**War Discourse: still talking about the First World War in Britain, 1914-2014**

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This chapter examines how the First World War is still talked about in Britain within political, media and public discourse. In advance of the centenary of its outbreak, the First World War has been a regular feature of discussion within Parliamentary debates, newspaper columns and a variety of political, social and local interest groups. These particular arenas frequently utilise a set of common responses to engage with, describe and remember the war. Terms such as ‘sacrifice’, ‘stoicism’, ‘futility’ or ‘slaughter’ are evoked in these circumstances to frame the conflict for contemporary society. However, alongside these traditional narratives of the war, alternative concepts of ‘celebration’, ‘community’ and ‘legacy’ have been used across a variety of media to structure the war’s remembrance to mark the centenary. Through an analysis of the political debate during the approach to the anniversary in 2014, a specific ‘war discourse’ will be identified. Using the methodology of critical discourse analysis, this way of talking about the war will be assessed as a form of social practice, reflecting issues of identity, power and politics within contemporary Britain. With the passing of the last veterans of the conflict the war has now moved beyond individual remembrance, however, despite this, the commemoration of the war is maintained and structured through language. This chapter demonstrates that far from receding into history, the way the war is talked about maintains its presence and its effect for British society. In this manner, through the study of the ‘war discourse’, language mobilises the past for the present.

**The First World War: myth, history, memory and language**

The remembrance of the war of the 1914-1918 in contemporary Britain appears to be a battlefield itself. With the advent of the hundredth anniversary of the war’s outbreak in August 2014, an array of politicians, actors, writers, campaigners and authors all stated their interpretation of the conflict as a tragic, futile endeavour. This description of the war is often termed the ‘popular memory’ by scholars who have highlighted how this interpretation is born from a widely-held misconception (Todman 2005). Over the past three decades, historians have sought to challenge the perception of the conflict as one of ‘mud, blood, rats and gas’ (Bond 2002). This analysis, termed as ‘revisonist history’, asserts the war as a success; a period when the entire nation was mobilised successfully for eventual victory in the field (Sheffield 2002). The reason for this disconnect between ‘academic’ and ‘public’ assessments of the conflict has been placed firmly upon the literary representations of the war from the 1920s and the depictions on television and film since the 1960s (Badsey 2001). However, such a position assumes that the public vapidly consumes these accounts and does not consider how the remembrance of the war serves as a far more dynamic element within British society (after Samuel 1994). This also locates the remembrance of the war in one particular medium when the field of memory studies has emphasised the multiplicity of forms through which the past is recalled; through media, memorials, practices, values, ideas and habits (Wertsch 2002). These acts of commemoration are also regarded by scholars with significance as they relate how contemporary individuals, groups and communities relate themselves to a historical or imagined past. Therefore, rather than attempt to locate the ‘popular memory’ of the war as formed from television and film and the result of the passive consumption of these media products, an alternative assessment of the way in which the war is recalled within society as a dynamic process can be asserted (Wilson 2013). In this manner, the place of the First World War within contemporary Britain can be examined through the tangible and intangible heritage of the conflict as an action undertaken for specific purposes. When the war is spoken of within current society, it is used as a means expressing current ideas as much as past occurrences.

This is especially evident with the way in which the First World War is recalled through the use of language in Britain. Through this medium, the conflict is remembered within the political, media and public sphere and its meanings and values for the present are contested. The study of the relationship between language and the war of 1914-1918 has been significantly neglected by studies of both the history and the memory of the conflict. Whilst assessments of film, propaganda and politics have utilised ideas about the deployment of language within society it has not yet formed a substantial part of study. Scholars have not focused upon the expressions, terms and vernacular usage of soldiers at the front and civilians at home during the war as a means of understanding the experience of civilians within a ‘total war’ (see Wilson 2011). Similarly, despite the profusion of studies regarding the remembrance of the events of the First World War in Britain, there has been only a limited movement within academia to examine how language is used to mobilise memory with regard to the conflict (see Wilson 2014). This oversight is significant as language as a historical and current phenomenon has been examined as the key feature of identity through representation and communication (Gadamer 1960). With this principle, the role of language in the remembrance of the First World is particularly striking. The conflict ushered in a range of phrases and monikers as civilians who were recruited and conscripted or were linked to the war effort through labour or family were introduced to an official and unofficial government and military lexicon. Such connections resulted in a dramatic change in vernacular expression as individuals at front, behind the lines and at home could reference; ‘going over the top’, ‘no man’s land’, ‘barrage’, ‘in the trenches’, ‘whizzbangs’, ‘conchies’ or ‘brass hats’ to describe their own lives or those of others (Ammer 1989). Language during the war served as a means to identify belonging and knowledge whilst it also demonstrates the extent to which the conflict shaped all aspects of cultural and social life.

