Nationalism and the First World War Centenary: Post 27

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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 United States World War I Centennial Commission marked the centenary of the nation’s entry into war on April 6. The National World War I Museum and Memorial hosted the ceremonies in Kansas City. The service featured a number of distinguished speakers, including actor Kevin Costner. The order of ceremonies reported that Acting Secretary of the Army Robert M. Speer attended as the representative for the United States’ government while relatively senior officials, such as Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian and Minister of Defense Steven Vandepu, represented France and Belgium. Michigan State University’s Kevin Greewalt published an editorial in The Conversation exploring the challenges of teaching the First World War in American and European schools, and the difficulty of reconciling national narratives with international events. David Smith explores similar themes in the Guardian, pointing out how the war remains obscure in American memory, despite its importance in elevating the United States as a world power.

On April 9th, Canadians commemorated the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge - part of the larger Battle of Arras. The New York Times provides a brief overview of the battle’s importance in Canadian national narrative. Canadian historian Tim Cook discusses the rising importance of this event in Canadian mythology, while writer Jamie Swift and historian Ian McKay highlight the fallacies of this nationalist myth. Cook and McKay debate face-to-face as part of a panel discussion televised on TVO. CBC Montreal focused on the contradictions of the Vimy narrative by featuring the story of Angus Goodleaf, a First Nations soldier who fought at Vimy but was denied veterans’ entitlements because of his status under the Indian Act.

New Zealanders participated in ceremonies commemorating the Battle of Arras. New Zealand artist Helen Pollock installed her sculpture “Victory Medal/The Poppy of Peace” at La Place des Héros in Arras. Visitors, including French President François Hollande and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, left messages on circles of red paper around Pollock’s sculpture. The descendants of forty-three Māori soldiers who dug tunnels to protect the Allies’ lines of communication travelled to Arras to partake in the centenary of the battle. Ceremonies in France and Edinburgh also commemorated Scottish soldiers’ participation in the battle.

April 16 marked the centenary of the Chemin des Dames offensive. The disastrous French offensive sparked widespread mutinies in the French army, leaving an especially complicated commemorative narrative. Ahead of the service, François Hollande argued that the centenary
should help reintegrate the offensive into France’s national memory of the First World War. The 2014 theft of a four-meter tall bronze sculpture by Haïm Kern memorializing French soldiers killed during the offensive suggests how the battle rates in French popular memory. Kern unveiled a replacement for his sculpture for the centenary. During the commemorative service, Hollande’s speech referred to the presence of Germany’s ambassador by calling the battlefield a symbol of peace and fellowship. In light of the current election, Hollande’s speech continued with a warning against the resurgence of hateful nationalism.