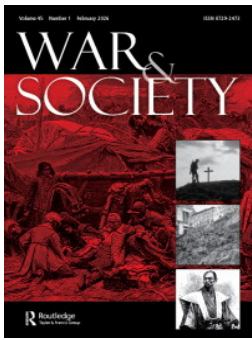


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Tim Grady

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Nationalising bodies, shifting loyalties: exhuming the war dead in a changing Europe

TIM GRADY

Division of Humanities, Culture and Environment, University of Chester, Chester, UK

Throughout Europe, thousands of national cemeteries contain the bodies of soldiers killed in the two world wars, each carefully divided according to nationality. Yet, as this article argues, determining the nationality of the dead was never so clear cut. Focusing on burials within Britain, it explores four categories of dead that demonstrate the fluidity of national belonging. The first group are the erroneously identified dead, who had been incorrectly identified during conflict. Second are the unwanted dead. These were the bodies of spies or people branded as traitors, who were stripped of their nationality post-war and barred from national cemeteries. Third are the contested dead; soldiers who died in the uniform of one army but were later reclaimed by another country. Finally, there are the convenient dead, who were simply assigned a nationality in the wake of conflict. Military cemeteries, as the article concludes, were artificial creations, based not only on national identity, but also on post-war decision making.

KEYWORDS First World War; Second World War; exhumations; military cemeteries; war graves commissions

In June 2024, a coffin containing the remains of Nathan Baskind, an American-Jewish soldier from Pittsburgh was laid to rest in Normandy. This turned out to be Baskind's most elaborate funeral, as he was buried with full military honours, but it was certainly not his first. Indeed, he had already been buried in France on two separate occasions. Baskind had breathed his last eighty years earlier, during the Allied operations against Nazi Germany. Captured, but fatally wounded, Baskind died in Cherbourg in June 1944, and ended up in a hastily dug mass grave with other, mainly German, casualties. In 1957, a team from the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, VDK) arrived in Cherbourg and

exhumed the occupants of the grave to a larger military cemetery in Marigny-le-Lozon. The exhumation team found fragments of an American uniform and identity discs, but without the ability to connect these to individual bodies, went no further at that stage. It took a further 65 years until the case was finally resolved; Baskind was identified and reburied again, only now in an American military cemetery.¹

Baskind's slow journey through northern France may at first glance appear to be something of an anomaly, a consequence perhaps of having to deal with the dead in the heat of battle. This was anything but the case. As this article makes clear, the identity and even the location of many of the war dead was for years, even decades, after conflict often still in flux. Much of this confusion was indeed a legacy of the original wartime burials, but post-war exhumations, as was the case with Baskind, also contributed. In the wake of the two world wars, all of the wartime belligerent countries were involved in a race to rescue their own dead. Teams of gravediggers crisscrossed the former battlefields moving bodies from scattered sites, such as Baskind's mass grave in Cherbourg, and moving them to larger concentration cemeteries, such as Marigny-le-Lozon. These operations might have been designed to secure the graves, but in moving bodies around, the identities of the dead could often change too.²

Historians working at the interface of war and memory have been only too aware that the identity of the dead is always extremely fragile. Thomas Laqueur, for example, rightly points out that mistakes in marking the graves of the First World War dead 'must have been routine'. British estimates from the time suggest that on the Western Front alone, the error rate was around three per cent.³ These mistakes not only include the nameless, unknown graves, who have their own historiography, but also the dead who were moved in largescale exhumation operations in the wake of conflict.⁴ This messy period between the end of fighting and the establishment of permanent military cemeteries has been largely overlooked in the existing literature.⁵ Instead, most studies have tended to focus on today's still visible war cemeteries, exploring questions of architecture, horticulture and even tourism.⁶ The loss of individual identities post-conflict was for the most part an

¹ VDK, 'Nathan Baskind: Ein eigenes Grab nach 80 Jahren' <<https://www.volksbund.de/nachrichten/nathan-baskind-ein-eigenes-grab-nach-80-jahren>> [accessed 4 September 2024].

² On the post-war exhumations in France: Zöe Rose Buonaiuto, 'A Grave Reconciliation: The Establishment of German War Cemeteries in Normandy, 1944–1964', *International Journal of Military History and Historiography*, 38 (2018), 170–95; Kate Clarke Lemay, *Triumph of the Dead: American World War II Cemeteries, Monuments, and Diplomacy in France* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018).

³ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Human Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 473–4.

⁴ David Crane, *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation of WWI's War Graves* (London: Collins, 2014), 166–88; Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2007).

⁵ For clear exceptions: Laura Tradii, '"Their Dear Remains Belong to Us Alone": Soldiers' Bodies, Commemoration, and Cultural Responses to Exhumations after the Great War', *First World War Studies*, 10 (2019), 245–61; Tim Grady, *Burying the Enemy: The Story of those who Cared for the Dead in Two World Wars* (London: Yale University Press, 2025).

⁶ In general: Simon Rietz, 'Deutsche Soldatenfriedhöfe des Ersten Weltkrieges und der Weimarer Republik. Ein Beitrag zur Professionsgeschichte der Landschaftsarchitektur' (PhD, Leibniz Universität Hannover, 2015). Mandy Morris considers the horticulture of cemeteries: Mandy Morris, 'Gardens

unfortunate consequence of the sheer scale of exhumation operations, but there were also deliberate obfuscations. As Michèle Barrett has diligently shown, when it came to dealing with the bodies of First World War colonial soldiers, the British sometimes proved only too willing to lose the graves.⁷

This article also explores the crucial period between the original burials and the creation of permanent cemeteries, but in contrast to Barrett its focus is less on calculated examples of non-commemoration. Instead, it is concerned with more subtle changes to the identities of the dead. Taking Britain as a geographical case study, the article considers the exhumation of both friend and foe in the decades that followed the two world wars, arguing that arbitrary choices often defined where bodies were moved to and how the new graves were marked. The article considers four different impulses that led to these shifts. The first concerns the erroneously identified dead, which is where post-conflict investigations revealed mistakes with the original identification. Second are the unwanted dead, such as spies or traitors who were stripped of their nationality post-war and barred from national cemeteries as a result. The contested dead form a third category. Sometimes soldiers died in the uniform of one army but then were reclaimed by another country post-exhumation. Finally, there are the convenient dead, who were simply assigned an identity during the exhumation process to ensure the cemeteries could be completed on time.

