
*Rosetta* **12.5**: 35-42.

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Monuments and Memory in Eastern France

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Context

The last three decades have seen a dramatic increase in academic interest in the study of memory and in particular “collective” and “social” memory.¹ This has been paralleled by popular interest in memory and especially genealogy and family history. However the area that has received perhaps the greatest attention, both academic and public, has been the memory of conflict.² Initial research into memorials and commemoration took a ‘top down’ approach, viewing memorials as political instruments aimed at promoting nationalism and as justification for state sponsored killing.³ This was subsequently challenged by an approach favouring the role of memorials in relation to the psychological processes of mourning and the emotional needs of a bereaved public.⁴ However recent scholarship has demonstrated that the developments of memorials from political to personal forms are neither separate nor sequential.⁵

In addition to this the discipline has also suffered from an approach that takes into account only one small period of commemoration.⁶ Motivations for memorialisation are concerned specifically with the circumstances of that particular conflict and fail to take into account the memorial tradition itself. In order to overcome these problems this research seeks to take a wider temporal perspective; situating war memorialisation within a longer process in order to examine changes that occur over

¹ See, for example, Berliner 1995; Confino 1997; Gedi and Elam 1996; Olick 1999; Olick and Robbins 1998.
³ See, for example, Mayo 1988; Mosse 1990; Rowlands 1993.
⁴ See, for example, Sherman 1998; Tarlow 1999; Winter 1995.
⁵ Varley 2008: 9.
⁶ The First World War has dominated the study of memorialisation, for recent examples see Levitch 2006; Stamp 2007; Stephens 2007; Winter 2009; Winter 2011.
time. By examining war memorialisation from the time of its initial emergence the research seeks to demonstrate how understandings of the monuments evolve as time passes from the conflict they commemorate and the ways in which commemoration responds not only to the past being commemorated but to earlier commemorations, and hence enacts a “memory of memory”.  

The study area

Eastern France forms arguably the most contested area in modern European history. Between 1871 and 1945 the region passed between French and German authority four times, during three separate conflicts. The areas surrounding Sedan and Metz are particularly representative of these changes. Both areas featured heavily in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and in the First and Second World Wars which followed. Sedan was the site of humiliating French defeat on 1 September 1870 but remained French through the peace terms that followed, only to be occupied again during the First World War. Metz, the site of another great French defeat during the 1870-71 conflict was annexed by Germany until 1918 when it was returned to France through the Treaty of Versailles. These areas are uniquely placed therefore to demonstrate the changing processes of memorialisation and the ways in which these evolved in France, first from the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War and then from the victory of the First World War. The close proximity between French memorials and their German counterparts also allows for a comparison of their treatment.

War memorials in eastern France

When war broke out between France and Prussia in 1870, few in France believed that it would be anything other than a swift French victory. Yet, less than a year after its outbreak, the conflict had resulted not only in the consolidation of the newly formed German Empire but the total destruction of the military power of Imperial France. This led to problems of memorialisation that France had yet to experience; a conflict in which France had failed to win a single battle could not be memorialised

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7 Olick 2007.
8 Howard 1961: 2.
in the traditional triumphal way. If Landsberg is correct and monuments were ‘intended to serve as guarantors of national memory [that] both created the illusion of a stable, recognisable past and promised to serve as a bulwark against further social upheaval’ then the traditional form of war monument was definitely not suited to the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. Yet rather than choosing not to commemorate the conflict, it instead gave rise to what has been described ‘one of the greatest waves of commemoration that the country had ever seen’.

Yet this commemorative construction was very different from the war memorial forms that had come before. Without great victories to commemorate attention was instead turned to the human cost of war and the bravery of the common soldier. For centuries soldiers had been treated as little more than criminals, but in the peace terms that followed the Franco-Prussian War specific provisions were made not just for the bodies of the fallen but also their memory. Ossuary monuments were created to house the bodies of the dead both on the battlefields themselves and in the surrounding villages. In addition to this commemorative monuments, not associated with physical remains, were constructed on the battlefields themselves. Although this itself was not a new phenomenon the scale of construction and the tolerance shown towards these monuments by both sides was unprecedented. In addition to this for the first time memorials were constructed in the village from which the deceased came. Attitudes towards these memorials demonstrates an understanding that they were not intended to glorify war, but instead were concerned with marking the sacrifice of the men and women who had lost their lives as a consequence of the conflict.

It was this implicit understanding of the memorial form that paved the way for a new wave of commemoration; one which was concerned with the memory of the conflict.

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9 Of which France’s Arc de Triomphe commemorating the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars provides the quintessential example
12 For example less than sixty years earlier, following the Prussian defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig, one German physician remarked that he had come across the ‘naked bodies of fallen soldiers, lying in a local school yard to be eaten by ravens and dogs’ Mosse 1990: 47.
13 As outlined by Article 16 of the Treaty of Frankfurt. This stated that the French and German authorities reciprocally agreed to respect and maintain the tombs of soldiers buried on their respected territories. Varley 2002: 326.
rather than the dead, but which had been legitimised by the memorials that had come before. Twenty years after the initial phase of memorialisation memorials began to be constructed in order to deliberately shape the way that the conflict is perceived and therefore the way it will enter the collective memory of future generations. This was of particular relevance for the towns of eastern France, many of which had become synonymous with defeat. In Sedan for example, in 1897, twenty-six years after the end of the conflict, a memorial was unveiled which used the image of a dying soldier in an effort to recast the memory of conflict from shame and dishonour to bravery in the face of adversity. This demonstrates the complex mix of political and bereavement narratives, in which a political message is made acceptable through association with the fallen. Concerns expressed at the time regarding the legitimacy of feelings behind these memorials suggests an early understanding of the complexities involved with the construction of war memorials and the ways in which they could be manipulated for political purposes. This demonstrates, at the time of their construction, a conscious understanding of the complex nature of memorialisation processes and its accompanying commemorations.

This understanding was to prove vital in the commemoration of the First World War. The return of Alsace and Lorraine to France following the conflict demonstrates the changes that had occurred. Implicit understandings of war memorials as distinct from other monumental forms was made clear when German war memorials were allowed to remain on returned French land, even when other traces of Germanification were erased. This reiterates the recognition of the unique nature of this form of war monument, which was legitimised through its association with the war dead. Memorials to the 1870-71 became an important part of the later commemorative narrative often forming the basis for First World War memorials. The construction of new memorials saw the revival of revanchist narratives and many memorials were dated 1870-1918, effectively eliminating the defeat of 1871. The study of First World War memorialisation in this region thus contributes not only to the understanding of

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15 For example in 1909 the president of Lorraine von Zeppelin wrote that the Souvenir Alsace-Lorraine was ‘an association whose efforts are all orientated, under the guise of devotion and remembrance, to the artificial maintenance of French sympathies’ Hamman, 2009: 323.

16 Revanchism (revenge) had been a popular sentiment following the Franco-Prussian War amongst some nationalists who called for immediate revenge and the reversal of territorial losses through a second conflict.
the processes which accompany the emergence of new memorial forms but also to patterns visible in the treatment of exiting memorials, viewing memorialisation as a dialectic process rather than one which is influenced only by external factors.
Bibliography


