Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 23

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Steve Marti of the University of Delaware brings H-Nationalism another monthly update on nationalism and the commemoration of the First World War. Please feel free to respond to this post. Interested in contributing to this series? Drop Steve a line at steve.marti.25@gmail.com.

As the onset of winter brought offensive operations to a close during the war, the commemoration of the First World War has recently shifted toward preparing and repairing memorials. Historic Environment Scotland, in partnership with the War Memorial Trust, allocated £55,000 to restore First World War memorials across Scotland. The American Legion has encouraged early applications for the 100 Cities/100 Memorials program to refurbish World War One memorials across the United States. An online petition gathered 1,200 signatures in support of a permanent memorial to New Zealand’s conscientious objectors. Anglican lay preacher Darryl Ward presented the petition to the mayor of Wellington on 16 November, the centenary of the New Zealand’s first conscription ballot. The Hastings District Council announced the addition of poppies to street signs on roads named after servicemen or naval vessels. The poppies intend to distinguish “the contribution of New Zealanders to international conflicts,” although list of designated roads includes senior British military officers such as Sir John Jellicoe, Sir Douglas Haig, and Admiral Andrew Cunningham.

Other commemorative projects take less traditional forms. The government of British Columbia awarded a grant of $248,000 to the Indus Media Foundation of Canada to support the development of online exhibits dedicated to telling the stories of South Asian soldiers who served during the First World War. Czech photographer Milan Kabelka announced the production of a 2017 calendar featuring scenes of reenactors wearing uniforms of the Czech Legion, which fought for the Allies during the First World War. Kabelka produced the calendar in partnership with Czechoslovak Legionnaires Community.

Elsewhere, commemorative projects struggled with financial difficulties or public discord. One of the last remaining Q-Ships, a submarine-hunter sailed by the Royal Navy during the First World War, faces the scrap heap. The HMS President Preservation Trust hoped to repair the HMS President’s hull and maintain the ship’s mooring along the Thames, but the Heritage Lottery Fund denied two applications from the trust. Dr Julian Lewis, Member for New Forest East, introduced a debate in Parliament on the preservation of the HMS President, before Parliament adjourned for the year. Protesters in Sheffield mobilized against the town council’s decision to fell twenty-three trees planted to honour soldiers killed during the First World War. The effort to save the memorial trees became the focal point of a campaign to reverse
the **town council’s decision to cut down over 1,000 trees** as part of municipal renovations. The *Guardian* argues that the effort to save the trees **reflects a wider reaction against policies of austerity.**

Some of this discord took the form of vandalism. On Remembrance Sunday, residents of Glencraig, Fife discovered that vandals **destroyed a memorial plaque** dedicated to Peter Johnstone. A local collection raised funds for the memorial to commemorate Johnstone, who grew up in Glencraig and played for Glasgow Celtic before enlisting during the First World War. The École militaire, in Paris, discovered **Ferdinand Foch’s kepi disappeared** from its display case sometime between 22 and 28 November.

A remembrance initiative in Northern Ireland aims to encourage commemoration among children and teenagers. Northern Ireland’s Communities Minister and Education Minister announced the **launch of the Battlefields Project**, which will fund travel for two Year 10 students and one teacher from every secondary school in Northern Ireland to visit the battlefields in France and Belgium. Two teenaged boys from Norwich **dug a detailed reconstruction of First World War trenches** in their back garden to commemorate the battle of the Somme. The two brothers **started their backyard reenacting in 2014**, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War.

The music video for French rapper Black M’s new song “Je suis chez moi,” which addresses issues of citizenship and belonging for peoples of colour in France, reached over 24 million views on YouTube. Black M wrote the song in response to criticisms from Marie Le Pen’s Front National, which blocked his performance at the Franco-German commemorations of the battle of Verdun in May of this year (discussed in **post 17 of this series**). Belgian entertainment magazine *Moustique* discussed the tone of “Je suis chez moi” and **referred the rapper’s great grandfather**, who fought with French colonial forces during the First World War and receives a brief mention in the song’s lyrics.

The journal of *Twentieth Century British History* published a **special issue** on centenary commemorations in the UK.