Erroneous identities

In the United States, the last Monday in May is Memorial Day, when Americans killed in past conflicts are honoured. For one brief moment in 1920, these ceremonies also took place in Liverpool, in northwest England. The graves of 697 American servicemen, most of whom had succumbed to the 1918–19 influenza pandemic, were decorated with a cypress wreath, flowers and a small American flag. Just a few weeks later, however, teams of American soldiers started the process of exhuming hundreds of the bodies in Liverpool ready for transportation back across the Atlantic.⁸ Over subsequent decades, particularly as the Second World War added more dead to British soil, such scenes were repeated time and again. The Americans, French and Belgians were quickest when it came to exhuming and repatriating their wartime dead. The vanquished powers of Germany and Italy were much slower at getting going, only moving their bodies in the 1950s and 1960s. Regardless of the timing, the one thing that all these operations had in common was that the process of moving bodies subtly altered the identities of the dead. Often new details of their lives emerged, while other information was lost.

“For Ever England”: Landscape, Identity and the First World War British Cemeteries on the Western Front’, *Ecumene*, 4 (1997), 410–34. On tourism: Wiebke Kolbe, ‘Trauer und Tourismus: Reisen des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge 1950–2010’, *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 14 (2017), 68–92.

⁷ Michèle Barrett, ‘Subalterns at War: First World War Colonial Forces and the Politics of the Imperial War Graves Commission’, *Interventions*, 9 (2007), 451–74.

⁸ ‘U.S. Decoration Day’, *Liverpool Echo*, 29 May 1920, 7; ‘Soldiers’ Graves’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 24 June 1920, 3.

Foreign civilians and servicemen who had lost their lives in wartime Britain tended to be laid to rest close to their place of death. With a conflict going on, it was easier to use the next parish churchyard or municipal burial ground with space than to move a body to another part of the country or even overseas. In practical terms, this meant that the only mourners at the graveside, if any at all, were the comrades of the deceased. Certainly, there was little opportunity for relatives to be at the funeral. With few connections between the living and the dead, it was easy for mistakes to occur, particularly when the authorities found themselves dealing with unfamiliar names or spellings. During the First World War, for example, a German and an Austrian civilian died in Portsmouth prison and were subsequently buried in the nearby Kingston Cemetery. Wooden markers recorded their names as Jacob Sonnerstein and Max Power Heinert respectively. Yet, once the war was over, there seemed less certainty about the two men's biographical details. A representative of Britain's Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) pointed out that 'Power' was probably a misreading of 'prisoner of war' (POW). They were not happy with 'Sonnerstein' either, offering alternatives of 'Sonnenreich' and 'Sonnerreich' instead.⁹

The complexities of naming the dead in Portsmouth was also a reflection of the exigencies of wartime burials, when there was not always the time to fully investigate the biographical details of the deceased. Sometimes, it also proved difficult to identify remains, particularly when dealing with those killed in aircraft downed over Britain during the Second World War. In Lossiemouth on Scotland's north coast, where several German airmen were buried, the difficulties of identification continued for months after the initial burials. The Imperial War Graves Commission erected crosses in 1940, marking plot 1105 as 'Unknown Airmen' and plot 1108 as 'Imholz'. Working from different lists, the Red Cross decided that 'Bastian' was actually interred in plot 1105, 'Imholz' was in plot 1106 and a certain 'Radholz' in 1108. Later, this was changed again, leaving Georg Imholz neither in plot 1106, nor in 1108, but instead in plot 1105, which is where he remains to this day.¹⁰ In such circumstances, it is clear to see how mistakes could easily happen.

Often inaccuracies in the naming of the dead only came to light post-war. The renewal of temporary grave markers provided one opportunity to recheck the biographical details of the deceased. When the IWGC started this work for the German dead in the 1920s, for example, relatives lodged complaints over the spelling of names, regimental details and dates.¹¹ The decision to exhume many of the foreign war graves in post-conflict Britain was another moment where the lives of the dead again came under the microscope. After all, if teams were going to go to the trouble of digging someone up, they needed to be sure they had the right body. When a French exhumation team arrived in Chester's Blacon cemetery in 1948, clearly such thoughts were on their mind. One of the six Frenchmen buried in the

⁹ Imperial War Graves Commission to German Embassy London, 23 May 1929, Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge Archive Kassel (hereafter, VDK) R13.

¹⁰ IWGC, 'Photographs of prisoners of war graves - Scotland', 3 August 1943, Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archive, Maidenhead (hereafter CWGC), CWGC/1/2/A/60.

¹¹ VDK, 'Aufzeichnung', 20 June 1927, VDK R13.

war graves plot, was Christian Warilow of the Free French Forces, who had been killed in North Wales in 1943. The exhumation team, however, was clearly not convinced of Warilow's credentials. Deciding that Warilow was an alias, they instead identified him as 26-year-old Henri Roger from Paris.¹²

Replacing Roger's wartime alias with his birthname helped to restore his original identity in death. Not every error though was picked up at the exhumation stage. Given the size and scope of the recovery process, this should not come as much of a surprise. Johann Herbst, a German soldier from Altheim in Franconia, died from a frontline head wound, in a Manchester hospital in 1916, and was then buried in the city's Southern Cemetery. Some fifteen years later, a member of the German embassy in London reported that the incorrect regimental details had been included on his headstone. As neither the British nor the Germans were willing to pay for it to be corrected, the grave marker with the inaccurate inscription remained. The profundity of such details then eluded the German exhumation teams in the 1960s. They simply disinterred Herbst from Manchester, brought his remains to their new military cemetery on Cannock Chase and reburied him with the never corrected regimental details. It was clearly one thing to identify an error, but quite another to act on the information.¹³

