

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 'Every one (re)membered': Anxiety, family history, and militarised vicarious identity promotion during Britain's First World War centenary commemorations

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## Abstract

International Relations (IR) scholarship on ontological (in)security has explored how political agents seek to shape collective identity through the contestation and securitisation of memory narratives around controversial historical events. This article contributes a novel approach for understanding how actors promote emotional engagement with such narratives, synthesising nascent scholarship on vicarious identity and military subjectivity to develop the concept of 'militarised vicarious identity promotion'. I use this framework to analyse how national custodian, the Royal British Legion, used the British 2014–18 First World War (WW1) centenary to promote affectively resonant revisionism around a war with difficult resonances in Britain by encouraging subjects to 'live through' others. Its 'LIVE ON' and 'Every One Remembered' initiatives first countered the centenary's potential to destabilise homogenised militarist narratives underpinning national ontological security by rehabilitating WW1 through vicarious frames blurring different military subjectivities together in ways designed to reincorporate WW1 into homogenised remembrance discourses. Second, Britons were encouraged to integrate the nation's military history into their personal biographies by vicariously identifying with ancestral and adoptive WW1 connections. Through enabling feelings of pride and status assuaging civilian anxiety, 'vicarious military subjectivity' based on family connections provided emotional reinforcement for identification with simplistic WW1 revisionism and homogenised British militarism more broadly.

**Keywords:** family history; First World War centenary; militarism; ontological security; vicarious identity; vicarious military subjectivity

## Introduction

Memory plays a central role in nation-states' attempts to establish a sense of ontological security, by anchoring understandings of social reality and self-identity narratives 'through the use of historical signposts and careful curating of select events, setbacks and triumphs, myths, and symbols'.<sup>1</sup> In Britain, hegemonic narrations of the Second World War (WW2) as 'the good war' in which government and people stood united, 'heroic and stoic ... in the face of evil' comprise Britain's foundational myth, underpinning liberal, militarised citizenship ideals.<sup>2</sup> However, other experiences have more

<sup>1</sup>Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 28; Alexandria J. Innes and Brent J. Steele, 'Memory, trauma and ontological security', in Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 15–29.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 132.

anxious legacies. Since the late 20th century, the First World War (WW1) has often been mythologised negatively in British imaginaries, being associated with futility, horror, and recklessness.<sup>3</sup> The WW1 soldier with whom the war is associated is correspondingly portrayed in popular culture such as the film *Oh! What a Lovely War* and the *Blackadder* television series as the victim of a ‘pointless, bloody and badly led [war]’, providing a cautionary tale of state violence and folly.<sup>4</sup>

While WW2 has generally eclipsed WW1 in official narratives, commemorations can refocus attention on difficult events, with competing myths having the potential to disrupt and reinforce different ideologies and identities. Scholars have investigated the discursive strategies employed by stakeholders to influence the ideological trajectory of commemorations, not least elite efforts to rehabilitate dissonant pasts and recast their associated subjectivities for contemporary political purposes through the curation and securitisation of memory in discourse.<sup>5</sup> However, this literature has not yet considered vicarious identity promotion as such a strategy, despite the concept’s recent theorisation in Ontological Security Studies (OSS).<sup>6</sup> To address this lacuna, this article draws together scholarship on ontological (in)security, vicarious identity, and military subjectivity, exploring *militarised vicarious identity promotion* as a strategy through which national custodians seek to make difficult pasts usable for contemporary purposes.

