Lessons from History: Beware the politics of commemoration.

The commemorations of the outbreak of World War One have already prompted much discussion and the coalition government has allocated fifty million pounds to fund centenary events.

According to the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, one reason for publicly marking this anniversary is that it was a ‘uniquely horrific war’. Yet, in terms of bloodshed, the British civil wars of the seventeenth century involved proportionally greater loss of life. Exploring why these events were not widely commemorated provides an insight into the present-day politics of memory.

The Act of Indemnity and Oblivion passed in 1660 sought not only to heal the wounds of the 1640s but also to end ‘all remembrance’ of these traumatic events. Though the date of Charles I’s execution (30th January) became a public fast day, the regicide itself was ‘the elephant in the room’ that most preachers declined to mention. Historians, such as Catherine Macaulay, who breached this national omertà about 1649, were fiercely criticised. Memorials to the events and personalities of the 1640s were also largely absent before the ‘monument mania’ of the late-nineteenth century.

Neither the complexity of the events of the 1640s, nor their internecine nature explains this relative silence. After all, the Wars of the Roses, a long, complex civil conflict, have been a fixture of the popular historical imagination since Shakespeare’s day. The neglect of the English revolution is instead political: a historical tradition built around a monarchical narrative has long struggled to accommodate its republican ‘interlude’.

Public remembrance is not then a direct indicator of historical significance, nor is it simply a natural, emotional response to loss. Commemoration is instead often a political act which can be employed to advance a variety of ideological positions.

This is strikingly revealed in the controversy over the Royal Mint’s commemorative coin, depicting Lord Kitchener. Public petitions were created objecting to the choice of Kitchener as ‘jingoistic’ and an endorsement of ‘war-mongering’. Many of the coin’s critics pointed not only to Kitchener’s record as Secretary of State for War 1914-16 but also his complicity in atrocities in Sudan and South Africa.

As many as 26000 people may have died in the concentration camps created during the Boer War. However, as the historian Elizabeth van Heyningen has shown, in South Africa, the undoubted horror of these camps was co-opted into a self-serving Afrikaaner mythology which, until recently, ignored the suffering of non-whites and resisted critical, historical analysis.

The multiple ways in which a figure such as Kitchener has been commemorated reminds us that history can be manipulated to serve any number of political masters. Michael Gove’s own interpretation, that Britain’s intervention in the war demonstrates our ‘special tradition of liberty’, connects to a similarly venerable tradition of yoking history to a particular vision of national identity.
Mourning the human costs of the war need not prejudice balanced historical evaluation, for, without such a sceptical approach, historians run the risk of being unwittingly conscripted into a political argument.

Ted Vallance
University of Roehampton

The author is grateful to the editor for permission to reproduce it here.

Further resources and reading


Michael Gove, Tom Holland, Margaret Macmillan, and Simon Schama discusses the teaching of World War One (amongst other topics)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b03mcmwx/Start_the_Week_Michael_Gove_on_teaching_history/


Andrew Lacey, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 2003)