The mistake with Herbst's grave was historic and longstanding. Sometimes, however, the exhumation teams themselves introduced their own errors into proceedings. This was the case in Swindon where six Italian POWs lay buried in the large Whitworth Road Cemetery. The men had been travelling to work in the back of a British military truck in November 1945 when it swerved across the road striking a house. Five of the Italians died the same day, while a sixth, Giacomo Gioielli, succumbed to his injuries the following day in hospital.¹⁴ The cemetery registers recorded the course of events correctly, listing names, ages and the date of death. Yet, when Gioielli's body was exhumed to Brookwood Cemetery in 1957, this all changed. Somehow the new headstone recorded his death as occurring not only one day earlier to match the other five, but also one month earlier on 10 October 1945.¹⁵

While the changes to Gioielli's grave marker were presumably the result of an accidental mix-up, the different exhumation teams also made their own deliberate alterations. Moving the dead from an existing burial ground to a new military cemetery required the removal and disposal of any markers in place over the original grave. Yet often the original headstones, erected by families or former comrades, revealed very detailed information about the body that lay below. In the Northamptonshire town of Rothwell, a single German headstone, made of granite,

¹² IWGC to Municipal Offices, Chester, 16 November 1948, CWGC/7/4/2/7057-4.

¹³ 'List No. 106 of German Prisoners of War', A3058, 'International Committee of the Red Cross' <<https://grandeguerra.icrc.org/en/List/349634/898/3058/>> [accessed 19 December 2024], ZAK to Deutsche Botschaft London, 30 May 1933, VDK R13.

¹⁴ 'Singing P.O.s Killed', *Sunday Express*, 11 November 1945, 8.

¹⁵ Whitworth Road Cemetery, Swindon, 'Register of Burials in War Graves, 1944-1946', The Lydiard Archives <<https://www.thelydiardarchives.org.uk/item/register-of-burials-in-war-graves-in-the-parish-of-swindon-book-1-1944-1946>> [accessed 20 December 2024]. 'Soldato Giacomo Gioielli', CWGC Find War Dead <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/7516251/giacomo-gioielli/>> [accessed 20 December 2024].

stood upright in the town's cemetery. The stone, which marked the grave of Heinrich Hollein, gave a detailed account of his life. 'Peace', the inscription started. 'In memory of Heinrich Hollein. 257th Regt. Prussian Infantry. Died October 22nd, 1918. Aged 28 years', it continued. The final line then explained how this soldier from Wuppertal had ended up in a small English market town: 'Erected by his sorrowing comrades of the Prisoners of War Camp, Rothwell'.¹⁶

When the dead were eventually exhumed, there was no longer a need for the existing headstones and the complex stories they once revealed. In the new military cemeteries, the war graves commissions demanded greater uniformity of design. All headstones had to be identical and be lined up in tight regimental lines. In contrast to his grave in Rothwell, Hollein's new grave in Cannock Chase's German military cemetery gave few clues to his life, listing nothing more than his name, rank and date of death.¹⁷ As was the case with Hollein, the identities of the foreign war dead buried in Britain were always in flux. The exhumation process inevitably led to some adjustments in the records; occasionally these were accidental changes of biographical details, but more often these were deliberate adjustments, as personalised headstones were swapped for the uniformity of a national war cemetery.

The unwanted dead

The German Military Cemetery on Cannock Chase is merely the largest of a series of national burial grounds in the UK. A far smaller example is the Netherlands Field of Honour in London's Mill Hill Cemetery, where 254 Dutch military personnel of the Second World War lie buried. While it might be smaller in scale, the Netherlands Field of Honour nonetheless follows the model of other national cemeteries. It consists of two formal sections, each made up row after row of identical lightly coloured headstones. Each stone contains the deceased's name, date of birth and death, all inscribed under an engraved lion representing the coat of arms of the Netherlands. The uniform design gives the impression of national unity, with the dead of one country brought together in the same place. Yet, this picture is rather deceptive, as not every corpse made it to Mill Hill, to Cannock Chase or indeed to any of the other national cemeteries. Often this was a question of logistics, but sometimes the dead were denied entry to these new national sites because of a questionable wartime record. In effect, their national identity was revoked in death leaving them separated from their fellow citizens killed in the world wars.

After the Second World War, the Dutch government acted quickly and decisively to determine which of their citizens were going to be allowed entry into its national cemeteries and who was to remain outside. Such distinctions in death were part of a broader post-war 'politics of retribution' in the Netherlands that targeted anyone deemed to have collaborated with the Nazis during the five years of German

¹⁶ The Urban District Council of Rothwell to the German-Consul General Liverpool, 31 October 1929, VDK R13.

¹⁷ 'Landsturmmann Heinrich Hollien', CWGC Find War Dead <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/6008941/heinrich-hollien/>> [accessed 20 December 2024].

occupation.¹⁸ In the Netherlands itself, thousands of men and women were put on trial for crimes ranging from actively supporting fascism through to instances of betrayal and fraternisation. Dutchmen who had volunteered to serve in the German army, whose numbers ran into the thousands, were one of the easiest groups to identify and sentence.¹⁹

Clearly the new government saw no reason to stop with the living and continued to implement its policy of separating loyal Dutch citizens from traitors with the war dead too. The British discovered the extent of such policies the hard way. In 1947, the IWGC set itself the task of organising some fifty graves in Knutsford Cemetery, Cheshire. The occupants had died from war wounds and general illness, while being treated in the town's military hospital, which also contained a wing for enemy soldiers. Among the long list of German names were also those of two Dutchmen: 57-year-old Aril Knoppert and 66-year-old Gerardus Landman. The IWGC helpfully planned either to return the remains of the two men to the Dutch War Graves Foundation (*Oorlogsgravenstichting*) or to mark each grave as belonging to a 'Dutch Civilian'.²⁰ Both suggestions were swiftly rebuffed. Landman was apparently on 'active service with the German army' and therefore 'considered a traitor', while Knoppert was a civilian attached to the German military, which in the eyes of the Dutch government made him a 'collaborator'.²¹

With the Dutch refusing to take their deceased citizens back, the British were left with an unforeseen problem and unexpected bodies to deal with. 'No one really knows what to do about these people', complained the IWGC. 'We can only be reassured of one point – he was [they were] regarded as "enemy"!'²² Once firmly labelled as the enemy, the problem became one for the Germans, and not for the British or Dutch, to solve. Their solution, as it emerged several years later, was to exhume Knoppert, Landman and other problematic Dutch bodies to the new German military cemetery on Cannock Chase. Once in Staffordshire, these men were reburied as members of the 'German army', and all mention of their Dutch past was expunged. As a result of such delicate operations, two Dutch narratives of the war developed. The official national war cemetery with the largest number of casualties was in Mill Hill, while a smaller number of war dead, who had been effectively stripped of their citizenship, lay elsewhere, no longer to be a part of the Netherlands' wartime history.

