Remembering and Forgetting the Great War in New York City

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This article examines the history of the Great War in New York City and the means by which it has been remembered and forgotten through the presence and absence of war memorials. New York City played a unique role in the history of the Great War, contributing to the war effort even before the declaration of war by the United States in 1917. The wartime experiences in the city were accompanied by political and racial tensions as fears of foreign influences undermining the state were ever-present. In a city which had witnessed large-scale immigration over the preceding century, fears of unrest or unpatriotic and un-American behaviour preoccupied both the city and the federal government. Nevertheless, the wartime contribution of the city’s foreign-born residents was substantial as large numbers registered for military service. As a means of reaffirming the principles of patriotism and an ‘American’ identity for the city, after the Armistice the official bodies and veterans groups worked to develop a singular expression or ‘spirit’ for the local war memorials. As the schemes for a central war memorial for the city floundered, the local memorials served as a means for residents to adopt and adapt this hegemonic expression of ‘American’ identity and form specific memories of the war for each community.

Keywords: New York City; Great War; memory; memorials; identity

# Introduction: New York City and the Great War

In July 2010 the remains of Private Thomas D. Costello of the 60th Infantry Regiment, United States Army, were interred at Arlington National Cemetery. Private Costello, who died during an artillery barrage near Jaulny, south-west of Metz, in September 1918, was a resident of New York City. He had registered for the draft in Manhattan, but was originally born in County Galway, Ireland, in May 1892, later immigrating to the United States with his sisters and brother.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this respect, Private Costello represents an important aspect of the particular history of New York City in the Great War. The city had incorporated waves of immigrants of various ethnicities and religions during the eighteenth century. Indeed, the 1900 census recorded 1,270,080 individuals in New York City who were born outside the United States, which accounted for 37 per cent of the total population of the metropolis.[[2]](#endnote-2) During the Great War, the potential for this disparate population to perpetuate the national struggles that engulfed Europe or to disrupt the endeavour of the United States was a troubling prospect for both the city authorities and the national government. However, by the end of hostilities the city was lauded by officials for its victorious role. The wartime Secretary of the Treasury, William G. McAdoo, could state in a victory parade in 1919, ‘I am proud of our great city, I am proud of the people who inhabit it’ (*New York Times*, April 22 1919).

Nevertheless, the outset of the conflict was accompanied by a concern that the city was an un-patriotic, un-American centre of political and social radicalism, which if it’s foreign-born citizens were called upon for military action would ‘shirk’ or reject their responsibilities.[[3]](#endnote-3) New York City was observed as a possible flashpoint as the war progressed and stories of atrocities, victories and defeats filled the newspapers. The activities of German U-boats, which impacted upon shipping and commerce in the city was a particular source of tension. The sinking of the RMS Lusitania in 1915, the creation of a militarized zone around the British Isles and the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917 by the German Fleet provoked widespread debate within and between the various foreign-language presses and major newspapers in the city.[[4]](#endnote-4) As in 1900 New York City was home to over 300,000 residents born in Germany, 155,000 in Russia, 30,000 in Poland, 275,000 in Ireland, 145,000 in Italy, 117,000 from Austria-Hungary and 90,000 from Great Britain, the potential for political and nationalistic tension was a serious concern.[[5]](#endnote-5) This prompted Mayor John Purroy Mitchell to create the Mayor’s Committee on National Defense in 1915, which was continued by his successor Mayor John Hylan in 1917, to organise efforts to protect the city, foster unity and propound ‘American’ values.[[6]](#endnote-6) Despite these measures, fears of foreign subversion and espionage were frequently recounted in the press (*New York Times*, December 19, 1915; *New York Times*, April 7, 1917). After the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the city authorities were placed on high alert to monitor ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ subversives in the areas of the Bronx and the Upper East Side which housed many of the city’s foreign-born residents. The city’s bridges, harbours and financial district were also provided with armed guards and increased security as even the potentiality of an invasion was countenanced.[[7]](#endnote-7)

# The Draft and the ‘Melting Pot’

The Selective Service Act introduced by the United States Government in 1917 to bolster the armed forces required citizens, naturalised and ‘alien’ men aged 21 to 31 to register for military service. The Act organised the country into a series of District and Local Draft Boards by population size, with each Local Draft Board initiated for every 30,000 people.[[8]](#endnote-8) In New York, the five boroughs were divided into 189 Local Boards, each responsible for assessing an individual’s ability to serve based upon his marital and familial responsibilities and his occupation in vital industries.[[9]](#endnote-9) Whilst the decisions of the Local Boards were considered impartial by observers the burden of military service inevitably fell upon African American men and the lower-skilled, poorer immigrant communities of the city.[[10]](#endnote-10) Despite this bias and fears of widespread avoidance and violence, witnessed in the Draft Riots of 1863, nearly 600,000 citizens of the city registered for the draft.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, the suspicion of foreign elements spreading dissent among the populace remained. Anarchist and Socialist Groups in the Upper East Side were widely condemned for encouraging citizens to ignore the draft registration.[[12]](#endnote-12) Prominent radicals Emma Goldberg and Alexander Berkman were eventually jailed in June 1917 for their role in distributing anti-draft literature in the city.[[13]](#endnote-13) The Silent Protest through Fifth Avenue in July 1917 by 8,000 of the city’s African American community against the racial violence throughout the country was also partially motivated by the added pressures placed on that community by the draft.[[14]](#endnote-14) Though only a relatively small amount of African Americans, foreign-born or second-generation immigrants avoided the draft, concerns were still voiced that the city would fall short of its patriotic duty.[[15]](#endnote-15) In encouraging citizens to reject the dissenting voices, Deputy Attorney General Roscoe S. Conkling called upon the city’s disparate population to show ‘loyalty’ to their country:

Curious eyes are directed toward the City of New York, and active minds are wondering what will happen here. Let the board members and the selected men therefore, inspired by their loyalty to the nation, proceed as a unit to the end that the story of the city’s greatness may be told.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Similarly, Congressman Isaac Siegel, made an appeal to the largely Jewish immigrant population of the Upper East Side to show it was ‘100% American’:

Do your part so New York may show that what people in other parts of the country say about her patriotism is false...Every citizen of the United States is in one of two classes – either he is loyal or he is a traitor.

It was these communities especially that were targeted by police and government officials in programmes to round-up ‘slackers’ and dissenters.[[17]](#endnote-17) These efforts were aided by the National Security League (NSL), an autonomous, non-governmental organisation, initiated in New York in December 1914 to ensure the nation’s readiness for combat and dedicated to disrupt foreign or divisive influences in the country.[[18]](#endnote-18) In September 1918, police officials and members of the NSL detained over 30,000 men who could not produce their draft registration cards. Individual cases of avoidance were publicised, such as that of Abraham Ituro, a 26 year-old Russian immigrant living in Harlem, who had been in the country 14 years, and had not signed up because ‘he did not want to’.[[19]](#endnote-19) However, the New York City draft was marked by how many citizens, foreign-born or of foreign parentage volunteered for the draft and military service with their adopted country.[[20]](#endnote-20) Peter Uskri, an Austrian émigré who admitted he had three brothers in the Austria-Hungarian Army but whose loyalty lay with the United States was accepted by Board 176 in Whitestone, Queens, in August 1917. Other immigrant conscripts declared their own personal motivations for joining up. Stephan Noskewas, a Russian immigrant, stated at the same draft board: ‘I want to fight in the American Army, and if possible against the Turks, for the Turks murdered my mother, my sisters and my brothers’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Complex issues of race, gender, nationality and citizenship, therefore, could be motivating factors for many foreign-born residents.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Such was the scale of the city’s draft registration that its citizens would constitute nearly 10 per cent of the entire force of the United States Army which by November 1918 had reached four million troops.[[23]](#endnote-23) It is these troops that reflected New York City’s heterogeneous constitution. The 369th and the 367th Infantry Regiments were draftees from the African American community in Harlem; the 69th Infantry Regiment were the ‘Fighting Irish’ composed of some of the city’s Irish diaspora; and the 77th Infantry Division were known as the ‘Melting Pot’ division:

The recruits represented all races and all creeds – men who had only recently been subjected to the pogroms of Russia, gunmen and gangsters (a type peculiar to New York City), Italians, Chinamen, the Jews and the Irish, a heterogeneous mass...which compromise the civilian population of New York City.[[24]](#endnote-24)

This ‘citizen army’, constituted by various political, ethnic and religious perspectives, took their part as ‘Doughboys’ in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).[[25]](#endnote-25) The scale of death for these troops was substantial, United States troops suffered heavy losses as they adapted to fighting in the European battlefields.[[26]](#endnote-26) In total, combatant and non-combatant deaths in the army numbered over 100,000 by the cessation of hostilities.[[27]](#endnote-27) This scale of loss provoked a discussion, even before the end of the conflict, amongst citizens, politicians and veterans as to the appropriate manner in which to mark this wartime service and sacrifice. The processes which marked the debates surrounding the erection of memorials highlight the means by which a specific memory of the conflict was adopted and adapted by the city’s residents.

**The Study of Memorials of the Great War**

The role of memorials in marking, maintaining and shaping the remembrance of the Great War has received a great deal of attention in many of the former combatant countries.[[28]](#endnote-28) As the cultural and social history of the war has expanded over the last twenty-five years, scholars have sought to assess the manner in which memorials structure a sense of individual or collective memory.[[29]](#endnote-29) For example, analyses have described how the memorials in France, Britain and Germany operated on a functional level to present a particular nationalistic or imperialistic memory of the conflict to visitors.[[30]](#endnote-30) The memorial architecture in both local and national memorials has also been assessed on its ability to provide relatives as well as wider society with a means to overcome the grief and sense of loss which occurred with the deaths of millions.[[31]](#endnote-31) These two distinct schools of thought, ‘functionalist’ and ‘grief’, have dominated interpretations of the war memorials of the Great War. However, recent studies have highlighted that the two are not mutually exclusive.[[32]](#endnote-32) Indeed, the form and function of war memorials represent the interweaving of wider social and political processes with individual and familial perceptions:

Personal feelings and needs were deeply involved in the practice of commemoration; but it was the organisation of public action which gave it form. At the same time, commemoration raised political issues which participants had to address.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The study of the memorials of the Great War in the United States also reflects this trend as scholars have noted the disparate ethnic and local memories that are evoked through the commemorative architecture.[[34]](#endnote-34) Bodnar has examined how individual civic memorials across the United States in the Great War acted as a hegemonic site of public memory, where communities were inculcated with appeals to patriotism and a particular ideal of American citizenship.[[35]](#endnote-35) Such a process is exemplified in the diffusion of the ‘Doughboy’ statue in the parks and town squares in the United States.[[36]](#endnote-36) These statues, depicting the figure of the heroic soldier of the AEF, appealed to the popular nationalism of the period for communities eager to stress their attachment to the nation.[[37]](#endnote-37) In this respect, the erection of Great War memorials across the political and social landscape of the United States has been highlighted as a process of control, resistance and acquiescence.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Following these studies, the process of memorialising the conflict in New York City represents a distinct episode in the wider remembrance of the war in America. The memorials erected in the aftermath of the conflict reflected the city’s prominent role in the war, the unique constitution of its citizens and the dialogue and debate that arose within the city as communities staked their claim to an ‘American’ identity. This analysis follows the processes and politics involved in the commemoration of the Great War in New York City. Remembering the conflict in the city is considered, therefore, to be an active choice by individuals and collectives, situated within a cultural and social context, bearing implications for identity and indicating the responsibilities that groups hold towards one another. This dynamic attribution of memory is formed through the concept of ‘mediated action’, which is taken to explain the utilisation of cultural forms such as monuments and memorials by agents in the act of remembering. These cultural forms, whilst possibly representing particular narratives regarding the past, provide frames in which societies themselves forge alternative, dissonant or indeed affirming narratives.[[39]](#endnote-39) The investigation of what can be termed ‘social memory’ or ‘cultural memory’ entails the analysis of the specific forms that this mediation takes, and it requires an understanding of how such narratives are produced by institutions and how they are consumed, or used, by individuals and collectives.

**New York’s Wartime and Victory Monuments**

The requirements of war had already shaped parts of the city into temporary memorials and shrines. The campaign for wartime bonds, the ‘Liberty Loans’, transformed a section of Fifth Avenue in lower Manhattan into a commemorative processional way.[[40]](#endnote-40) To encourage businesses, organisations and citizens to buy these wartime bonds the Liberty Loans Committee of New York and the committee of arts and decoration for the Mayor’s Committee on National Defense organized artists to decorate Fifth Avenue from Madison Square Park to Central Park.[[41]](#endnote-41) The Mayor’s Committee was particularly interested in the work of monuments to inspire patriotism and encourage the cohesion of an ethnically diverse city. The drive for the Fourth Liberty Loan in September 1918 witnessed the culmination of these activities as paintings, dramas, musical recitals and monuments were enacted or erected over a kilometre from 23rd Street to 59th Street. This triumphant way was renamed temporarily as the ‘Avenue of the Allies’ as each block on the avenue was devoted to one of the Allied nations. Along this route, shop windows were decorated with memorials and sculptures of ‘Victory’ or patriotic artwork by renowned artists depicting the heroes of United States and the Allies were placed at prominent places.[[42]](#endnote-42) An ‘Altar of Liberty’ was constructed at Madison Square which acted as a stage for the performances of patriotic songs, dramas and music. Outside the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue a picture frame was placed, measuring 18 metres square, upon which for 22 successive days a picture was placed marking the ‘spirit’ of one of the Allied nations. This celebration of the multinational wartime effort also enabled many of the diasporic citizens of the city to support both their country of birth and their adopted homeland. Buying the loans became a symbol of patriotic duty, though as each of the Allied nations was honoured during the Fourth Liberty Loan Drive in the city, citizens were able to express their multiple allegiances.[[43]](#endnote-43)

This wartime memorialisation on Fifth Avenue influenced the debates regarding the manner by which the city would mark the conflict after the hostilities. Many within the city suggested that the ‘noble mood’ reflected in the avenue should be made permanent after the war.[[44]](#endnote-44) After November 1918, politicians, veterans groups and wartime organisations began suggesting ideas as to how to commemorate New York’s soldiers in the AEF. Immediately after the declaration of peace, Mayor Hylan authorised a committee to plan for an appropriate monuments and devices to mark the return of United States troops.[[45]](#endnote-45) The committee, named the Mayor’s Committee on a Permanent War Memorial, and chaired by the politician and wartime Special Deputy Police Commissioner of New York Rodman Wanamaker, appointed the architects Paul Wayland Bartlett and Thomas Hastings to oversee a group or architects and artists whose detail was to prepare Fifth Avenue for the homecoming parades.[[46]](#endnote-46) To raise the sufficient funds to erect both the temporary and planned permanent memorial, Wanamaker announced in late November 1918 that public subscriptions would be sought and collected by members of the Police Department and Police Reserves. Citizens of the city were called upon to show their gratitude and patriotism and donate to the fund.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The public funds paid for a memorial scheme along Fifth Avenue which offered both the citizens of New York City and the returning troops with a symbol of victorious unity grounded in the language of classical architecture.[[48]](#endnote-48) The three elements of the memorial avenue were; the ‘Arch of Victory’ located on 24th Street on Fifth Avenue, measuring over 30 metres high, depicting allegorical figures of Democracy and Justice and exhibiting panels commemorating the efforts at home and on the battlefield; the ‘Arch of Jewels’ on 60th Street, a columned gateway decorated with over 20,000 pieces of crystal, lit up by searchlights at night, along its centre was draped an American flag; and the ‘Court of the Dead’, outside the New York Public Library, where the passing parade could honour the fallen. The ‘Court of the Dead’ was comprised of two pylons, bearing the emblems of United States divisions and depicting shields, spears and palm leaves, connected by a purple sheath, upon which the names of battles fought by American troops were etched in gold.[[49]](#endnote-49) For the return of the New York regiments, 189 wreaths from each draft board were placed at the foot of the monument.[[50]](#endnote-50) The three elements thereby provided the parades with prompts of victory, remembrance and thankfulness whilst the dedication to nation and service was reinforced throughout the commemorative scheme. Indeed, the return of soldiers recruited from the diverse city was an occasion for a wider reflection on issues of ‘patriotism’ and nationhood. The parade on May 7 1919, of the 77th Infantry Division, the ‘Melting Pot’ Division, served to reaffirm specific ideas of citizenship. The 77th Division were thereby extolled as an example of valour and patriotism for all of New York’s residents:

They were just the ordinary American boy taken from the office and shop to answer the call of their country and the land of their adoption...New York was proud of them.[[51]](#endnote-51)

For the return of the 27th Infantry Division in March 1919, stores along Fifth Avenue were all draped in the national flag whilst one store used its shop frontage to display a United States flag five stories high.[[52]](#endnote-52) Such sentiments were not expressed for the earlier parade of the 369th Infantry Regiment in February 1918, ‘The Harlem Hellfighters’, whose heroics in battle were applauded along Fifth Avenue without the allusions to citizenship and patriotism and without the monumental architecture which was yet to be constructed.[[53]](#endnote-53) These sentiments, however, were expressed in the welcoming received in the soldiers’ local boroughs. Indeed, communities held homecoming dinners, galas and dances to welcome back the troops of their area. Jewish residents of the Lower East Side of Manhattan organised committees to prepare celebrations for the 14,000 New York men of Jewish heritage who fought in the AEF.[[54]](#endnote-54) Nevertheless, it was the newly-formed Mayor’s Committee that structured the large-scale welcoming parades for New York’s troops that focused attention for the city’s residents.

**A Permanent Memorial for the City**

The committee were also keen to replicate the themes of patriotism and service in the parades within their plan for a permanent war memorial. Under Wanamaker’s supervision, the committee launched an open competition and public hearings for artists and architects to submit plans for the permanent memorial in November 1919.[[55]](#endnote-55) A jury of artists and lay persons were selected to hear the proposed schemes, though no single scheme found favour with the panel. Though the committee did use the proposals to suggest a number of possible memorial schemes for the city:

* A ‘Liberty Bridge’ should be erected over the Hudson River
* Madison Square Garden should be purchased for a ‘Liberty Hall’ – the largest convention centre in the world
* A ‘Liberty Arch’ erected as a ‘constant reminder of the sacrifice’.

As these suggestions were announced, the Committee on a Permanent War Memorial began a laborious process of negotiation and debate with politicians and citizens as to the utility of the schemes to the city. The initial proposal of a ‘Liberty Bridge’ quickly drew the attention and ire of New York’s representatives as a scheme which would benefit not only the residents of the city but neighbouring New Jersey was not thought fitting enough a memorial for New York’s troops.[[56]](#endnote-56) The concept of a ‘Liberty Hall’ on Madison Square Garden was also rapidly withdrawn, as the group proposing its erection considered that it would be more desirable to pursue as an independent venture rather than as part of the city’s own plan.[[57]](#endnote-57) The group was formed in 1919 as the Victory Hall Association, Inc. (VHA) to raise funds for a conference and exhibition hall. The building was designed as an imposing monument for the men and women who served in the United States Army during the conflict. It would seat 20,000, house meeting rooms, a swimming pool and a rifle range. It would be replete with bronze plaques naming the dead and house a record of the service of United States citizens in the war.[[58]](#endnote-58) Plans were set out to raise the $20m required to build the site from public and private donations in late 1919.[[59]](#endnote-59) The vision of the plan was also backed by state officials and the judiciary as the VHA secured permission to possess and build the grand edifice on an entire block, bounded by Lexington and Park Avenues in the east and west, and by 42nd and 41st Streets to the north and south.[[60]](#endnote-60) Despite substantial political support, the proposed development received criticism for its utilisation of what was possibly the most expensive piece of real estate in the world. Alderman, and future New York City Mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, criticised the scheme as depriving citizens of the valuable income that the city-owned property would raise. La Guardia also suggested that the Victory Hall would serve to benefit the needs of the wealthy and influential hotel operators and apartment owners in the district by preventing the building of a public subway stop on the site.[[61]](#endnote-61) The VHA attempted to deflect this criticism of elitism and popularize the venture amongst citizens by proposing that the Victory Hall should be the resting place of New York’s own ‘Unknown Soldier’, mirroring the internment at Arlington National Cemetery in 1921. However, petitions issued to Secretary of State for War, Newton D. Baker were met with refusal.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Witnessing the failure of these high profile plans, the Committee thereby sought to propose the erection of a ‘Liberty Arch’ and a ‘Liberty Altar’ on Madison Square Park. By utilising the designs of the temporary memorials which marked the return home of United States troops the committee sought to appease both politicians and citizens. Despite this presumption the plans received widespread criticism and were eventually blocked by the Board of Estimate, which controlled the city’s financial outlay, as too expensive, impractical considering the potential future development of the city and significantly that the classical forms proposed failed to evoke ‘the American spirit’.[[63]](#endnote-63) The plans were also opposed by veterans groups who became increasingly influential in the commemoration of the war in the city. The American Legion, formed in 1919 and divided into local ‘posts’, argued that the scheme did not reflect the sacrifice and unity of the troops.[[64]](#endnote-64) By the end of 1921, the failure to secure a viable site and commission a structure for the city’s war memorial led to the resignation of Wanamaker. By April 1922, with the proposed memorial scheme still floundering, Wanamaker was reappointed by Mayor Hylan to spearhead a new drive to furnish the city with an appropriate monument.[[65]](#endnote-65)