The legacy of this militarisation of language can still be noted today in the popular lexicon. Across the political, media and public sphere, the language of the First World War is employed. However, the manner of its usage indicates a process that is far from the simple process of consumption that revisionist historians have assessed. The war is frequently talked about, but it is used to discuss issues far removed from the events of 1914-1918. In this employment, the war serves as a device to comment upon the experiences that individuals, groups and communities are exposed to in contemporary Britain. Far from serving as a purely illustrative effect, this mode of referencing communicates issues of identity, politics and representation in modern society. For example, the phrase ‘in the trenches’ is regularly employed within the political, media and public sphere as a means of criticising authority and the dereliction of duty as well as demonstrating a sense of suffering and common, collective effort. With the employment of austerity measures after the election of the coalition government in Britain in 2010, the saying has been employed within the leftwing media as a vehicle for emphasising opposition:

The image of the NHS today is of the British army on the Somme, “lions led by donkeys”. The lions are nurses, labouring in the trenches. The donkeys are back at the chateau, scoffing seminars, feuding with ministers, arguing on Radio 4's Today programme. Foreigners look on in amazement. This is a health service, for goodness sake, not a state religion (Jenkins 2013).

Durham’s deputy leader Alan Napier said the Coalition had been an economic disaster and cabinet member Morris Nicholls said dealing with the cuts was “like being in the trenches” (Tallentire 2014).

Lib Dem president Tim Farron, who warned against cutting the top 50p tax rate, said it is a daily battle to stick up for ordinary workers. He said: “We as Lib Dems have to fight in the trenches day in, day out to try to make sure that it’s not just the poor who are paying” (Lyons 2012).

Framing current debates in the context of the war of 1914-1918 immediately places a significant emotional, symbolic and political structure to understanding contemporary issues (Wilson 2014). The intangible heritage of the conflict, in the words and phrases that emerged or are associated with the war, can demonstrate the social practices of remembrance as an active, engaged process. The war is recalled within Britain not just to commemorate the events and individuals who served, fought and died in the conflict but to detail issues of identity and power today. Therefore, the discussions regarding the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of war indicate more than just differing opinions but constitute subtle forms of discourse that seek to represent both the past and the present in particular frameworks.

**Analysing language and the remembrance of the war**

To examine the way in which the conflict was discussed and its place within wider British society during the period of preparation for the anniversary as well as the event itself, the political speeches, media coverage and public debate surrounding the centenary of the outbreak of war in 2014 can be utilised. The purpose of this selection is to identify the ‘war discourse’ that was used to structure remembrance and assert a vision of the past in the present (after Waterton and Wilson 2009). The function of this ‘war discourse’ can be assessed by applying Fairclough’s (2001) delineation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In this approach, Fairclough employs Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power relations and states that expression within society, the use of terms, phrases and the means of representation, is purposeful and possesses social and political effect (Fairclough 1995; 2003). In this assessment, how issues are spoken about through language and how discourse forms a framework through which issues emerge, interprets those issues for wider society (Wodnak 2011). Through this analytical framework, scholars have forwarded a critical method of analysing the discourses used in society to understand how the means of communication structures experience (van Dijk 2008). This method is based upon a scheme that examines discourse to assess the manner in which it structures representation. This is demonstrated in the identification of genres, frames and styles within forms of communication.

Genres are significant because they provide a framework for an audience to comprehend discourse. Examples of genres can be considered to be political speeches, church services or government policy documents, essentially where communication possesses a particular symbolic quality because of the socially significant context of its emergence. However, evidently, due to this quality, ‘genres’ can be the locus of power and domination as well as means of resistance within society. ‘Frames’ refer to the manner in which the external environment can be apprehended differently from alternative perspectives by agents. As such, frames can be used to provide alternative agendas within society as they enabling a positioning to take place in relation to events or issues. Examples of frames would be the representation of the view of the ‘everyday man’ as a means of critiquing or affirming values within the media or even within political discourse. Finally, ‘styles’ are the ways in which discourse is used to constitute a sense of being and identity, how identification is located through the application and manner of particular discourses. A simple example of this process of identification through discourse is the inclusion of the pronouns ‘we’ or ‘us’ within a communication to emphasise a common experience or agenda.