Ironically, while the VDK found a home for Knoppert, Landman and other disgraced Dutchmen, they proved more reluctant to accept other war dead, who surely had a greater claim to reburial in a German national cemetery. Sometimes such oversights could be traced back to how people had originally been buried. Many women, for example, were never formally recognised as war dead when they died. Thirty-six-year-old Erna Wesseling was fairly typical in this regard. Born in Cologne, she had

¹⁸ István Deák, Jan Gross and Tony Judt, eds, *The Politics of Retribution: World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Chrisje Brants, 'Dealing with the Holocaust and Collaboration: The Dutch Experience of Criminal Justice and Accountability after World War II', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 34 (2000), 211–36, 224.

²⁰ IWGC Western Region to IWGC, 9 March 1948, CWGC/7/4/2/6943–1.

²¹ Netherlands Embassy to IWGC, 16 June 1953, CWGC/7/4/2/6943–2.

²² IWGC Western Region to IWGC, 9 April 1948, CWGC/7/4/2/6943–1.

come over to Britain in the mid-1930s for work. Her final role was as a domestic servant to a wealthy widow in a house near Henley-on-Thames in Berkshire. When hostilities started in 1939, the British authorities classed Wesseling as an enemy alien, but after further investigation, she was allowed to remain free in Berkshire.²³ Life, though, for a German woman in wartime Britain cannot have been easy. In early 1945, a local resident found reams of German papers floating in the River Thames and sometime later a rat catcher found a woman's body in the water. The coroner's inquest implied that Wesseling had taken her own life due to unrequited love, but the ongoing conflict must also have taken a big toll. A friend reported that Wesseling had had 'concern for her native Cologne and her family' because of the Allied bombing raids.²⁴ Wesseling's body was interred locally, which is where she remained, when other German war dead were later exhumed to Cannock Chase.

Another group to miss out on a plot in the new German military cemetery were those individuals who had been caught spying. During the First World War, when spy fever reigned supreme, the British arrested a number of people for allegedly sending secrets to the wartime enemy. In total, twelve men were placed on trial for espionage offences and then sentenced to death after being found guilty.²⁵ One female spy – Louise Wertheim – was also convicted, but she never faced a firing squad and was handed a prison sentence instead. Behind bars, however, her health deteriorated quickly, and she died in 1920 from tuberculosis in Broadmoor Asylum.²⁶ When the VDK came to exhume the German dead in the 1960s, there was never any mention of Wertheim, although the male spies were briefly discussed. Indeed, the VDK's planning team even visited the grave of Carl Hans Lody, the first of the spies to be executed, to see if his remains could be exhumed. Yet, in the end nothing happened, and the remains of Lody and the other male spies were left where they had first been buried in East London's Plaistow Cemetery.²⁷

Moving a group of spies to Cannock Chase might have shone the wrong type of light on the new German military cemetery. There were, however, also practical reasons for leaving the bodies behind. Lody and the other German spies had originally been buried in common graves in Plaistow with several other bodies joining each of them in the same grave. Lody, for example, shared his burial plot with another three bodies.²⁸ This was common practice in British cemeteries. Rather than being purchased outright, a common grave remained the property of the local burial board, which allowed further bodies to be added to each plot.²⁹ The difficulty for anyone wanting to exhume bodies from these graves, as the VDK later discovered,

²³ Home Office, 'Female Enemy Alien – Exemption from Internment – Non-Refugee', 15 November 1939, TNA HO 396/101.

²⁴ Berkshire Constabulary, 'Police Report on the Death of Anna Erna Wesseling', 20 February 1945, Berkshire Record Office, COR/R1/25/11/1-11.

²⁵ For an overview: Leonard Sellers, *Shot in the Tower: The Story of the Spies Executed in the Tower of London during the First World War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1997).

²⁶ Sellers, 138–9.

²⁷ VDK, 'Bericht über die Dienstreise zur Geschäftsstelle England', 22 May 1963, VDK A10/93.

²⁸ O. Karlowa to Deutsche Botschaft London, 27 April 1937, VDK R13.

²⁹ Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134.

was that the authorities insisted that permission be sought from all relatives before spades could be put in the ground. In the end, this hurdle made it much easier to leave the German spies where they were and thus outside of a national cemetery.

In Plaistow cemetery today, visitors can find Lody's grave marked carefully with a simple polished headstone that merely records name and dates. Although there is nothing to indicate that this is a German war grave, at least his final resting place is marked. Many other Germans buried in communal graves were not so fortunate. Rudolf Noack, a 23-year-old German POW, for example, died from appendicitis in Chester in 1919. The British authorities buried his body in a communal grave in the city's Overleigh cemetery, which is presumably where he still lies as the VDK never recovered his body in the 1960s.³⁰ Even less is known about Heinrich Siemers. The exact circumstances remain hazy, but he died in Lancashire in early March 1941 and was subsequently buried in a common grave in the main cemetery in Newton-le-Willows. As was the case with Noack, his body was never exhumed to the new German military cemetery in the 1960s. Today, the VDK's official grave register simply records his last resting place as a blank.³¹

The non-exhumation of Noack and Siemers to Cannock Chase was solely due to the fact that they had originally been buried in communal graves together with the remains of British civilians. As was the case with the First World War spies, the VDK was not prepared to seek out the individual permissions required to exhume from a common grave.³² While this decision might have been a practical reality, it is less clear why the VDK chose to remove the existing headstones to the German dead at the same time, effectively rendering the graves of Noack, Siemers and other Germans buried in communal graves lost. Today there is no sign of them either in Germany's national war cemetery on Cannock Chase or in the burial grounds where they had originally been laid to rest. Their fate is a further sign that national cemeteries tell a very selective story based on decisions made not necessarily during conflict, but rather at the time of post-war exhumations.