I explore this through the case of the British 2014–18 WW1 centenary commemorations. Although its importance was widely affirmed, the centenary generated contrasting anxieties: while left-leaning commentators worried that the commemorations might glorify WW1 for nationalistic purposes, conservatives expressed concerns that political correctness might preclude sufficient celebration of righteous national triumph.<sup>7</sup> Recognising these sensitivities, the British government claimed neutrality, framing the centenary as an opportunity for remembrance and to ‘[say] something about who we are.’<sup>8</sup> While welcoming the opportunity to challenge the negative mythology’s oversimplifications and promote more nuanced interpretations, historians recognised that contemporary sensibilities might trump historical fidelity.<sup>9</sup> McCartney identified three aspects of WW1’s place in contemporary British culture that might perpetuate negative perceptions of the war. First was the tendency of genealogy (a popular method of public engagement with WW1) to promote an ‘empathetic individualized approach to family history’, emphasising the WW1 soldier’s non-agentive victimhood. Second, growing public interest in war’s ‘psychological costs’ had further solidified this WW1 ‘soldier-victim’ image. Finally, this image was central in efforts to distance modern veterans from Britain’s unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially through remembrance discourses linking these wars to WW1, thereby reinforcing the WW1 soldier-victim image. In this context,

<sup>3</sup>Following Todman, the term ‘negative mythology’ refers to popular associations of WW1 with futility, horror, and recklessness. He defines ‘a myth [as] a belief about the past held by an individual but common to a social group ... reducing the complex events of the past to an easily understood set of symbols’, emphasising that WW1’s modern myth ‘has its origins in events and emotions at the time’. Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), pp. xii–xiii, 221–3.

<sup>4</sup>Helen B. McCartney, ‘The First World War soldier and his contemporary image in Britain’, *International Affairs*, 90:2 (2014), pp. 299–315 (p. 303).

<sup>5</sup>Maria Mälksoo, ‘“Memory must be defended”: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37; Paul Nesbitt-Larking and James W. McAuley, ‘Securitisation through re-enchantment: The strategic uses of myth and memory’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 317–32.

<sup>6</sup>Christopher S Browning, Pertti Joenniemi, and Brent Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup>Andrew Mycock, ‘The First World War centenary in the UK: “A truly national commemoration”?’, *The Round Table*, 103:2 (2014), pp. 156–7.

<sup>8</sup>David Cameron, ‘Speech at Imperial War Museum on First World War centenary plans’, London, 11 October 2012, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>.

<sup>9</sup>E.g. Catriona Pennell, ‘Popular history and myth-making: The role and responsibility of First World War historians in the centenary commemorations, 2014–2018’, *Historically Speaking*, 13:5 (2012), pp. 11–14; Huw Strachan, ‘First World War anniversary: We must do more than remember’, *The Telegraph* (11 January 2013), available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/9795881/First-World-War-anniversary-we-must-do-more-than-remember.html>.

McCartney warned that the centenary may reinforce the negative mythology's depiction of WW1 personnel as "brave but powerless victim[s]".<sup>10</sup>

In this article, I argue that the centenary gave rise to a very different narrative, not least due to the efforts of the Royal British Legion (RBL) to counter WW1's negative mythology. As Britain's largest veterans' charity and 'national custodian of remembrance', founded after WW1 with close ties to the British state, the RBL is invested in the narration of both WW1 and modern veterans. Moreover, given the centenary's political sensitivities, the RBL's familiar place in national life – especially its annual Poppy Appeal raising money for veteran welfare – combined with its public image as 'apolitical' and trustworthy, made it one of the most influential centenary stakeholders.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to McCartney's concerns that genealogy and remembrance might reinforce WW1's 'negative' mythology, through a discourse analysis of its flagship 'LIVE ON' and 'Every One Remembered' centenary campaigns, I show how RBL efforts at *militarised vicarious identity promotion* used both phenomena to promote revisionist centenary engagement aligned with its contemporary priorities. Significantly, despite remembrance's historic association with WW1 and victimhood, the centenary followed a period when remembrance was reframed in ebullient terms through increasingly homogenising discourses of heroic sacrifice blurring together Britain's wars but centred on WW2, promoted as an avenue for public re-engagement with militarised nationalism; it also coincided with RBL attempts to *challenge* public perceptions of modern veterans as victims. Facing a centenary that might undermine these priorities and generate national ontological insecurity by prompting critical reflection on British militarism informed by WW1's negative mythology, RBL initiatives used vicarious frames to rehabilitate WW1 soldiers as heroes of a worthy conflict by reincorporating them into discourses of heroic sacrifice. This was reinforced by campaigns deliberately stimulating anxieties regarding civilians' debt to military personnel and the symbolic mortality of the dead, while encouraging subjects to vicariously identify with military ancestors or other 'adopted' connections to reinforce their own ontological security. Subjects were encouraged to take pride in their ancestors' participation, cultivating *vicarious military subjectivity* by integrating the nation's military history into their personal biographies, thus providing emotional reinforcement for identification with the RBL's militarised revisionism.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond offering a novel conceptual framework providing insights into the politics of memory and ontological security during Britain's WW1 centenary, the article makes two further contributions. First, it develops nascent International Relations (IR) scholarship on vicarious identity by highlighting the vicarious politics of 'symbolic immortality' as a driving force behind commemoration. Moreover, whereas existing studies have predominantly focused on vicarious identification with/between nation-states,<sup>13</sup> I broaden this agenda by exploring the family as a complementary object of vicarious identity, thus answering recent calls for IR theorists to re-examine kinship relations.<sup>14</sup> Second, while primarily focusing on vicarious identity *promotion*, the article suggests why such efforts resonated by developing work on military subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> This scholarship shows how war commemoration calls upon citizens to participate in 'communities of feeling' situated around hyper-personalised frames promoting public support for the

