Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 24

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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.

The new year brings anticipation for the next cycle of centenary commemorations. The Guardian printed an editorial on the major events of 1917, whose full significance only became clearer with the passage of time. Shaun Walker, Moscow correspondent for the Guardian, outlined the conflicting narratives in marking the 1917 revolutions in contemporary Russia and the challenge of creating a cohesive national narrative from these events.

The UK’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport, in cooperation with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, opened an electronic ballot for tickets to the official centenary ceremonies for the Battle of Passchendaele at the end of July 2017. Culture Secretary Karen Bradley encouraged descendants of those who fought at the battle to apply for a pair of the 4,000 allotted tickets. The ballot is open to all members of the public, through an official website. The Département de la Somme released an active programme of events for commemoration ceremonies up to July 2017, despite the end of the Battle of the Somme centenary commemorations in the fall of 2016.

The Canadian Department of Veterans Affairs opened registration for the centenary commemorations for the Battle of Vimy Ridge. A spokesperson for the Préfecture du Pas-de-Calais anticipates that 20,000 visitors will attend the service at Vimy Ridge. A new visitors’ center will be built near the ridge as a result of a public-private partnership. The decision to allow “tasteful” acknowledgment of corporate sponsors near the memorial raised some debate over the place of commercial interests alongside national monuments. Brian Bethune wrote an essay for MacLean’s Magazine outlining the place of Vimy Ridge in Canada’s national narrative. Two cartoonists based in Southern Ontario announced their plans for a comic book imagining Canadian Medical Officer John McCrae, best known for composing the poem In Flanders Fields, executing a fictional secret mission during the battle of Vimy Ridge. The comic book version of McCrae will lead a team of six other notable Canadian contemporaries, including artist A.Y. Jackson and Nobel Laureate Frederic Banting.

Four Royal Service Legion clubs in rural New South Wales, Australia cancelled their Anzac Day marches for April 2017. The clubs cannot afford to comply with the state government’s new anti-terrorism legislation, which requires barriers erected at public gatherings in order to prevent truck attacks such as those seen in Nice and Berlin. David White, director of the Katoomba RSL, commented that the impact of anti-terror legislation proves that “the terrorists are winning.”
Public interest in centenary commemoration opens new opportunities to reflect on past events. Jenny Waldman, director of Britain’s 14-18 NOW commemoration events, wrote a letter to the Guardian commenting on the success of the program’s public commemorative projects such as We’re Here Because We’re Here (mentioned in Post 19 of this series). The popular multiplayer computer game Verdun staged its second annual online reenactment of the Christmas Truce of 1914, with proceeds donated to the charity War Child. The Times of India profiled the UK Punjab Heritage Association’s ongoing project to map the origin of Sikh soldiers who enlisted during the First World War. These public, participatory commemorative efforts share a common goal of democratizing the narratives attached to the events of the First World War.