The contested dead

Twenty-one-year-old Onofry Olijnyk died five days after the signing of the armistice in November 1918. Suffering from a bout of pneumonia, presumably resulting from the global pneumonia pandemic, he breathed his last in Belmont POW hospital in Surrey. His body was then transported some four kilometres up the road to Sutton Cemetery, where he was buried in a large section reserved for the enemy. Most of Olijnyk's mortuary neighbours were Germans, but he himself had actually served in the Austro-Hungarian army. Olijnyk had been captured fighting in the Battle of Asiago on the Italian front, from where he, and a small number of his comrades, had

³⁰ 'List No. 269 of German Prisoners of War', A43668, 'International Committee of the Red Cross' <<https://grandequerre.icrc.org/en/List/86735/898/43668/>> [accessed 7 February 2025]. CWGC, 'Chester General Cemetery', 7 January 1970, CWGC/CEM 7058 Pt.3.

³¹ VDK, 'Gräbersuche-Online' <<https://www.volksbund.de/erinnern-gedenken/grabersuche-online/detail/4516a9db7afcf89dc655b39fbo55c257>> [accessed, 7 February 2025].

³² CWGC to Home Office, 4 January 1961, TNA HO 282/21.

eventually been brought to internment camps in Britain. According to the burial records, Olijnyk was officially an Austrian infantryman. Yet, even this designation, was something of a simplification. Olijnyk came from the region of Stanisławów, which was integrated into interwar Poland after the Paris peace conferences, but is today the city of Ivano–Frankivsk in Ukraine. All this leaves open the question whether Olijnyk was Austrian, Hungarian, Polish or even Ukrainian.³³

Olijnyk's case highlights the difficulty that all the wartime belligerents had in separating the dead into discrete national military cemeteries once the fighting had stopped. Quite often the war dead resisted simple categorisation. The breakup of Austria–Hungary and the German Empire created a series of new or expanded successor states in the east, including Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania. Meanwhile, there were also border changes to France, Italy, Denmark and Belgium in the west. Before the different war graves associations had had a chance to think through fully the consequences of these shifts for their care of the war dead, the Second World War set loose another major process of territorial realignment. The most dramatic shifts again occurred in Eastern Europe as the Soviet Union stretched its influence ever further westwards with the annexation of Polish and Romanian territory. After both conflicts, therefore, many soldiers fought and died wearing the uniforms of one country but then post-war found themselves associated with a completely different nation.

In the vast majority of cases, nobody delved too deeply into these more complicated questions of national belonging. A dead soldier simply became another body that needed to be provided with a permanent burial spot. With tens of thousands of bodies to be ordered into final cemeteries after the two world wars, there was often neither the time nor the inclination to explore complicated issues of national belonging. Today, for example, Olijnyk's body lies in the German military cemetery on Cannock Chase. His dark granite headstone, which matches the others lined up in silent rows, offers no indication that the grave belonged to an Austro–Hungarian soldier. It is only by delving into the burial registers that such information emerges, but even then, the Polish or indeed Ukrainian connections are absent.³⁴

Yet, in the wake of conflict, some national governments did take an interest in 'renationalising bodies'.³⁵ A soldier might have fought wearing the military uniform of one army, but this did not stop the authorities in another country from trying to reclaim the remains once the fighting had stopped. A case in point concerns Czechoslovakia, which was formed as one of the successor states to the Austro–Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War. Although some Czech and Slovak soldiers had fought in the so-called Czechoslovakian Legion, the vast

³³ 'List No. 117 of Austrian or Hungarian Prisoners of War', V183, 'International Committee of the Red Cross' <<https://grandguerre.icrc.org/en/List/53946/968/183/>> [accessed 13 February 2025]. 'Infanterist Onofry Olijnyk', CWGC Find War Dead <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/6017511/onofry-olijnyk/>> [accessed 13 February 2025].

³⁴ 'Infanterist Onofry Olijnyk', CWGC Find War Dead <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/6017511/onofry-olijnyk/>> [accessed 13 February 2025].

³⁵ Jean-Marc Dreyfus, 'Renationalizing Bodies? The French Search Mission for the Corpses of Deportees in Germany, 1946–58', in *Human Remains and Violence: Methodological Approaches*, ed. Elisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 129–45.

majority had served in the armies of Austria–Hungary.³⁶ Such inconveniences, though, did nothing to stop the new Czechoslovak state from trying to renationalise these dead soldiers post-war. In 1925, the Czechoslovak Legation in London even requested that the graves of any Czechoslovak soldiers be marked differently to other Austro-Hungarians who happened to have been buried in the UK. The IWGC was forced to point out politely that it was simply ‘impossible to distinguish Czechoslovak graves from those of other nationalities formerly Austrian’.³⁷

While it proved impossible to separate the Czechoslovaks from the other war dead, the Danes in contrast had greater success in renationalising their bodies. The Danish authorities focused on soldiers from South Jutland, a region that had been in German hands until its northern half was returned to Denmark under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.³⁸ Almost 30,000 Danish speakers had worn German military uniforms in the conflict, although their loyalties had long come under question from within Germany itself.³⁹ Seeking to exploit these uncertainties, the British established a separate POW camp for Danes, Poles and other non-German nationalities in Feltham, Surrey. In the words of the Foreign Office, this was to be strictly restricted to those prisoners who ‘may be expected to be friendly to the Allies’.⁴⁰

Four Danish–German soldiers died in Feltham during the First World War and their remains were buried in the Feltham Borstal cemetery. Three of these men had succumbed to the global influenza pandemic in 1918, while the fourth died from complications related to food poisoning. After the war, there had clearly been a determined effort to secure the men’s Danish identities in death. An association of former POWs based in Denmark arranged for a large granite boulder to be placed over the graves, which bore a single inscription in Danish.⁴¹ The stone memorial certainly did its job, as during the interwar years, the four men continued to be referred to as Danish prisoners. In 1931, for example, the German embassy wrote to the governor of Feltham Borstal asking for an update on the condition of the graves of the ‘German military prisoners of war’. The governor responded, pointing out that not only were the graves all ‘in good condition’ but they are for soldiers of ‘Schleswig–Holstein nationality’, by which was meant Danish.⁴²

It was only in the 1960s that the nationality of the four men was categorically confirmed. As part of its largescale concentration operation, the VDK laid out plans

³⁶ Mark Cornwall, *The Last Years of Austria-Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth Century Europe* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 177–9.