<sup>10</sup> McCartney, 'First World War soldier', p. 315.

<sup>11</sup> Gavin Ellison, 'Brand watch: The Royal British Legion', *Third Sector* (7 January 2014), available at: <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/brand-watch-royal-british-legion/communications/article/1224269>.

<sup>12</sup> 'To become militarised', Enloe notes, 'is to adopt militaristic values (e.g. a belief in hierarchy, obedience, and the use of forces) and priorities as one's own, to see military solutions as particularly effective, to see the world as a dangerous place best approached with militaristic attitudes.' Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher S. Browning, "'Je suis en terrasse': Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be", *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61; Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*.

<sup>14</sup> Kristin Haugevik and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Kinship in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Paul R. Higate (ed.), *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Joanna Tidy, 'The gender politics of "ground truth" in the military dissent movement: The power and limits of authenticity claims regarding war', *International Political Sociology*, 10:2 (2016), pp. 99–114.

military by emphasising the good citizenship of individual personnel and the emotional needs of their families.<sup>16</sup> While enabling feelings of belonging, commemorations also reaffirm militarised citizenship hierarchies by deliberately activating ‘civilian anxiety’ that one is failing to live up to social expectations by not undertaking military service.<sup>17</sup> By highlighting how civilians are increasingly encouraged to develop a personal military backstory, however, I argue that vicarious military subjectivity constitutes an alternative strategy for mitigating civilian anxiety – one blurring civilian–military boundaries by signifying that subjects have *already* ‘done their bit’ by virtue of personal connections.

The article begins by theoretically explicating vicarious identity promotion and the politics of commemoration, before using this framework to make sense of WW1’s changing role in British discourse. I then theoretically parse the strategies used by the RBL to promote militarised centenary engagement. The subsequent sections explore how contemporary imperatives drove efforts to rehabilitate the image of WW1 and modern military personnel, analysing how ‘Every One Remembered’ promoted vicarious military subjectivity. I conclude by highlighting some ethical implications of militarised vicarious identity promotion and directions for future research.

