

Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel. *Ypres*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 259.

In a recent addition to Oxford University Press' Great Battles series, historians Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel have situated Ypres, a city synonymous with the First World War, at the centre of their transnational study. In their monograph, *Ypres*, the authors argue that public discourses, national narratives and historical interpretations are essential to understanding the ways in which combatant nations transformed the Flemish city and surrounding landscape into a twenty-first-century centrepiece of British and Commonwealth commemoration. The thought-provoking analysis that Connelly and Goebel bring to both traditional and media-based sources has produced a fresh scholarly perspective on the unique role that the city and salient have served, and continue to serve, in the remembrance and memory of the First World War.

Connelly and Goebel examine the history and evolving memories of Ypres in seven chapters that are both chronologically and thematically arranged. The authors begin their study at the turn of the twentieth century and convincingly argue that the rise of leisurely travel throughout the Victorian age had transformed the small Belgian city into a picturesque travel destination in Western Europe. Connelly and Goebel's conclusions are derived from their analysis of tourism publications that presented Ypres as a historic setting for cultural excursions surrounded by remarkable medieval architecture. Consequently, the authors argue that this imagery of Ypres was firmly ingrained in British popular culture prior to 1914 and therefore influenced wartime discourses as combatant nations were deployed to the salient, and the city itself fell victim to destructive artillery bombardments.

Studies of First World War commemoration frequently begin with the end of the war. Historians therefore often frame the memorialisation of the Western Front as a predominantly postwar priority. However, in *Ypres*, Connelly and Goebel thoughtfully connect the national myths of combatant nations, Dominions and colonies to their origins on the wartime battlegrounds. This is quite an ambitious task, as the authors note that the salient was the setting of five battles fought between global combatants. These battles, and the national myths that originated from them, are meticulously researched and thoughtfully described by Connelly and Goebel

so that their readers appreciate the significance that each nation attributed to different sectors of the Ypres Salient. Following the Armistice, and under an umbrella of British imperial identity, official memorial committees reinforced these national narratives through the construction of permanent memorials. The authors extend their analysis to consider how these culturally crafted sites of memory continued to evolve throughout the interwar period, and how new generations of local residents and battlefield tourists continued to interpret this commemorative landscape throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Connelly and Goebel's transnational approach to the Ypres Salient is ideal for a comparative analysis of the construction of national myths and memories among combatant nations. This perspective sheds light on unique cultural circumstances where collective memories have been modified over time. Their specific attention to the rise and fall of the Langemarck myth in Germany's collective memory is notable as it relays the fact that some national myths were altered beyond repair. The authors note that the Langemarck myth originated in 1914 as a wartime symbol of youthful German sacrifice and national unity. While the myth became widely celebrated in German society both during and after the war, the Nazi regime during the 1930s effectively transformed the narrative into what Connelly and Goebel describe as "a state-sponsored myth" (p. 142). After Germany's defeat in the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, the Langemarck myth was past the point of revival. While collective memories across Britain and the Commonwealth continued to endure into the 1950s and the 1960s, the authors argue that for Germany to move forward, their national myths tainted by Nazism had to remain in the past. The authors' thoughtful analysis of the ways in which nations collectively remember and forget builds upon important scholarship by historians including Jay Winter, and is a pivotal point where *Ypres* sets itself apart from other scholarly publications that focus on a single national context.¹

A transnational study that spans over a century requires a vast array of source materials in order to be effective. Accordingly, Connelly and Goebel have applied a media-based methodological

¹ See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

approach that considers a wide variety of both traditional and unconventional sources. In addition to consulting official documents, books and newspapers, the authors also examined the ways in which films, music, paintings and photographs elevated wartime legends into the collective memories of nations. Additionally, the authors also conducted field research across commemorative sites in and around Ypres where they witnessed first-hand the memorials, tour programs and commemorative rituals that define the Ypres Salient for modern-day visitors. Indeed, they are quite right to assert that *Ypres* is an all-encompassing scholarly study that evaluates how this revered city has come to mean so much to so many.

As *Ypres* was written during the centennial of the First World War, additional studies that offer an in-depth critique of the centenary will remain for a future generation of historians to explore. In the interim, *Ypres*' transnational perspective, thought-provoking analysis and accessible prose make this book essential reading for both students and scholars of the First World War. Similarly, the twenty-first-century battlefield traveller will also greatly benefit by adding this scholarly publication to their essential reading list. With Connelly and Goebel guiding their readers through the complex history and the evolving memories of the salient, the readers of *Ypres* will not be disappointed.

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