that remembrance of

<sup>4</sup>Although the fact that the British army sought to ban these ‘truce games’, considering them to constitute ‘near-mutiny’, has been largely forgotten (Roberts, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>The 1927 FA Cup Final was the first to broadcast on BBC radio (and recorded and later made available to purchase on record disc). It became one of the first ‘mediatised rituals’ (Cottle, 2006) in the age of mass, public broadcasting, extending beyond the immediate spectators in attendance, to the radio audience at home.

<sup>6</sup>The invented ritual of ‘Abide with Me’ as the ‘Cup Final hymn’ represented the culmination of a larger movement of ‘community singing’ that had begun in 1925, with the establishment of the Community Singers Association — an elite-led movement, driven by the tabloid press and the Daily Express in particular (Nannestad, 2010: 4).

Britain's war dead has become a recurring feature of the British football calendar. However, as Wilson (2014: 197) observes, 'the manner in which these sites of memory frame the significance of the game in relationship to the war reveals wider assumptions about the contested memory of the conflict in Britain'. The framing of the relations between football and the military has not remained constant over time, and serves as a useful lens through which to examine the nature of contemporary British identity, and how this can be established, reinvented and contested. Despite the popular imagery of football and military life in the context of World War I, there were always important points of tension. The disdain heaped on the 'unpatriotic' FA and professional footballers for continuing with the 1914–15 league season despite the advent of war is a case in point (Veitch, 1985). The instrumentalization of football for military recruitment in this period relied more on the renunciation of football, rather than a celebration of its virtues. In the narratives of masculine heroics that were constructed, it was the young men in the trenches rather than the football field or stadia that were cast as heroes. This was encapsulated in the infamous World War I recruitment poster that implored 'young men of Britain [to] play the Greater Game and join the Football Battalion'. In a column headed 'Duty Before Sport', *The Times* (1914) published the following announcement:

This is no time for football. This nation, this Empire has got to occupy itself with more serious business. The young men who play football and the young men who look on have better work to do. The trumpet calls them, their country calls them, the heroes in the trenches call them. They are summoned to leave their sport, and to take part in the great game. That game is war, for life or death.

The position of the military in football remained limited to 'banal' (Billig, 1995) reference points, such as the singing of 'Abide with Me', for most of the twentieth century. The nature of military memorialization is not fixed, therefore. There have been significant changes in popular attitudes toward the military, including the manner in which the war dead should be commemorated, over the last century. In the inter-war years (1919–1939) a two-minute silence was only observed on Armistice Day (11 November). Even though by the 1930s remembrance had become established in the calendar of British life, there is no evidence that a two-minute silence was observed at the only two football fixtures that took place on 11 November (in 1922 or 1933) during this period (Noakes, 2015). Following the end of World War II, the two-minute silence and other commemorative ceremonies were moved to the nearest Sunday after the 11 November, thereafter referred to as Remembrance Sunday. This was prompted by the desire, on behalf of the British government, for military remembrance to be inclusive of both World War I and II, rather than have an exclusive focus on the former. The fact that professional football in Britain only began to be played on a Sunday from 1974 militated any connection between military commemoration and the national

sport to very few opportunities. None was sought. Indeed, minute silences on or around Remembrance Sunday were only introduced in football at the turn of the millennium.

After 1945, the institution of 'Remembrance Sunday' served to strengthen the British myth of 'peacefulness', which had emerged in the inter-war years (Lawrence, 2003). In contrast to the conventional portrayals of the post-war welfare state, Edgerton (2005) argues that the British state was equally driven by a logic of a 'warfare state'.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the latter, the Falklands/Malvinas War is a decisive moment. The conflation of the militaristic, nationalistic and sporting in the discourse on the Falklands was important in reshaping the relationship between all three thereafter. It reshaped public attitudes towards the military, driven by a media discourse that emphasized 'powerful myths of British identity from which a story of nationalism, bravery, and victory unfolded' (Maltby, 2016). Unlike many post-1945 conflicts, the Falklands War was fought outside the paradigm of the Cold War; it was predicated on the defence of sovereign territory against the aggression of a military dictatorship and framed (both by the government and the media) as a counterpoint to Britain's supposed domestic and international post-war decline (Jones, 2018). In a speech to a Conservative Party rally following the British victory, Prime Minister Thatcher claimed: 'Britain has re-kindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before' (1983). The show of military strength and ultimate victory counterposed against the prevailing narratives of decline (including the fate of British football, both domestically and internationally) was not lost on the public. One Mass Observation respondent suggested that 'the response of the great majority of people in Britain indicates a thirst for a glorious victory, perhaps because of our recent poor showing in football' (cited in Jones, 2018: 83).