³⁷ IWGC Director of Records, ‘Foreign Graves in the United Kingdom’, 20 September 1932, CWGC/1/1/8/1.

³⁸ Claus Christensen Bundgård, ‘Fighting for the Kaiser: The Danish Minority in the German Army, 1914–18’, in *Scandinavia in the First World War: Studies in the War Experience of Northern Neutrals*, ed. Claes Ahlund (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), 267–82.

³⁹ Benjamin Ziemann, ‘Fahnenflucht im deutschen Heer 1914–1918’, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 55 (1996), 93–130, 127.

⁴⁰ Waller to Horace Rumbold, 29 July 1915, TNA FO 383/72. Brian Feltman, *The Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 60–1.

⁴¹ Urban District Council of Feltham to Home Office, 26 September 1961, TNA HO 282/21.

⁴² Secretary of the German Embassy to Feltham Borstal, 19 August 1931; H.M. Borstal Institution to German Embassy, 17 September 1931, VDK R13.

to exhume these graves and to have the remains moved from Feltham to Cannock Chase. When news of the proposal eventually reached members of the Danish embassy in London, they immediately protested the case based on the potential of 'great distress' for the relatives.⁴³ The matter eventually landed on the desk of a junior minister in the Home Office who seemed somewhat confused by the entire nationality issue: 'Why should Germans decide not to remove Danish bodies from English earth to other English earth?' After being given a brief history lesson into the wars of German unification and the 1864 Treaty of Vienna, he eventually agreed that the men were indeed Danish and should remain in Feltham.⁴⁴ The VDK was left with little option but to leave the four graves *in situ*, scrubbing the names from their lists of official German war dead.⁴⁵

At the same time as the Danes were laying claim to their war graves, the Austrians were doing the same for their First World War casualties. Throughout Britain, there were roughly 100 First World War Austrian graves, of which the vast majority belonged to civilian internees rather than military personnel. The largest concentration was in the Great Northern Cemetery, otherwise known as the New Southgate Cemetery, in north London, where fifteen men who had died in the Alexandra Palace internment camp lay buried. Smaller clusters of Austrian graves existed close to wartime hospitals in places such as Sutton, Surrey, or Darent Park, Kent.⁴⁶ The Austrian state had shown only limited interest in these graves during the interwar years, only occasionally acknowledging their existence at best.⁴⁷ As soon as the VDK proposed exhuming the dead in the 1960s, however, their attitude changed. The Austrian embassy in London made it clear to both the CWGC and the VDK that these graves 'should not be removed'.⁴⁸

Yet, when it came to the Austrian dead of the Second World War who had lost their lives fighting for Nazi Germany, the picture was very different. With these men, the Austrians proved only too willing to allow the VDK to exhume their remains to the German military cemetery on Cannock Chase. During the 1960s, therefore, most of this group were quietly disinterred and laid to rest with the German dead in Staffordshire. There is no specific reference to the Austrians in this new location. Luftwaffe airmen downed on wartime missions over Britain, for example, are simply recorded as 'German Air Force' regardless of whether the individuals were originally from Austria or Germany.⁴⁹ Such an arrangement of course proved to be very helpful for the new Austrian republic; it allowed them to place greater distance between themselves and the memory of Nazi Germany. Such debates over both the identity of the dead and their final resting place reflected the fact that 'imperial mobilisation' had been central to both conflicts. In the post-war world, however, the breakdown of empires and decolonisation shifted national

⁴³ Urban District Council of Feltham to Home Office, 26 September 1961, TNA HO 282/21.

⁴⁴ David Renton to Mr Stotesbury, 1961, TNA HO 282/21.

⁴⁵ VDK to CWGC, 25 October 1961, TNA, HO 282/21.

⁴⁶ IWGC to Foreign Office, 16 December 1959, CWGC/1/2/E/5.

⁴⁷ Austrian Legation to Deutsche Botschaft London, 30 July 1928, VDK R13.

⁴⁸ CWGC to Home Office, 4 January 1961, TNA HO 282/21.

⁴⁹ See the case of three airmen originally buried in Watton, one of whom was Austrian: 'German War Dead', *Thetford & Watton Times*, [undated clipping], VDK A100/975.

identities once again, leaving the dead torn between old empires and newly emerging nation states.⁵⁰

The convenient dead

Internally, the British government recognised the complexities of attempting to separate out the war dead along national lines. The trickiest situation in their eyes came with the German graves, as in both world wars there had been ‘many nationals of other countries’ serving in the ‘armed forces’. What they most feared were ‘embarrassing’ and ‘conflicting requests’ over particular bodies. ‘Say, the Ukrainian governments or the Poles on the one hand and the Norwegians, Dutch and the Belgians on the other’ tried to reclaim their dead, the Home Office pondered, then this would leave the British having to negotiate ownership with the Germans.⁵¹ To avoid such awkwardness, it proved much easier for all concerned if nobody delved too deeply into the entire question of national belonging.

The war dead from the French regions of Alsace and Lorraine provided a particularly thorny conundrum for all concerned. During the First World War, men from these provinces, which the Germans had annexed in 1871 after their victory in the Franco-Prussian war, were drafted into the German military. In total, more than 350,000 soldiers from Alsace and Lorraine wore German uniforms in the Great War.⁵² Even though these soldiers later fought mainly on the eastern front, some of them were captured and brought to British POW camps.⁵³ It is likely that small numbers of these men counted amongst the circa 2,700 German soldiers to die on British soil. Yet, there was never any special dispensation made for this particular group of war dead. The French authorities exhumed the remains of their own soldiers in 1924 and repatriated the remains back across the English Channel but left the graves of the soldiers from Alsace and Lorraine behind.⁵⁴ For reasons of convenience, it surely seemed easier to leave these men labelled as Germans than to try to unpick the issue of wartime allegiances.