At this point, the new Committee selected once again the architect Thomas Hastings to plan a memorial. Hastings responded by reworking a previously discarded project of his to transform the lower reservoir in Central Park into a grand monumental lagoon. The design of this monument went through several stages as Hastings recast the scheme to suit the demands of politicians and the criticisms of fellow architects and artists.[[66]](#endnote-66) The plan eventually proposed the drainage of the lower reservoir and the construction of a memorial arch, which would house relics of the conflict. The scheme would also incorporate children’s play areas and provide a link between the two most prestigious museums in the city, the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The proposal struggled to attract funding from the public; raising only over $200,000 towards the estimated cost of $745,000. Whilst receiving support from Mayor Hylan and the Parks Commissioner Francis Gallatin the proposal was blocked by opponents on the basis that it deprived the poorer residents from the outer boroughs of access to open space and ‘vandalised’ the aesthetic of the park’s vistas.[[67]](#endnote-67) The lack of widespread political and popular support as well as the limited financial resources ensured the proposal was eventually voted down by the Board of Estimate and the plan for a war memorial indefinitely postponed in May 1924. Nevertheless, the city still possessed the money raised through public donations to fund the war memorial which now amounted to over $340,000. This fund would eventually be used a decade later to build playgrounds in the city’s boroughs named for nine of the city’s soldiers who died in the war.[[68]](#endnote-68)

**The Local War Memorials**

Whilst the memorial playgrounds celebrated the individuals from their communities they were only an incomplete means to recognise the contribution of the city’s population in the war. In contrast to the hesitant and partial official effort to remember the war, the communities of New York commissioned and erected their own memorials to mark the service of the men and women from their own areas.[[69]](#endnote-69) Across the boroughs of New York City, citizens who witnessed the draft of young men from their community had either experienced the death of family members directly or knew of others who had felt loss and bereavement. The return home of the soldiers was met with a desire from localities to erect memorials and monuments to honour the service and sacrifice of their own residents. As more areas declared an interest in erecting a permanent dedication of some form, a growing unease was felt by both New York’s political authorities and the architectural and artistic elite, that a profusion of structures of dubious taste and aestheticism would soon crowd the city.[[70]](#endnote-70) The fear of an expression of diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions was also considered to go against the desire to express a unified ‘American spirit’ in the war memorials.[[71]](#endnote-71) The body controlling the erection of public or private monuments in New York City on public property was the Art Commission, which was established in 1898 to curtail the profusion of individual monuments and establish aesthetic principles for the construction of artwork in the city.[[72]](#endnote-72) The Art Commission’s board was composed of the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the President of the New York Public Library, the President of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, three artists and three ‘lay’ members unattached to the arts profession. The commission possessed the power to accept, veto and request alterations on any proposed structure in the city. Directly after 1918 and lasting throughout the 1920s, the commission’s main source of work was concerned with the erection of memorials in communities across the city.[[73]](#endnote-73) Groups and organisations desiring to build a monument on public land, therefore, were required to obtain permission from the commission on issues of design and location.

The Art Commission adhered to a series of principles in the construction of local war memorials. These were based on issues of taste, practicality and ‘spirit’ and reflected the wider debates across the United States on the form and function of public war memorials.[[74]](#endnote-74) The American Federation of the Arts also took a key role in this process and offered advice to organisations seeking a memorial in their area.[[75]](#endnote-75) The goals of both the Art Commission and the AFA were highly compatible. Indeed, the AFA not only held board members in common with the Art Commission, but also proposed a similar set of viable designs for war monuments. Whilst social groups and organisations called for the construction of community halls and community facilities, a dominant movement within the AFA and the Art Commission of New York City dismissed these proposals as potentially divisive and against ‘the spirit of remembrance’.[[76]](#endnote-76) The American Legion, the Gold Star Mothers and the Veterans of Foreign Wars took the same interest in the construction of local war memorials in the city. In this manner, meeting places, libraries and public amenities were considered to encourage and perpetuate ethnic, cultural or religious enclaves within society. In the scheme of planners, the remembrance of the war required a dedication to unity, the principles of liberty and an assertion of ‘one nation’ and ‘100 per cent Americanism’:

Any method of commemoration will be fitting that in simple, straightforward manner, expressed the feelings of honor and gratitude which stir the community.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Monuments and memorials were, thereby, restricted to a number of forms which were thought most suited to communicate these concepts. Flagpoles, tablets, allegorical statues and soldier statues of ‘artistic’ merit were considered appropriate in developing a scheme of commemoration that reflected the correct ‘spirit’.[[78]](#endnote-78) As the immediate post-war period saw widespread ethic, racial and political violence, the desire to use war memorials to evoke a stable and unified nation was pressing across the United States and especially in New York. The suspicion of ‘foreign’ elements raised by the 1918 Sedition Act, which enabled the expulsion of dissenters from the country and was only repealed in late 1920, served to heighten distrust of communities in the city; the summer of 1919 witnessed substantial race riots in a number of locations, including New York City; and in September 1920, a bomb concealed in a horse-drawn carriage and thought to be planted by Italian anarchists, exploded on Wall Street killing 38 and wounding hundreds.[[79]](#endnote-79) The Art Commission of New York was, therefore, compelled to take decisions on monuments in the context of these social and political anxieties.

The option to construct a local memorial was often taken in conjunction with the regional officials and prominent businessmen that also sat on the local draft boards as well as housing associations and political groups. However, the funding and support for such schemes came directly from the local residents as they sought a means to mark the effect of the war on their community.[[80]](#endnote-80) These memorials reflected a community’s inclusion as part of the wider war effort. For the émigré communities of New York City, it anchored them into the history of their adopted country and served to demonstrate their status *in America*. For the Art Commission and groups such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Gold Star Mothers, such memorials acted as a means of unifying the nation and acclimatising foreign-born and diasporic communities *as American*. The ability of the Art Commission to control these local memorials was an inevitable by-product of the inability of communities to obtain private land for construction. As the price of real-estate was at a premium, and the future progress of areas still unknown, there was a marked hesitancy in building memorials which would subsequently become obstacles to housing, traffic or development.[[81]](#endnote-81) As such, the only recourse groups had to ensure the building of their memorial was to request permission from the Parks Commission to build structures in the city’s parks, squares and gardens. As memorials on public property the final decision on the form of the memorial would lie entirely with the Art Commission. Such an arrangement was also favoured by the Park Commissioner Francis Gallatin who argued that the memorials and monuments in the city’s public spaces could do more to ‘Americanize’ the city’s foreign-born residents than ‘all the sermons on Americanisation’.[[82]](#endnote-82)

Local memorial schemes continued apace and by 1921, the total number of war memorials across the city numbered nearly 50. By the 1930s there were approximately 100 memorials on public property in New York City.[[83]](#endnote-83) Indeed, the rush of some residence committees to erect their own monument led to complications and duplications. Anthony Pantola of Lewis Place, Brooklyn, was falsely recorded as dead whilst serving in France, whilst the records had been amended, his name still appeared on three separate memorials in Brooklyn in 1922.[[84]](#endnote-84) Communities were desirous of connecting themselves with the war effort and quickly raised funds to support the work of the various local ‘War Monument Committee’ and ‘Victory Associations’ which were initiated to oversee developments. The residents of Long Island raised the majority of the $20,000 required to build a memorial in their area through a circus held for the community in 1920 (Figure 1).[[85]](#endnote-85) To acquire the funds for a memorial in Highland Park, Brooklyn, the local memorial committee organised block parties for local businesses and political groups as well as the Polish and Italian communities in the area.[[86]](#endnote-86) Whilst the collection of money to support the building of monuments drew upon the city’s diverse communities, the modes of expression deemed suitable for the monuments architecture did not. Indeed, a certain awkwardness pertained the discussions between the Art Commission and foreign-born residents:

The greatest diplomacy must be used to avoid hurting the feelings of such donors (proposals put forward by those ‘deficient in artistic judgment’)...the problem is particularly complicated where Americans of foreign birth or descent are concerned.[[87]](#endnote-87)

The Art Commission would inform local communities of the verdict of their proposed memorial and could suggest alterations in the location and design of the piece. To ensure support for the scheme, local groups would also enlist the assistance of local chapters of the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Gold Star Mothers. These groups could also participate in the decisions made as to the form of memorials before submission to the Art Commission. Despite the level of hegemonic control over the selection of memorials, these structures served to provide reassurance and support for bereaved families, especially for those whose relatives were buried in Europe. Joseph Scherer, treasurer for the Long Island City Memorial League stated at the outset of his organisation’s efforts to fund a local memorial:

I believe that a monument bearing the names of the country’s dead erected in the localities from which the men were taken would be a solace to those whose relatives lie ‘over there’.[[88]](#endnote-88)

In contrast to the limited amounts that were raised for the proposed permanent memorial for the entire city, the smaller community memorials were able to motivate residents and local businesses to contribute to the building of their own site of remembrance. These memorials were intended to provide communities with a permanent memorial of patriotism and sacrifice to the nation. This is most clearly manifested in the use of the ‘Doughboy’ statue or soldier statuary which was used for nine of the 100 memorials on public property in the city. These pieces were selected by the Art Commission and were not the cast-iron replicas which quickly became popular in small towns in the United States. These statues were commissioned from notable artists and cast in bronze depicting soldiers in a variety of poses, poised, contemplative, valorous and mournful. Despite the emotion or action that these statues depicted, they provided communities with a symbol of unity. The figure of the soldier was used to stand for the ‘100 per cent Americanism’; a means of remembering not the heritage and background of the soldiers from the area, but a reminder of the collective appeal to nation. The artist Celia Beaux, working with the AFA, reflected upon this communicative power of the statue of the soldier:

Surely the most poignant reminder, must be the image of the boy himself, as he goes to the front, with the burden of his full kit, and accoutrement from under which his boyish, lean, American face leans out.[[89]](#endnote-89)

The statue was particularly popular for residents from the middle class districts around the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The community around Greenwich Village funded the $10,000 required for the construction of a bronze ‘Doughboy’ in Abingdon Square, whilst memorial associations organised the construction of the Chelsea Park and De Witt Clinton Park ‘doughboys’.[[90]](#endnote-90) The ‘Doughboy’ statue was also erected across the other boroughs of the city, with the Woodside Doughboy in Queens paid for by the local chapter of the Gold Star Mothers. This memorial was unveiled in November 1921 and contains a dedication to the ‘Unknown Soldier’, ‘to those unknown heroes of the community who died in the service’. Whilst egalitarian in composition, the reference to the ‘unknown soldier’ served to reinforce the concept of ‘one nation’. The author, John Dos Passos, a veteran of the conflict, critiqued this pretence of this democratic mode of remembrance in ‘The Body of an American’:

Make sure he aint a dinge, boys

make sure he aint a guinea or a kike

how can you tell a guys a hundredpercent when all you’ve got’s a gunnysack full of bones bronze buttons stamped with the screaming eagle and a pair of roll puttees?[[91]](#endnote-91)

The ‘spirit of remembrance’ required by the Art Commission evoked a singular vision of liberty, patriotism and service that required foreign-born residents to conform to a concept of ‘American’ identity. The statue of a bronze angel in Winthrop Park, Brooklyn raised by the Greenpoint Memorial Association reflects these desires in its dedication:

‘To the living and the dead heroes of Greenpoint who fought in the world war because they loved America, revered its ideals understood and supported its institutions and gave their all that our government shall not perish from the earth’

The efforts of the American Legion and the Gold Star Mothers, whose posts throughout the city sponsored a third of the memorials on public property, served to reinforce these notions. Monuments and memorials to the African American servicemen of the city were conspicuous by their absence. The Gold Star Mothers did not allow African American members and the William Lloyd Garrison Post of the American Legion in Harlem for African American veterans faced accusations of dissent and corruption from the Legion’s principals in the early 1920s.[[92]](#endnote-92) Public bodies and veteran’s groups, therefore, did not assist in providing memorials to reaffirm the principles of citizenship and ‘Americanism’ within the African American communities in Harlem and elsewhere in the city.

Whilst the memorials were intended to act as unifying force, bringing together the disparate populations, they became the focus of community activities. As the campaign for a city memorial faltered, throughout the 1920s the centre of memorial activity shifted to the local boroughs and around the individual memorials. The marking of Armistice Day in the city had continued to use a parade on Fifth Avenue as the means of coordinating remembrance activities. These often served to appeal to popular nationalism as part of the commemorations. In November 1921, marchers carried an American flag as part of the ‘Americanization parade’ organised by veterans groups to mark the internment of the ‘Unknown Soldier’ and to raise awareness of American values.[[93]](#endnote-93) The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars were key in ensuring the observance of the Armistice Day and the two minute silence in the city.[[94]](#endnote-94) Large crowds in early 1920s were drawn to Fifth Avenue to watch parades of veterans.[[95]](#endnote-95) However, as the local memorials were constructed, largely between 1920 and 1926, the remembrance activities were attached to these sites. For instance, the marking of Armistice Day in 1925 in Greater Ridgewood, Brooklyn, was marked by a large parade conducted through the streets of the community after which a congregation gathered at the Ridgewood Memorial Monument, a gift of the Gold Star Mothers, where a service was held to honour the 111 men from Ridgewood who died in the war.[[96]](#endnote-96) Whilst local memorials became the backdrop for military manoeuvres, veteran’s parades and religious services – local memorials became a means of articulating the memory of the service of members of the community in the conflict. Monuments became part of the ‘ownership’ of communities and their maintenance and upkeep became significant to the areas that upheld the memory of their fellow citizen’s service. This process has continued to the present; the ‘Winged Victory’ statue in Pleasant Plains in the borough of Staten Island, erected in 1923, was stolen in 1975 whilst being repaired after its position on a traffic island resulted in repeated damage in collisions with cars. Whilst the city authorities offered an alternative structure as a replacement, local residents campaigned for a replica of the monument, which was originally raised through public subscription, to continue honouring the wartime actions of its residents.[[97]](#endnote-97) Furthermore, in 2005 the 369th Infantry Division, the ‘Harlem Hellfighters’, officially received recognition in the city for their wartime service with an obelisk erected in Harlem outside the 369th Armory.