As well as an electoral boost for the stuttering Conservative government in Thatcher's first term, the so-called 'Falklands Factor' also entailed an upsurge in popular feeling about the role of the military as a crucial ingredient of British national identity (Barnett, 1982; Hobsbawm, 1983). The nexus between an increasing nationalist fervour, military victory and football was strengthened due to the coincidence between the tail end of the Falklands War and the English national team's participation in the 1982 World Cup. This meant the 'the stage was set for a conflation of politico-nationalist and footballing discourses' (Wren-Lewis & Clarke, 1983:126-27):

During the run-up to the 1982 World Cup the atmosphere undeniably changed [...] a mood of patriotic optimism began to emerge. There can be no doubt that the news of British victories in the South Atlantic created the conditions for this

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<sup>7</sup>There has not been a single year that Britain has not been engaged in military conflict in the putative 'post-war' era; no other country has been engaged continuously in fighting over such a long period (MacAskill & Cobain, 2014). To date, 1968 and 2016 are the only years where no UK Armed Forces personnel have lost their lives as a result of conflict (MoD, 2019).

mood [...] The BBC team [...] were especially keen to identify 'a new national pride in the English team and their supporters'. With the English team's 3-1 victory over the French following two days after the first news of a British military triumph in Port Stanley, Jimmy Hill was able to speak of it as 'a time when pride and patriotism in this country is [*sic*] just reawakening'.

Victory in the Falklands War was interpreted, concluded Hobsbawm (1983: 19), 'as if we had won a World Cup with guns'. While such overt connotations of the sporting and the nationalistic dissipated after the end of the Falklands War, a more enduring shift in tone post-1982 can be detected. It marked a seminal moment in the civil-military relations of the UK, especially with regard to remembrance (Penn & Berridge, 2018). There were calls in the aftermath of the Falklands War in 1982 for the restoration of the two-minute silence to its original date of Armistice Day. Since the Falklands there has been a concerted effort by successive British governments, as well as by the military itself, to promote military values and 'to legitimise the near-permanent state of war' (Penn & Berridge, 2018: 117). The participation of the British armed forces in conflict since 1982 — in the Gulf War (1990–1991), Bosnia (1992–1995), Kosovo (1998–1999), Sierra Leone (2000–2002), Afghanistan (2001–2014), Iraq (2003–2009) and Libya (2011) — prompted a reimagining of the role of military commemoration. However, it is only in the last decade that the instrumental role of football has been amplified in this context. This can be seen as a strategic response not only to the management of civil-military relations, but also to the perceived erosion of British national identity.

The relationship between the football, military commemoration and nationalism is historically and ideologically contingent. The growing prominence of military remembrance in football in recent decades should not be reduced to the engagement of the UK military in operations in the same period. Wider changes in commemorative practices in British football and society — what Russell (2006) terms the 'commemorative turn' — are also important.

## The commemorative turn

Commemoration in football of any kind was rare until the mid-1980s; the 1958 Munich air disaster and the death of Bill Shankly in 1981 the notable exceptions.<sup>8</sup> On the rare occasions it did happen, commemoration was localized and relatively muted. As Russell argues, 'while football paid due respect to its dead, there was generally nothing distinctive about its public mourning in terms of frequency and style' (2006: 3). The shock of three footballing catastrophes over a four-year period — Heysel (1985), Bradford (1985), and Hillsborough (1989) — claiming the lives of 191 supporters in total, can be identified as a critical juncture. The latter of

<sup>8</sup>The Munich disaster was a particularly important historical marker and set the pattern for future commemorations in sport: 'In the immediate aftermath, the Football League ordered two minutes of silence at all games [...] together with the wearing of black armbands and the lowering of flags to half-mast' (Mitten, 2014).