### Vicarious identity and the politics of commemoration

This article explores the role of vicarious identity promotion in national custodians’ efforts to encourage militarised public engagement with the WW1 centenary. ‘Vicarious identity’ refers to ‘the appropriation of an other’s identity, experiences and actions as if they were one’s own’ – a phenomenon visible when sports fans claim ‘we won’ when their team triumphs, or when parents are perceived as ‘living through’ their children.<sup>18</sup> It is also central to (inter)national politics, with nation-states being constituted by bonds of ‘we’ feeling involving ‘identity fusion.’<sup>19</sup> ‘Vicarious identification’ – conscious and non-conscious ‘attempts to establish and legitimize a vicarious identity’ – is often indicated in discourse by the use of first-person pronouns (e.g. ‘I’, ‘we’) when describing others’ actions. However, it is also traceable in (auto)biographical narratives and routines emphasising ‘shared home, culture, community, history and parallel/equivalent experiences’, expressions of ‘detailed knowledge [and] ... emotion’ signifying commitment to a vicarious identity and the invocation of familial ties.<sup>20</sup>

Recent scholarship has theorised vicarious identity as a strategy for reinforcing a sense of ontological security. OSS scholars hold that to avoid being overwhelmed by existential anxieties – encompassing mortality and broader questions of (non-)being including existential meaning and social judgements about subjects’ relative moral standing<sup>21</sup> – subjects at different levels (e.g. individuals, nation-states) strive to establish a ‘sense of presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and ... continuous person.’<sup>22</sup> This involves articulating (auto)biographical narratives and routines which locate the subject in time and space and provide a stable sense of self-identity and agency.<sup>23</sup> Subjects seek to have that ‘self recognized and affirmed by others’ through identification with

<sup>16</sup>Anthony King, ‘The Afghan War and “postmodern” memory: Commemoration and the dead of Helmand’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61:1 (2010), pp. 1–25; Victoria M. Basham, ‘Gender, race, militarism and remembrance: The everyday geopolitics of the poppy’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23:6 (2016), pp. 883–96.

<sup>17</sup>Katharine M. Millar, ‘What do we do now? Examining civilian masculinity/ies in contemporary liberal civil–military relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:2 (2019), pp. 239–59.

<sup>18</sup>Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup>Christopher S. Browning and Joseph Haigh, ‘Hierarchies of heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the limits of militarized vicarious resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:3 (2022), pp. 1–13 (p. 3).

<sup>20</sup>Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup>Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962); Bahar Rumelili, ‘[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36.

<sup>22</sup>R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [first published 1960]), p. 39.

<sup>23</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 35–6.

intersubjective frameworks of reality.<sup>24</sup> By 'bracket[ing] out questions about ourselves, others and the object-world', these allow for a sense of social meaning, purpose, and self-esteem.<sup>25</sup>

Because ontological security is intersubjective, societies engage in *vicarious identity promotion*, encouraging subjects to articulate their subjectivity through identification with pre-existing discourses and collectives, including the family and nation-state. Vicarious identification with nation-states is viewed as offering several ontological security resources. First, nationalism offers an ontological framework, condensing complex events into homogenising, easily communicable shorthand mythologies 'convey[ing] a picture of security, stability, and simple answers' and providing a moral framework conducive to pursuing full subjectivity and social discipline.<sup>26</sup> As Tarver notes, by subjecting themselves to a group, 'individuals both subordinate themselves to a discipline and, by virtue of it, achieve a sense of their own identities'. Beyond cultivating fictive kinship among citizens, subjectivisation allows subjects to hierarchically distinguish themselves from other members through competition for social status around cherished signifiers (e.g. patriotism).<sup>27</sup> Second, 'living through the achievements of the broader community' (e.g. past military victories) allows subjects to 'bask in reflected glory', bolstering ontological security especially when subjects perceive their own subjectivity as lacking.<sup>28</sup> Finally, vicarious identification offers subjects 'symbolic immortality' – 'the promise ... of cheating death by contributing to and living on through the group even after one has worldly departed.'<sup>29</sup>