**Conclusions**

The memory of the Great War in New York City is thereby marked by division, anxiety, conformity and eventual ownership. Whilst no central memorial exists which structures the remembrance of the conflict, local sites of memory have served to articulate wider sentiments regarding identity, citizenship and patriotism. As the hundredth anniversaries of the Great War approach a reappraisal of the history and legacy of the United State’s involvement in the global conflagration is apparent. Scholars have assessed how the war formed the basis of the ‘American century’, paving the way for the cultural and political dominance of the United States.[[98]](#endnote-98) The memory of the war in the city was a highly contested issue immediately after the cessation of the conflict; various interest groups and political authorities sought to utilise the war experience as a means to recast the disparate population of New York as ‘100 per cent American’. As the fear of ‘foreign influences’ infiltrating New York’s political and social systems and wreaking havoc as well as wider racial tensions in the city, war memorials were used to provide a harmonious, unified vision of ‘Americanism’ in a city whose varied population before the war had been routinely viewed as ‘un-American’. The remembrance of the war in the city was in this respect cast as one held by local communities. Rather than forming a singular, popular memory of the war, the communities in New York City created memories of the conflict which were specific to their own context. For the émigré populations, these memorials occupied a multiform of positions. Memorials were part of a hegemonic structure, to remember the war as a unifying experience to encourage the process of ‘Americanization’; conversely, they also acted as a means of validating their own presence in the city, stressing their place in the history of the United States; finally, the memorials were also a significant means of grieving for the dead, enabling bereaved families to remember their relatives.

Memorials to the Great War in New York City encapsulate the social, political and individual impact of the conflict on the city. The division of the analysis of war memorials into a ‘functional school’ or a ‘grief school’ obscures how these memorials portray, create and maintain narratives of remembrance which function at multiple levels. The war memorials in New York City emphasise this capacity of structures to create a complex web of associations. The official narratives of remembrance were intended to smooth away the distinctions within the city’s population. Despite this objective, memorials became anchors for citizens, attaching them to their place in the city and the country. The memory of the Great War in New York is not located in a single site, a monument or tomb. It might, therefore, appear that the war is a forgotten aspect of the city’s and United States history. Such a perspective derives from the inappropriate level of analysis conducted on the remembrance of the war in the United States. A dominant narrative of remembrance comparable to that of Britain, France, Australia or Canada does not exist. Rather, the remembrance of the war is composed of a series of ‘memories’, individual narratives of participation and engagement that demonstrate identity, place and attachment and that are mobilised to reaffirm a group’s or community’s history.

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2. . Census Office, *Abstract of the Twelfth Census, 1900*, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 10-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Schrader, “The German Americans,” 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Census Office, *Abstract of the Twelfth Census, 1900*, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Chadbourne, *Mayor’s Committee on National Defence,* 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . “New York Police Department is on a War Footing,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1917; “City Now Prepared is Calmly Waiting,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Office of the Provost Marshal General, *Selective Service Regulations*, 1-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Chambers, *To Raise an Army*, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Ford, *Americans All*, 25-27; Ford, “Mindful of the traditions of His Race,” 35-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . “Appeals from Draft put at 30,000 Here,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1918. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . “Predict Peaceful Registration Here,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1917.

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13. . “Emma Goldman and A. Berkman Behind the Bars,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . “Negroes in Protest March in Fifth Avenue,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Leonard, *The Story of New York in the World War*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . This and the proceeding quotation are both from “Upper East Side Cool on Draft Adherents,” *New York Times*,May 31, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . “Issue Final Orders for Mobilisation”, *New York Times*, September 7, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Ward, “The origin and activities of the National Security League,” 51-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. “Seize 20,000 Here in Slacker Search,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1918. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Sterba, *Good Americans*, 10-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . “Three Boards Fill Quotas for Draft,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1917. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Shenk, *Work or Fight*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Leonard, *The Story of New York in the World War*, 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Ibid., 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Kennedy, *Over Here*, 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Grotelueschen, *The AEF way of war*, 20-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Congressional Research Service, “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” [http://www*.*fas*.*org*/* sgp*/*crs*/*natsec*/*RL32492*.*pdf](http://www.fas.org/%20sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf) (accessed November 10, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . Moriarty, “The Material Culture of Great War Remembrance,” 653. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*; Bushaway, “Name upon name”; Prost, *Republican Identities*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Maclean and Phillips, The Sorrow and the Pride; Inglis, “The Homecoming”; Gaffney, *Aftermath*; Connelly, *The Great War*. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . Moriarty, “Private Grief and Public Remembrance,” 125-126. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . King, *Memorials in the Great War*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . Glassberg and Moore, “Patriotism in Orange,” 160-162. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . Bodnar, Remaking America, 15; Bodnar, “Public Memory in an American City,” 74-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . Wingate, “Over the top,” 29-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . Piehler, “Remembering the war to end all wars,” 28-30; Piehler, “The war dead and the Gold Star”, 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . Piehler, Remembering War, 15-18; Trout, Battlefields of Memory, 12; Budreau, Bodies of War, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . Wertsch, *Voices of Collecting Remembering*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . “Art on the ‘Avenue of the Allies’, New York City,” *Art and Archaeology* 7 (338-339). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
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51. . Gannon, “Proceedings of the United Spanish War Veterans,” 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
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53. . “Fifth Avenue Cheers Negro Veterans”, *New York Times*, February 18, 1919. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. . “Honor the Fallen in Court of Dead,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1919.

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    **List of Figures**

    Figure 1. Astoria Park War Memorial. Erected by the Long Island City Memorial League, 1926. Photograph by author. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)