Through the application of CDA, the function of ‘war discourse’ in the framing of the centenary events to mark the outbreak of the First World War across contemporary British society can be assessed. The potential for such a study is significant; the popular lexicon and wider cultural references are saturated with connections to the conflict which evoke particular effects. To speak of ‘the trenches’, ‘no man’s land’ or ‘going over the top’ possesses a capacity to immediately place particular ideas, associations and values within Britain regarding place, class, identity, power and authority. The advent of the centenary of the declaration of war, therefore, represented a potentially disruptive point within society. However, the way in which a specific ‘war discourse’ was employed through official events, speeches and media commentary enabled the amelioration of the critical agenda that the conflict has been frequently used for within British society. The ‘war discourse’ can be identified for its implicit use and as a means of structuring and interpreting the past for the present to ensure the commemorations during August 2014 were, to an extent, neutralised and apolitical. Therefore, rather than assuming the ‘popular memory’ of the war has emerged from a vapid consumption of media images, the employment of the conflict as a reference within language demonstrates the place and value of the events of 1914-1918 within contemporary Britain. The commemorative events witnessed the emergence of a ‘war discourse’ which served to manage and structure the anniversary for individuals, groups and communities. The presence of phrases and terms from the conflict which are used to frame current anxieties, fears and desires demonstrates the cultural and symbolic value of the First World War in Britain and offers an alternative assessment of its remembrance within wider society.

**Commemorating 1914-2014: the ‘war discourse’ in Britain**

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War potentially represented a point when the ‘popular memory’ of the conflict could be brought to bear on national institutions within Britain. The perception of the conflict as ‘mud, blood, rats and gas’ is associated with issues of official incompetence, institutional neglect and the failure of authority which could have served to undermine confidence within the state. The way in which the anniversary was framed within official discourse isolated this sentiment with a focus on unity and shared sacrifice. The first major government discussion on the anniversary emerged with a speech by Prime Minister David Cameron in the Imperial War Museum in October 2012. This served as a moment to outline the events planned to mark the centenary and also to define what the British Government saw as the structuring principles of this remembrance. In this statement, the Prime Minister asserted that the war still concerned British society for three reasons; the sheer scale of sacrifice, the national character of stoicism and endurance that was formed during the war and the emotional status of the conflict across the nation which was ‘difficult to define’ (Cameron 2012). In essence, this provides the genres, frames and styles of the ‘war discourse’. The genre of official respect for the number of those killed in the war, the framing of the conflict as part of a ‘British’ character and identity and the emotive style that was used to present the events of 1914-1918 to wider society. In this assessment, the character of the centenary was set through the language used to define it. In the Prime Minister’s speech, the remembrance of the war was structured upon these three schemes:

Our ambition is a truly national commemoration, worth of this historic centenary. I want a commemoration that captures our national spirit, in every corner of the country, from our schools to our workplaces, to our town halls and local communities. A commemoration that, like the Diamond Jubilee celebrated this year, says something about who we are as a people (Cameron 2012).

Shorn of any element of political discontent surrounding the First World War, the conflict is talked about as an emotive point but also one of pride and thankfulness. Similar statements were made by leading government figures during 2012 as details of the commemoration were publically disseminated. In October 2012, Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, launching a plan for thousands of British schoolchildren to visit the cemeteries and memorials of France and Flanders, described the anniversary planning in the same tripartite scheme as the Prime Minister in his speech at the Imperial War Museum:

The men who gave their lives in the Great War will remain heroes forever. The last British veteran has now died but their bravery and suffering must never be forgotten. This project will ensure that never happens by leaving a lasting legacy of this hugely significant period of our nation’s history and culture. Children will learn, at first hand, about the sacrifices made by individuals and communities to secure our nation and protect our liberty (Gove 2012).

In June 2013, the Culture Secretary, Maria Miller, also stated how it was ‘right that we remember and mark the centenary’ (Miller 2013). Through this particular framing of the commemoration of the anniversary as a morally right thing to do but one which supports the notion of collective sacrifice for the nation, the character of the commemoration is placed within a particular context. The official nature of these statements establishes a specific genre through which the anniversary can be understood. The ‘war discourse’ is a means by which the conflict can be respectfully remembered but it can be placed beyond the divisive politics which the war evokes within British society. The financial support of the British Government through the substantial funding of £50 million and contributions from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) also enabled the propagation of this specific aspect of the war discourse. Indeed, the funding body framed their initial call for funding applications within the same genre of stressing the significance and avoiding any anxieties:

The First World War affected millions across the globe and shaped the world we live in. The Centenary is a chance to understand the war better, uncover its stories and explore what it means to us today (HLF, 2011).

