The First World War commemorations: Across Europe and into the future

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Intro VO : *Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.*

Sam: So we're here today with Dr Jonathan Boff who's a Lecturer in the Department of History, here at the University of Birmingham. Hi, Jonathan.

Jonathan: Hi, good morning.

Sam: So can you tell us a little bit about what you do here at the university?

Jonathan: Sure. We have a Centre for War Studies which is one of the largest groups in the country, specialising in the study of war and particularly of military history. We run a whole range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes so all the way through from 18 year old undergraduates to advanced PhD students and obviously have our own research programme as well. My particular focus as an individual is on the First World War, which is one of the traditional strengths of the University of Birmingham.

Sam: 2014, well it marks a hundred years since the outbreak of the First World War. How is it that we recall that hundred years ago in today's society?

Jonathan: Well, as you know, it's been quite a controversial issue over the last year or two already. The Government took a while to get its head around exactly what role it was going to play, if any. I think it has now decided that it needs to lead on this and not just follow and I think that's, you know, potentially a good thing but of course that immediately makes it a political event and some of the interventions from people like Michael Gove over Christmas and New Year have sort of stirred up a little bit of a hornet's nest about exactly what the right balance is between commemoration, celebration, commiseration and the sadder aspects of obviously what is a very controversial war. There are more – and just to make it more complicated still, not only do you have a range of opinions I think within Britain as to what the meaning of the First World War is and therefore how it should be commemorated, but within Europe never mind the United States for that matter, you have another set of sensitivities as well. So the Government has announced a programme of commemorations that it's going to be involved in; many of them, or at least some of them, with our French and German friends, but I think over the course of the next four, five years, we're going to see a whole range of different initiatives at every level from the local Boy Scouts group all the way up to major multinational Government-led institutions with the Queen or Prince Charles laying wreaths.

Sam: And so how does the way that Great Britain commemorates the First World War differ from how Germany would commemorate the First World War?

Jonathan: That's a very interesting question. So far it seems that the Germans aren't very keen on commemorating it at all very much. Of course they have a more complicated war to process in terms of the historical memory if you like and a lot of effort on the part of historians and I suppose just the general popular perceptions as well has tended to concentrate much more closely on the Second World War, which is obviously problematic in a whole range of different ways. And consequently the level of historical interest in Germany for example is a fraction of what it is in this country. Inevitably I think that's a bit of a shame. There are certain continuities as well as some important differences between the way Germany got pulled into or pushed itself into both the first and the second world wars and those continuities and differences are interesting and of course, particularly when you think about the consequences of the First World War, it's very hard to disentangle the rise of Nazism and the cataclysm of the Second World War, from the consequences of the First World War and therefore the two to some extent do have to go together. However, so far as we can tell, so far where the British Government anyway, you know, has laid out these ten salient events that it wants to highlight, the German response to that has been a little bit more along the lines of 'oh, it's those British doing that Basil Fawlty thing again. Will they ever learn to move on?' The German Government doesn't seem to be as interested in it as the British are and I think probably that's also true at a popular level as well. I don't think you're going to see the same kind of interest, for example, that you get in Britain for example in terms of things like restoring the First World War memorials that every village and town more or less up and down the country has, you know, there's been a lot of work and time and volunteer effort put into making sure they're in tip-top shape for the centenary. I'm sure there will be more done over the next few years. We don't see the same kind of developments I don't think in the German case.

Sam: So as we move away from the First World War, past a hundred years now, how will our commemoration change as time goes on? Do you think it will always be as strong or there's going to be a sense of distance from it?

Jonathan: Well inevitably the sense of distance will grow, you know, the last combat veterans of the First World War have passed away in the last few years. There are still a few people alive who were born during the First World War but increasingly few of those and obviously their memories are weak and fading in many cases. So inevitably there will be greater distance but I think actually on the other hand that, you know, the rise of the what I call 'who do you think you are' generation, people that are interested in family history and so on, does mean that people have the time and the leisure and frankly with the internet these days, the skills and the ability to go off and find out what their grandfather or their great-grandfather did in some of these - or mother for that matter - in some of these events and therefore I think it will stay at a higher level, or perhaps in some ways may stay closer to us than, for example, the Battle of Waterloo or the Napoleonic Wars has done. That's the first thing. So at a popular level I think interest will probably remain quite high and we certainly see that in demand for our courses and there are well organised groups of historical interest, people like the Western Front Association, with thousands of members up and down the country who are still interested in trying to answer some of these questions, which sort of brings me onto the second side of this which is that I think there is a difference in the level of interest and importance of the First World War which raises it up from most of the wars of the past and possibly even the Second World War, by which I mean that precisely because of this complicated and confusing and difficult - and there are conflicting interpretations of it - we're unlikely to achieve the same level of closure about it as, for example, about the Napoleonic Wars and consequently I think people will still be arguing - I don't know about in another hundred years time - but I'm sure in my lifetime and probably for another fifty years, the two unfortunately not being the same thing, you know, we will still see people arguing about why countries fought in the First World War, why it was fought the way it was, were the Generals all donkeys, were the soldiers all lions and the effects that the First World War had on the 20th Century. It's possible, one can argue in a sense that the First World War, or the final aftershocks of the First World War in Europe don't really die away until at least the coming down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And in the Middle East of course they're still very much with us in places like Syria. You know, Syria is the shape it is on the map today because of decisions that were made in the First World War. So that's why I think in some ways it has greater resonance than the Second World War. So, you know, I do think it is going to be of lasting interest. There are still lots of questions that we can't really answer about the First World War, although there's a vast amount of documentation that survives, there's some that is lost, some of which hopefully will reappear, you never know, and may answer some of these questions. But frankly, some of these questions are probably the kind of questions about which there will always be differing interpretations and argument and that's the nature of history and that's all to the good, certainly as far as I'm concerned.

Sam: And now you've got a lecture series haven't you that's coming out very soon?

Jonathan: Yes. We decided that, well one of the things that we would do towards commemorating the First World War would be to try and have an open series of lectures and we would invite some of the most famous and highly respected historians from around the world to come to Birmingham to give a high profile lecture on various aspects of the First World War. We're hoping that this is something that we'll do every year through to 2018. The first ones begin at the end of January with Professor Sir Hew Strachan, who is one of the leading military historians in the country, if not the leading military historian in the country, and then Christopher Clarke who's had a lot of exposure recently for his work on the origins of the First World War, and the theme for this term anyway for 2014 is going to be roads to war. So it is looking at the origins of the First World War but write large, not necessarily just who sent which telegram to whom at what day in July 1914, but also looking at some of the deeper maybe cultural conflicts that were underpinning the issues, the economic issues, the political issues, the religious issues, all the different aspects that go together to contribute to the causes of the First World War.

Sam: Fantastic. Well we look forward to seeing that here at the university. Dr Jonathan Boff, thank you very much for joining us today.

Jonathan: Thank you.

The **Birmingham Great War Centenary Lecture Series (/research/activity/warstudies/events/centenary-lectures.aspx)** is open to the public. The lectures focus on 'Roads to War' and run from 28 January 2014.

Outro VO : *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website:* ***www.ideaslabuk.com (http://www.ideaslabuk.com)*** *. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer and producer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Sam Walter.*

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