There were plenty of other soldiers from contested territory or borderland regions where national identity was similarly opaque. Twenty-eight-year-old Jacob Schatz, for example, originally came from the Swiss city of St. Gallen, just south of Lake Constance which marks the border to Germany. Schatz, like many people from this wider German speaking region, clearly had an affinity with Switzerland’s larger neighbour. He enrolled in an infantry regiment from Württemberg and served on the western front, before he was captured and taken into the British POW camp system in September 1917. Schatz eventually found his way to a camp

⁵⁰ John Horne, ‘End of a Paradigm? The Cultural History of the Great War’, *Past & Present*, 242 (2019), 155–92, 180.

⁵¹ Home Office to Foreign Office, 10 August 1955, TNA FO 369/5162.

⁵² Alan Kramer, ‘Wackes at War: Alsace-Lorraine and the Failure of German National Mobilization, 1914–1918’, in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 105–21, 106.

⁵³ Ludwig Bogenstätter and Heinrich Zimmermann, *Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht: Eine Kronik des englischen Kriegsgefangenenlagers Handforth bei Manchester* (Munich: Piloty & Löhle, 1921), 64.

⁵⁴ ‘France’s Honoured Dead’, *Portsmouth Evening News*, 15 March 1924, 12.

in Skipton, where he succumbed to pneumonia during the global influenza pandemic. His fellow prisoners, who produced a memorial sheet for the camp's dead, recorded Schatz's particulars and listed him as Swiss. Some 45 years later, however, when the VDK exhumed his body and reburied it on Cannock Chase, all of this was forgotten. He then became just another German soldier laid to rest in Germany's new national cemetery.⁵⁵

Soldiers from Eastern Europe killed in the two world wars were the most likely to suffer a similar fate. In Feltham, where the Danes had managed to secure the future of their own graves, eight soldiers with Polish heritage also lay buried. Like their Danish comrades, these men had also been enlisted into the German armies of the First World War. Twenty-seven-year-old, Stanislaus Polczynski, was a typical example. Before the war, he had toiled away in the deep coalmines around Bochum in the Ruhr, a region that had a large community of Polish immigrant workers.⁵⁶ The British authorities identified Polczynski and many of his comrades as Polish rather than German, which is why they sent the men to the Feltham internment camp along with the Danish-Germans. Some 45 years later, however, when the VDK came to exhume the bodies of Polczynski – a victim of the influenza pandemic – and the other Poles from Feltham, this earlier national history no longer featured. With nobody on hand to advocate for their cause, the eight Polish bodies were simply exhumed as Germans and taken to Cannock Chase.⁵⁷

The fact that the Poles were exhumed and moved to a German national cemetery, while the Danes remained in their original graves, was entirely about contemporary politics. The VDK had already made clear its willingness to move all remains to Cannock Chase, 'irrespective of nationality', so long as the soldier was 'serving in the German Forces' at the time of his death.⁵⁸ The Germans only deviated from this approach when they were challenged directly. This had been the case with Danish officialdom, who resisted any demands to exhume their war dead. When it came to the Polish war dead, however, there were no voices of dissent. In the midst of the Cold War, it clearly proved too difficult for either Polish families or authorities to advocate for individuals who had lost their lives wearing German military uniforms in a much earlier conflict.

Soviet soldiers whom the Nazi regime had recruited into the German Wehrmacht suffered a similar fate to the Poles. Rather than being commemorated as Soviet or even Russian war dead, it proved far more convenient for all concerned simply to label these men as German. Efraem Nadiradse, for example, died in the final

⁵⁵ Fritz Sachsse and Willy Cossmann, *Kriegsgefangen in Skipton: Leben und Geschichte deutscher Kriegsgefangener in einem englischen Lager* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1920), 233. 'List No. 234 of German Prisoners of War', A36341, 'International Committee of the Red Cross' <<https://grandeguerrre.icrc.org/en/List/245565/898/36341>> [accessed 21 March 2025].

⁵⁶ On the Ruhr Poles: Stanislaus Wachowiak, *Die Polen in Rheinland-Westfalen* (Borna-Leipzig: Noske, 1916).

⁵⁷ 'List No. 232 of German Prisoners of War', Angl.232, 'International Committee of the Red Cross' <<https://grandeguerrre.icrc.org/en/List/252011/899/232/202065>>. 'Reservist Stanislaus Polczynski', CWGC Find War Dead <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/6009491/stanislaus-polczynski/>> [accessed 28 April 2025].

⁵⁸ CWGC, 'Feltham Borstal Institute', 20 December 1960, CWGC/7/4/2/10496.

months of the Second World War far from home as a POW in Swindon. When laying Nadiradse to rest in the town's Whitworth Road cemetery, the authorities clearly identified the deceased as Russian, noting this as his nationality and adding his home country as 'Russia' too.⁵⁹ Even after 1945, the VDK continued to distinguish between German and Russian war graves. On a factfinding mission to Britain in 1956, the VDK's representatives decided that Nadiradse's grave should be treated differently from the other German dead and then further north in Preston, again distinguished between '2 German and 2 Russian members of the German Wehrmacht'.⁶⁰ Yet, when the dead were exhumed a decade later, all national differences were expunged and the Russians became completely German. There was no longer any need for people to ponder these men's past lives or to ask difficult questions about national loyalties in times of conflict; all that mattered was that these were German soldiers.