While such frameworks help *manage* anxiety, its existential character means that all subjects and communities face periodic challenges to their ontological security. They can experience shame if their actions undermine self-identity claims or are negatively appraised by others.<sup>30</sup> Anxiety can also arise from crises such as natural or human-made disasters impinging on settled understandings of ourselves, others, and the world. Giddens argues that due to the 'extreme dynamism' facilitated by technological advances and globalised interconnection, 'crises become endemic' and apocalyptic in scope in late modernity – e.g. mass war.<sup>31</sup> The anxiety unleashed by crises is also shaped by late modernity's particular configuration. First, unlike the religious frameworks upon which people previously depended for ontological security, which tamed death by promising heavenly salvation in return for good conduct, the nation-state that supplanted God as the ultimate sovereign is limited to pledging *national* resilience. Thus, rather than salvation, in late modernity mortality represents the anxious spectre of non-being. This is exacerbated by death's 'sequestration' from social settings to mask the limits of state power – limits that are laid bare by mass death events.<sup>32</sup> Second, whereas tradition previously largely determined subjects' social status, late modernity is characterised by neoliberal individualisation, with 'enterprising selves' compelled by

<sup>24</sup> Innes and Steele, 'Memory, trauma and ontological security', p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, pp. 37, 47; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation & Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 42).

<sup>26</sup> Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67 (p. 742); Todman, *The Great War*, pp. xii–xiii, 221–3.

<sup>27</sup> Erin C. Tarver, *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 26–7, 21; see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 192.

<sup>28</sup> Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*, p. 2; Robert B. Cialdini, Richard J. Borden, Avril Thorne et al., 'Basking in reflected glory: Three (football) field studies', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34:3 (1976), pp. 366–75.

<sup>29</sup> Browning, "'Je suis en terrasse'", p. 251; on 'symbolic immortality', see Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145–56; Charlotte Heath-Kelly, *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).



the market-state to cultivate their own personal 'brands'.<sup>33</sup> While late modern societies enforce social codes, then, they offer little *existential* guidance for navigating late modernity's 'morally arid environment'.<sup>34</sup> This can generate disorientation, dread, boredom, and desires for catharsis, with ontological security-seeking becoming increasingly fragmented.<sup>35</sup>

Political actors are deeply invested in the management of such anxieties. While the nation-state is reliant upon channelling anxiety to promote social discipline, elites often fear the disruptive potential of 'mass emotion' and 'emotional contagion' unleashed by crises because anxiety may exceed elite control when it becomes a 'public mood'.<sup>36</sup> Concerns that anxiety may undermine social cohesion or that political rivals may opportunistically fill the discursive vacuum prompt 'elite, top-down efforts to prevent its outbreak, quarantine and calm its perceived fires, or direct its force towards desired targets'.<sup>37</sup> Such efforts typically promote national ontological security by 'naming affect as emotion', thus framing the range of appropriate responses.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, elites can experience public pressure to provide leadership during crises, with anxious moods providing enabling conditions for political strategies such as securitisation, which resonates because of its ability to transpose anxiety into fear of tangible threats.<sup>39</sup>

Another important strategy in the context of mass death events is the promotion of symbolic immortality. Although the nation-state is unable to secure its citizens against death (and may compel mortal sacrifice in war) or replicate religion's promise of eternal salvation, as Abulof argues, the promise of symbolic immortality can assuage death *anxieties* by transposing individual anxieties into collective ones, with the nation-state's will to immortality standing in for individuals' own unrealisable desire to endure.<sup>40</sup> This entails public commemoration of the dead, which effaces the limits of state power through performances of collective remembrance.<sup>41</sup> Of course, because symbolic immortality depends upon the living sustaining the legacy of the dead, it is inherently political, raising questions of who is remembered and how. Wars generate multiple emotions (e.g. grief, trauma, pride, anger) and divergent commemorative attempts to make sense of loss, including some dissonant with 'official' narrations. To tame the disruptive potential of dissonant narratives, elites promote public engagement with discourses and rituals that manage anxieties and grief through collective commemoration focused on national sacrifice. Such frameworks operate through homogenising and depoliticising commemorative vernaculars, framing mortal sacrifice for the nation – and commemoration upholding symbolic immortality – as virtuous, while being polysemic enough to provide catharsis for/neutralise broader sentiments.<sup>42</sup> Thus, national custodians use commemoration to reinvigorate national vicarious identification through renewed mythologising and performances of state-sanctioned emotion.

