Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 25

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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.

A number of projects made their debut in preparation for the centenary of the United States’ entry into World War I. The US Army Center for Military History launched its WWI Centenary Website, the Library of Congress created a new portal for digitized holdings relevant to World War I, and the National Air and Space Museum is preparing to open a special exhibit on American war art. The National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City announced plans for a national centennial ceremony in April 2017. The United States World War I Centennial Commission dispatched teams of volunteers dressed in vintage uniforms to hand out packets of poppy seeds during the Presidential inauguration ceremonies and raise awareness for the upcoming centenary.

Major preparations are underway for the centenary of the Battles of Arras and the Chemin des Dames. As with other major centenary events, the Prefet de l’Aisne requires attendees to reserve tickets for the official service commemorating the Chemin des Dames offensive. Departmental governments submitted their application to list fourteen commemorative sites in the Pas-de-Calais and six sites in the Department du Nord as part of a UNESCO trail. The city of Arras released an 8-minute video to “rehabilitate” the Battle of Arras, the British assault paired with the French advance at the Chemin des Dames. The Canadian component of the Battle of Arras, the assault on Vimy Ridge, needs no rehabilitation as the municipal government launched a program to welcome Canadian visitors “home” for centenary events in April. Organizers of the Festival du Voyageur in Winnipeg, Manitoba commissioned a large snow sculpture based on the Canadian memorial at Vimy.

Smaller commemorative projects are also gathering momentum. The British Council in Greece sent out a call for partnerships in organizing events to mark the Salonika Campaign. Cymru’n Cofio Wales Remembers 1914-1918 released plans for their upcoming commemorations for the Third Battle of Ypres at the Welsh Memorial in Flanders. Local authorities in Heuvelland, Belgium commissioned a statue showing Stretcher Bearer John Meekes, a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, carrying a wounded Major Willie Redmon, an outspoken Irish nationalist. Redmon and Meekes served with the 16th (Irish) Division and 36th (Ulster) Division, respectively, which fought alongside one another during the Battle of the Messines Ridge.
Elsewhere, commemorations of the First World War are undertaking different kinds of reparative work. Volunteers in Rarotonga struggle to restore the graves of Cook Islanders who fought during the First World War as the sea erodes parts of Nikao Cemetery. The Rona Tranby Trust, an Australian non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of Indigenous oral histories, launched an effort to collect oral histories from families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers who fought with the Australian Light Horse during the First World War. The magazine and news website France Afrique published an essay on the racial slur ‘bamboula’ and its proliferation as colonial soldiers arrived in France during the First World War. The essay addresses comments from a spokesman for the French police union, who uttered the slur on the current events show ‘C’dans l’Air,’ in reference to an incident where French police officers beat and sodomized a 22-year old youth worker in Aulnay-sous-Bois.