In this way, the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War can be talked about but done so in a way that prevents the incursion of the sentiments of the popular memory of the conflict. The ‘war discourse’ is not restricted to the documents and discussions of the British Government but also in the events and memorials that were planned in advance of the anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict in August 2014. One of the most prominent of these programmes of commemoration has been the government-led initiative to provide paving stone memorials for individuals awarded the Victoria Cross during the First World War. Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, announced the programme in August 2013 as a means of fostering a sense of pride in the service and sacrifice of people from villages, towns and cities across Britain:

The stones will provide an enduring legacy in local communities of their local heroes- a fitting tribute to mark the centenary of their extraordinary bravery and service fighting for their country. This will also enable residents to gain a greater understanding of how their area fitted into the story of the First World War (Pickles 2013).

The creation of these memorial markers, which celebrate the bravery and heroism of individuals who received the highest military decoration in the British Army, evidences the frames present within the ‘war discourse’. The focus on personal valour can disrupt the notion of collective suffering present within the popular memory of the war and evidenced in the usage of terms such as ‘in the trenches’. Such frames were also employed in the manner in which the released of soldiers’ wills who died during the First World War were released to the public through an online repository (Find a Soldier’s Will 2014). The project, initiated by Her Majesty’s Court and Tribunal Service in August 2013, was phrased as an opportunity to look at the poignant last thoughts of ‘war heroes’ as they were instructed to write their wills before going to the front lines. The Courts Minister, Helen Grant, stated:

This fascinating project has opened the door to a whole new insight on our war heroes – it has given us the opportunity for the first time to hear the thoughts and emotions of the brave soldiers who died for this country in their own words (Grant 2013).

The specific frames of the ‘war discourse’ can be observed here as a means to obscure the notion of victimhood which is prevalent in the popular memory of the conflict and evidenced in the oft-quoted sentiment of ‘lions led by donkeys’. The same assertion was made on the day of the anniversary itself by the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon:

Today is an opportunity to commemorate the spirit of the British people, our determination to fight for what is just, and our willingness to lay down our lives in the name of our country. In every corner of the country, remembrance ceremonies are taking place and I am honoured to have today followed in the steps of those who fought for king and country in 1914 (Fallon 2014).

This aspect of speaking about the war ensures that the notions of division and dissonance are reduced as the recognition of achievement and victory is forwarded within commemorative practices. The insistence upon regarding the war in this particular manner is also supported with the emotive style of the ‘war discourse’. Whilst revisionist scholars have critiqued the ‘popular memory’ of the war for its overtly sentimental vision of the past, the representation of the centenary was frequently couched in reference to the emotional nature of the subject matter. Indeed, one of the most evocative pieces of the marking of the anniversary was the display of ceramic poppies within the moat of the Tower of London which was designed as an emotional engagement with the past. The piece, entitled *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, involved the progressive planting of 888,246 individual poppies to represent the deaths of each individual in the British Army from July to November 2014. Whilst funded by corporate partners and the independent charity Royal Historic Palaces, the installation was supported by prominent politicians. Indeed, the attempt to ensure a permanent home for the memorial was championed by the British Government. Upon securing a place for a touring exhibition of the poppies, Prime Minister David Cameron stated:

By displaying parts of the installation around the country and then permanently in the Imperial War Museum, we have ensured that this poignant memorial will be saved for the nation (Cameron 2014).

The status of poignancy and sadness accompanying the installation was emphasised as the piece proved highly popular with the public attracting large crowds of visitors. Drawing upon the established mode of emotional engagement within the popular memory of the conflict, such a style within the war discourse enables the politics of remembrance to be defused. Deprived of a focus, the ‘war discourse’ establishes a sense of sadness and pity but removes it from the ‘anti-establishment’ focus of the popular memory or subverts it for other purposes. For example, in November 2014 the ‘Last Post’ initiative was announced, which encourages local groups to play the bugle call, now so closely associated with remembrance, during a fortnightly period around Remembrance Sunday. The Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, stated:

When we hear the Last Post now its poignancy only serves as a reminder of what these heroes gave to our country (Pickles 2014).

**Conclusions**

The centenary of the outbreak of First World War marked a point of potential disruption in Britain. The popular memory of the conflict stresses the incompetency of officials, the irresponsibility of those in authority and the abuse of power. Therefore, commemorating the conflict could have served to place the institutions of the state under scrutiny. However, through the emergence of a specific ‘war discourse’ a means by which the war could be talked about without evoking dissonant political perspectives was achieved. By focusing on the scale of sacrifice, the character of that sacrifice and the emotion evoked by that sacrifice, the ‘war discourse’ served to neutralise the anniversary. In this way, the remembrance of the war through language can be regarded as an ongoing battle; the ‘trenches’ are fought over in Britain as a means of establishing identity, place and politics.

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