The bodies of Ukrainian POWs who had died in British captivity followed the same path taken by the Russians and Poles. Most of the Ukrainians had been members of the Galicia division, part of the Waffen-SS. The division had largely fought on the eastern front, where its members were also implicated in numerous atrocities and war crimes. After surrendering to the British at the war's end, over 8,000 of these men eventually ended up in POW camps on the British mainland.⁶¹ In internment, the Ukrainians faced the same dangers as all other prisoners, suffering fatal accidents at work or play often exacerbated by the boredom of life behind wire. Bohdan Palij, a soldier from the Solboda region of Ukraine, had been badly wounded in 1944, taking a bullet to the lungs. He managed to recover from this experience only to drown three years later in Suffolk. Although a weak swimmer, Palij had apparently decided to bathe in a nearby lake but quickly got into trouble. Two other Ukrainian POWs saw him struggling, throwing 'his hands above the water'. They pulled him to the shore, but by then 20-year-old Palij was already dead.⁶²

Palij was first buried in Thetford cemetery, before being moved with the other German dead to Cannock Chase in the 1960s. As had been the case elsewhere, it was at this point that Palij's Ukrainian past was erased. Both the British and the Germans had initially recognised his Ukrainian nationality. The coroner at the inquest into the drowning, for example, had even recorded Palij as a 'Ukrainian soldier'.⁶³ Moving him to Cannock Chase as a German, though, proved far more convenient for all involved. It meant that nobody needed to consider the thorny issue of collaboration or be reminded of the wartime atrocities perpetrated by the Galicia division. Obscuring national identities in this way proved to be an easy way to bury a far more difficult past.

⁵⁹ Swindon Corporation, 'Register of Burials in War Graves, 1944-46', The Lydiard Archives, <<https://www.thelydiardarchives.org.uk/item/register-of-burials-in-war-graves-in-the-parish-of-swindon-book-1-1944-1946>> [accessed 28 April 2025].

⁶⁰ VDK, 'Bericht über die besuchten deutschen Kriegsgräber in England', 11 July 1956, VDK A11/55.

⁶¹ David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed: How Britain became a Refuge for Nazi War Criminals* (London: Phoenix, 2001), 102-33.

⁶² 'Ukrainian Soldier Drowned at Redgrave', *Diss Express*, 4 July 1947, 3.

⁶³ 'Ukrainian Soldier Drowned at Redgrave', 3.

Conclusion

The Netherlands embassy to the United Kingdom marked the eightieth anniversary of VE Day in May 2025 with a short ceremony in the Dutch military cemetery in Mill Hill. A minister from the Dutch Church led proceedings, paying respects to the country's war dead, as around 60 people looked on. While the 254 Dutch servicemen and women buried in North London were rightly at the very centre of this commemorative moment, there was another, much smaller, group of Dutch dead who remained silent. Aril Knoppert and Gerardus Landman, the two Dutchmen who died in wartime Knutsford and were later labelled traitors, were understandably absent. Their graves, and those of other Dutch 'traitors', lie almost 200 kilometres further north in the German military cemetery on Cannock Chase. This conveniently meant that the graves of these men could not sully the anniversary moment by telling other, far more complicated, stories of the Netherlands and the Second World War.⁶⁴

The omission of Knoppert, Landman and others from Mill Hill was all to do with post-conflict decision making. The time between death and burial in a permanent military cemetery could drag on for years, even decades. In this liminal period, the living were able to make their own choices about the future of those killed in times of conflict. As this article argues, the identity of the war dead was often in flux. The four main impulses behind such changes were first, the erroneously identified dead; second the unwanted dead; third the contested dead; and fourth the convenient dead. In each case, the grave of an individual killed in the two world wars was altered to fit the particular circumstances of the post-war world. Today's neatly landscaped military cemeteries, therefore, offer only a snapshot of each nation's actual war experience. They contain the graves of some men and women with only a tenuous national connection, while at the same time the cemetery gates remained closed to other groups of war dead, who often had stronger claims to inclusion.

There has long been recognition in the historiography that war memorials are constructed sites of memory. They are always as much about forgetting as remembering, urging the public to honour those who made the ultimate sacrifice, while at the same time masking the true horrors of military death.⁶⁵ Such observations, however, have rarely been applied to military cemeteries. The fact that cemeteries involve actual bodies that clearly provide clear proof of wartime loss may be one reason for this oversight. Similarly, the detailed forensic work of the CWGC, VDK and other war graves' organisation also provides such sites with a stamp of authenticity. Yet, as this article maintains, post-war military cemeteries were also artificial constructs. Just as with war memorials, cemeteries also emerged out of discussions about who was to be included and who was to be excluded from the commemoration of conflict.

⁶⁴ Marja Kingma, 'Remembering Sacrifice, Celebrating Freedom', British Library <<https://blogs.bl.uk/european/netherlands/>> [accessed 19 May 2025].

⁶⁵ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bob Bushaway, 'Name Upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance', in *Myths of the English*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 136–67.

Such conclusions may not be overly surprising, particularly given Michèle Barrett's important work on the non-commemoration of African soldiers from the British empire. Nonetheless, given the centrality of military cemeteries to the public commemoration of conflict, all omissions, whether this is with colonial soldiers or Dutch 'traitors', have consequences. Military cemeteries of course are not only a place where dignitaries perform annual rituals of remembrance; they also serve as a destination for pilgrims, tourists and thousands of schoolchildren who each year undertake tours of the western front and other former battlefields.⁶⁶ In short, cemeteries are at the very centre of narratives about questions of war, sacrifice and national belonging. They act as a particular form of Pierre Nora's *lieu de mémoire*, prompting visitors to reflect on the lives of past generations who apparently died for a national cause.⁶⁷ As this article demonstrates, however, the military cemeteries themselves have not always proved to be the most reliable of witnesses. They provide a partial and incomplete record of conflict, based solely on who the living later deemed worthy of inclusion and how they chose to commemorate them.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Tim Grady is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Chester. His research focuses on twentieth century war, conflict and society in Britain and Germany. He has most recently published *A Deadly Legacy: German Jews and the Great War* (Yale University Press, 2017) and *Burying the Enemy: The Story of Those who Cared for the Dead in Two World Wars* (Yale University Press, 2025).

Correspondence to: Tim Grady. Email: t.grady@chester.ac.uk

⁶⁶ Catriona Pennell, 'Taught to Remember? British Youth and First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours', *Cultural Trends*, 27 (2018), 83–98.

⁶⁷ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, translator Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).