While anxieties unleashed by crises can temporarily sustain the hegemony of national commemorative discourses and marginalise dissenting views, their discursive resonance and emotional sensitivity may decline as anxiety dissipates and the discourse's original referent generation (often

<sup>33</sup>Peter Miller and Nik Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup>Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 145–56.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 16, 8; Jorg Kustermans and Erik Ringmar, 'Modernity, boredom, and war: A suggestive essay', *Review of International Studies*, 37:4 (2011), pp. 1775–92.

<sup>36</sup>Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Rethinking affective experience and popular emotion: World War I and the construction of group emotion in International Relations', *Political Psychology*, 40:6 (2019), pp. 1357–72 (p. 1362); Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1026.

<sup>37</sup>Hall and Ross, 'Rethinking affective experience', p. 1363.

<sup>38</sup>Jack Holland and Ty Solomon, 'Affect is what states make of it: Articulating everyday experiences of 9/11', *Critical Studies on Security*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 262–77 (p. 273).

<sup>39</sup>Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1027.

<sup>40</sup>Uriel Abulof, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup>Heath-Kelly, *Death and Security*.

<sup>42</sup>Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 168.

most emotionally invested in it due to their lived experience) passes away.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, successor generations may revise the historical record in light of subsequent events and changing social norms. As Steele notes, past actions that are a source of pride for some – e.g. war, empire – can lead others to ‘feel ashamed of the actions of their in-group even when they personally were not responsible for those actions’ when they undermine self-identity narratives, leading to the emergence of revisionist mythologies challenging ‘official’ ontological security narratives.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, commemorations can become flashpoints for the anxious contestation of disputed historical events and figures at the heart of the shared national symbolic order.<sup>45</sup>

### The First World War and British war commemoration in perspective

These dynamics are visible in WW1’s changing place in the British national imagination. British culture has frequently mythologised WW1 negatively, emphasising its futility, horror, and hapless generals’ betrayal of the brave British ‘Tommy’ soldier. While divisive from the outset, however, the war was contemporaneously sustained by the widespread belief that the sacrifices entailed were just and necessary. Moreover, as the war’s human toll mounted, honouring the dead’s sacrifice became a key justification for its continuation.<sup>46</sup> Famously, John McCrae’s poem ‘In Flanders Fields’ implored Britons to persevere with the war to uphold the symbolic immortality of the dead: the war must be won *because* so many lives had already been lost.<sup>47</sup> Rather than the deaths themselves, anxiety centred on the possibility that without victory, those deaths may lack *meaning*.

Similar logics were central to post-war commemorative culture, becoming hegemonic because they addressed multiple personal and political challenges arising from a conflict involving the mass mobilisation of a force from a wider social demographic than Britain’s previous wars and resulting in the deaths of 1.1 million British Empire personnel. The widespread bereavement and grief that this generated, coupled with Britain’s nascent democratisation during this period, led to unprecedented calls for the repatriation of the dead to facilitate individualised commemoration, reflecting the population’s increasingly diverse preferences.<sup>48</sup> While refusing these calls for reasons of cost, equality, and taste, the British government took their underlying sentiments seriously, particularly in the context of the social transformation and disorder that were generated by the war at home and abroad, with the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland and the 1917 Russian Revolution looming large in policymakers’ minds. Against this backdrop, political elites became increasingly anxious about the collective emotions generated by the war, including the potential for grief and fragmented commemoration to induce social paralysis or be instrumentalised by political opponents to upend the existing social order through calls for change and revolution.<sup>49</sup>

Such concerns prompted official efforts to channel the diverse emotional responses to WW1 through a unifying commemorative framework emphasising patriotic sacrifice for future peace.<sup>50</sup> While the war’s end and the Armistice’s anniversary were marked by military parades catering to the desires of government and many veterans to celebrate victory, it was memorialisation of the dead, including the Cenotaph, the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, and the Two Minutes’ Silence, that resonated most with the public mood, providing sites of pilgrimage for the bereaved and rituals

<sup>43</sup>Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*, pp. 188–92.