these is particularly critical to a shift in the memorial culture of football. In the immediate aftermath of Hillsborough, both Sheffield Wednesday's home ground, as the site of the disaster, and Anfield, the home stadium of Liverpool fans who had been its victims, became huge shrines composed of flowers, club scarves and shirts, personal mementos, including teddy bears and photos.<sup>9</sup> Observing the reaction to Hillsborough, Taylor (1989: 92) remarked how the pictures of these shrines impressed on him how football stadia had become sites of 'popular sanctification'. Bairner (2006) contrasts the relatively restrained public reaction to the Ibrox Stadium disaster of 1971 with the outpouring of emotion for Hillsborough. Indeed, as Walker (2004: 180) notes, 'the Ibrox disaster has been much more the subject of popular inquiry and personal remembrance since the late 1980s than before', reaffirming the emergence of football as a 'site of memory' in 'the age of commemoration' (Nora, 1992). Hillsborough signalled a quantitative and qualitative shift in football's commemorative practice, which challenged and subverted as well as build upon existing memorial and ecclesiastical traditions, comprising: the naming of spectator stands after deceased players and managers (Russell, 2006); memorial plaques and 'commemorative bricks' (Herzog, 2013); the scattering of ashes on the 'hallowed turf' or in club 'memorial gardens' (Cook, 2006); football themed funerals (Huggins, 2012); and the erection of monuments to footballing greats (Stride et al., 2013).<sup>10</sup>

The emergence of new forms of memorial and sepulchral cultures in football should be seen in context of 'a much wider shift in the nation's emotional ecology' (Russell, 2006: 10). Thinking even more broadly, these changes can be located within the latest 'memory-boom' (Winter, 2006) and seen as a response to the rapid pace of change in late twentieth and early twenty-first century society (Van De Mierop, 2016). As Huyssen argues: 'memory and musealization together are called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space' (2003: 23). Several studies have pointed to the 'New cultures of memorialisation and commemoration' following the death of Princess Diana (Russell, 2006: 5). It is notable that most sport fixtures, including the Premier League football season, were postponed on the day her death was announced, as well as the following Saturday when her funeral took place (BBC, 1997). The Labour government of the time intervened to apply pressure on the Scottish FA to reconsider its decision to continue with its scheduled fixture

<sup>9</sup>There is a distinction to be made here between official and fan-led commemoration. The acts of commemoration in the immediate aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster — including the spectacular Anfield shrine covering vast swathes of the pitch and the 'The Mile of Scarves' knotted between there and Goodison Park, the home of their local rivals Everton — were initiated by football fans. It was ten years before an official minute silence was observed at the FA Cup semi-finals in 1999, following pressure from by the Hillsborough Justice Campaign group.

<sup>10</sup>However, it is important not to overstate the rapidity of change following these events. As late as 1998, Frank Keating (1999) remarked upon the lack of attention afforded by football to the death of World Cup winning England manager Alf Ramsey, saying: 'Football is too manic these days to spare time for reflection, remembrance, or humanity, even in death'.

against Belarus (Miller, 1997). The decision to postpone was unprecedented: notwithstanding extreme weather, the football season had continued virtually uninterrupted in the post-1945 era, even in the aftermath of the death of King George VI and Sir Winston Churchill. It is in this context of a commemorative turn in both British sport and society, that we should consider the growing prominence of military remembrance in football.

### Why does football 'remember'?

Since 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, national commemoration has taken place on both Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. This change created the space for a more prominent role for military commemoration *within* football. The first minute silence for fallen soldiers took place in the 1999/2000 season. Since then, it has become a permanent fixture in the football calendar due to several factors: the wider transformation in remembrance practices and the role of particular 'memory entrepreneurs' (Autry, 2017), such as the Royal British Legion (RBL), in lobbying for change; the increasing mediatization of football and the associated changes to the fixture calendar; as well as wider trends in attitudes to commemoration in British society.

The institution of the minute(s) silence for the war dead in football has been augmented over the intervening period. It was first introduced only to matches taking place on Remembrance Sunday. But, in the last decade it has tended to cover professional football matches in all four divisions of the football league, as well as much of the amateur game, scheduled nearest to Remembrance Weekend. The hyper-mediatized nature of modern football is important when considering military commemoration. The advantage of football stadia as a memory hot-spot over other public spaces, such as market squares and war memorials, is that dutiful observance of this liminal moment of quiet reflection can be broadcast to millions at home and overseas. The more diverse range of commemorative practices that emerged in football post-Hillsborough shaped innovations in military commemoration: for example, the unveiling of the Heart of Midlothian memorial to 'fallen footballers' in Edinburgh in 2004 (Ramshaw, 2014); a special, limited edition green 'military-style' Bolton Wanderers third strip during the 2014/2015 season, embossed with the words 'Lest We Forget', from Laurence Binyon's poem 'For The Fallen' (Penn & Berridge, 2018); and the holding of dedicated remembrance services for the war dead at football stadia. What was the stimulus for this change?

The increasing use of commemorative silence in football — what *The Guardian* called 'imitations of armistice silences' (12 September 2002) — and wider society threatened the privileged status of Remembrance Weekend. By the late 1990s there were expressions of anxiety, particularly by the RBL as the self-referential 'guarantor of remembrance', about whether 'the annual memorial to those killed fighting for their country was gradually waning' (Vallely, 2000). At this point the marginalization of military remembrance — in the midst of the wider proliferation



of other types of commemoration — was seized upon by parts of the tabloid press. The *Sunday Express* conducted a survey of 12–16-year olds, finding that a quarter of those interviewed had ‘no idea what Remembrance Sunday was for, believing it was to commemorate other historical figures such as Guy Fawkes’ (Chambers & Black, 2000). This unease was heightened after three-minute silences were held in the aftermath of the terrorist atrocities of 9/11, the 2004 Madrid bombings and the 7/7 London bombings, as well as the 2005 Asian Tsunami. So-called ‘silence inflation’ was perceived as a threat to the distinctiveness and centrality of military remembrance in the British polity (Foster & Woodthorpe, 2012: 54–55).

The rising prominence of the poppy in football can be seen as part of a strategic response to this challenge. The reinvention of military commemoration in football should be understood according to a broader ‘remembrance project’, driven by the RBL, which coheres around the central aim to reaffirm remembrance as a central plank of British public life via popular culture.<sup>11</sup> The entrepreneurial role played by the RBL — supported by senior Army chiefs, other military charities (such as Help for Heroes) and most of the media — has successfully co-opted the political class and much of the private sector in its campaigns, leading to a fundamental recasting of civil–military relations in the UK (Forster, 2012). The change in position of football’s gatekeepers regarding the place of remembrance within professional game — from laggards through to collective acquiescence and finally enthusiastic cheerleaders — reveals the ulterior interests of its authorities and clubs in this project, as well as the wider societal shift in attitude (Hines et al., 2015).

The latest stage in this process is the reification of nations (‘Cymru’n Cofio’/ ‘Wales Remembers’), sports (‘Football Remembers’), and individual clubs (‘Arsenal Remembers’) in military commemoration. There is an increasingly choreographed spectacularization of military remembrance, which seeks to establish a discrete relationship between the football leagues and clubs and the military via the poppy. As Basham argues (2016: 891–92), this can be seen as part of a strategy to invite ‘communities of feeling to remember war in particular ways, most notably, as a matter of masculinised military sacrifice’. The plethora of official and unofficial poppy paraphernalia serve to demonstrate the coalition of the different communities of feeling that exists with regard to football, the military and the nation. The almost ubiquitous pin badges sporting the various football club crests alongside the poppy are a direct artefact of this elision.

The football clubs and authorities are fully cognizant that they operate in a hyper-mediated landscape and are ‘anxious to show a sense of social responsibility that, for all the genuine motives involved, is undoubtedly underlaid by an acute consciousness of image’ (Russell, 2006: 14).<sup>12</sup> There is a desire to reaffirm traditional

<sup>11</sup>See Kelly (2013) who documents the increasing militarisation of popular culture in the UK.

<sup>12</sup>This proliferation of memorialization in football is not restricted to the UK. Herzog (2015: 198) shows that a multitude of diverse traditions, ceremonies and rituals are widely employed by clubs and associations are throughout Europe and beyond, although he concedes that these trends have ‘strong roots’ in the UK.

links to community and nation in an era of globalized football. An era where football is characterized by 'transnational circulation of labour, information, capital, and commodities' (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004: 549) and post-national modes of consumption, has arguably resulted in an increased need to denote local football identity (Johnes & Mason, 2003). As Foster and Woodthorpe (2012: 53) argue, terrace cultures (including those involving memorial and remembrance) have come to adopt a crucial role in representing the nation and locality 'by actuating particularistic symbolism before global audiences'.

Military remembrance has evolved to form a crucial part of football's cultural political economy. As a 'cultural object', the expansion of market relations and capital accumulation in 'the football industry' increasingly rely on the 'aesthetic and culturally symbolic qualities' — such as the poppy — attached to the consumption of football (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2007: 3.3). The spectacle of remembrance in football is likely to continue to grow, as football becomes more of an important commodity for the media and other economic interests to expand their markets and sustain their profits in an increasingly competitive global economy. The turn to commemoration provides useful 'moral lessons' of loyalty, duty, sacrifice and service from 'our heroes', which contrast sharply with the 'the degradation of contemporary footballers' (Russell, 2006: 20–21). As Marina Hyde argues, in the discourse on 'sacrifice in the age of pampering':

Each Remembrance Day we now seem to be reminded just how badly the present crop of moisturised millionaires would struggle in a muddy trench [...] no social group is discussed in these terms more than footballers, who are forever being compared unfavourably with generations past who were conscripted into world wars. No profession doesn't know it's born like footballers don't know they're born. (The Guardian, 9 November, 2016)

We have come full circle. The instrumentalization of football in the dominant nationalistic-militaristic discourse in the contemporary era rests on its denigration rather than its extolment, just as it did at the start of the twentieth century. In the modern spectacle of military remembrance, an antipathy to 'pampered millionaire footballers' as 'shirkers and cowards' is often juxtaposed with the reverence of the 'fallen soldier' (McEvoy, 2014). While professional sportspeople may be 'proxy warriors' of the nation they suffer in comparison to the 'real' warriors and heroes of the armed forces, both past and present. The exalted sacrifice of the fallen purifies 'the web of greed, disloyalty, and hate' (Mosse, 1990: 79) in modern football, so frequently held up as a symbol for all that is wrong with contemporary society from both the left and right of the British media (McEvoy, 2014; Davies, 2016). The decoupling of football from its traditional communities — epitomized by the caricature of the avaricious, immoral 'modern footballer' — is used to further sanctify the war dead and strengthen the communal bonds of a fracturing British nationalism. Contemporary military remembrance in Britain is redolent of

memorial practices in Germany during the 1920s: the calls to waken the fallen soldiers ‘so that they might redeem a living Germany’ (Mosse, 1990: 79).

## Conclusion

The discursive power of football in the modern spectacle lies in its apparent authenticity; ‘there is a real crowd in a real stadium, where social relationships, networks, and identities established amongst those present offer an indissoluble humanity’ (Goldblatt, 2019: 4) in an example of what Durkheim (1912) referred to as ‘collective effervescence’. Indeed, the playing of matches behind closed doors, with no fans in attendance, due to Covid-19 restrictions has underlined the affective capacity of ‘the crowd’ in its absence. This ‘coherent body of people’ (Halbwach, 1992 [1941]: 48) provides the specific affective context or ‘collective milieu’ (Halbwach, 1997 [1950]: 95) in which individuals (both present and watching from afar) can remember and recreate the past. As Halbwach (1992 [1942]: 84) notes, ‘Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time’. The football stadia represents a ‘unique occasion’, which through the collective milieu of the crowd, with its own shared memories, can engender ‘our own constant consciousness of belonging to diverse milieus at all one time’ (Halbwach, 1997 [1950]: 89). In this way the exuberant, tribal commitment of football supporters can be harnessed into a reimagination of Britishness.

The symbolic capital of this authenticity is irresistible to powerful political and economic forces. The instrumentalization of football in the spectacle of military remembrance, however, risks undermining the horrors of war, as it becomes ever more obsessed with the highly-mediated images and the appearance of dutiful respect — a simulacrum of remembrance — over actual thoughtful reflection: ‘The spectacle, considered as the reigning society’s method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a false consciousness of time’ (Debord, 1992 [1967]: 60). As Simon Jenkins (2018) claims, ‘The more staged and synthetic the remembrance, the more it loses veracity and context’. The spectacularization of military remembrance in football thus represents the latest phase through which the experience of war is trivialized, distorted and manipulated in the interests of both the nation-state and global capital.

## Notes on contributor

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