<sup>44</sup>Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, pp. 54–5.

<sup>45</sup>Browning, “‘Je suis en terrasse’”, p. 251.

<sup>46</sup>Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, ‘Bereaved and aggrieved: Combat motivation and the ideology of sacrifice in the First World War’, *Historical Research*, 83:219 (2010), pp. 156–62.

<sup>47</sup>James Fox, ‘Poppy politics: Remembrance of things present’, in Constantine Sandis (ed.), *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), pp. 21–30 (p. 23).

<sup>48</sup>Michael Heffernan, ‘For ever England: The Western front and the politics of remembrance in Britain’, *Ecumene*, 2:3 (1995), pp. 293–323.

<sup>49</sup>Jenny Macleod and Yvonne Inall, ‘A century of Armistice Day: Memorialisation in the wake of the First World War’, *Mortality*, 25:1 (2019), pp. 48–68 (pp. 51–2).

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

for the communal recognition of loss; they also transposed anxiety by making death meaningful while being simple enough to incorporate multiple sentiments.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, by sanctifying sacrifice and sequestering death through annual rituals promoting a return to the pre-war status quo the rest of the year, commemoration assuaged official concerns about order and the willingness of subjects to make future sacrifices.<sup>52</sup> And while some Cabinet members ‘perceived a tension between marking Britain’s victory and mourning her dead, with the risk that the latter might obscure the former’, the perception that remembrance discourse ‘[consoled] those bereaved by the war’ made questioning the war’s validity effectively taboo for several decades.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, remembrance’s dominant association with the dead occurred in the context of the growing need of the living. Despite being promised ‘homes fit for heroes’ by the government, veteran welfare was largely delegated to the numerous charities formed during the war. By 1921, this improvised social safety net was under significant strain against the background of economic recession, high veteran unemployment, and a shortfall in state welfare provision. Some veterans even disrupted the Cenotaph commemorations, protesting ‘perpetual homage to the dead veteran when surviving ones were receiving such little help.’<sup>54</sup> This context prompted the formation of the British Legion in the same year to provide veteran welfare and avert demands for social change by unifying veterans of different classes in one organisation ‘[inculcating] a sense of loyalty to the Crown, Community, State and Nation.’<sup>55</sup> Inspired by McCrae’s poem, the Legion sold red silk poppies as symbols of remembrance for British forces to raise funds for veterans and their families. The Legion subsequently became the ‘national custodian of remembrance’ (a key ontological security arbiter), with its annual Poppy Appeal reminding the public of its existential debt to soldiers and keeping ‘alive’ the memory of the dead and the living – a function that continues today.<sup>56</sup>

Although WW1-era commemorative culture was subsequently extended to reflect WW2 (perhaps suggesting the equivalence of the wars), the wars soon diverged in the collective imagination. As McLeod and Inall argue, ‘the political relevance of remembering the “war to end all wars” was undermined by the renewal of conflict between 1939 and 1945.’<sup>57</sup> By contrast, from the 1950s onwards, a stream of ebullient cultural outputs cast WW2 as ‘the good war’ and the foundational experience of contemporary ‘Britishness.’<sup>58</sup> Concurrently, the passing of the generations that had experienced and depended upon affirmative narrations of WW1 meant that by the 1970s, subsequent generations inherited a commemorative framework whose emphasis on death contributed to WW1’s cultural association with waste and trauma becoming dominant.<sup>59</sup>

The ‘memory boom’ of the late 1980s saw renewed public interest in WW1 commemoration and family history.<sup>60</sup> Driving this trend, Todman argues, was ‘the rapid pace of change’ of the modern world which led people ‘to seek stability and an affirmation of identity in the past’ by establishing ‘an imaginative connection with past people or events – particularly with members of our own families – [which] allows us to tell ourselves powerful stories about who we are and reinforce our sense

<sup>51</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 60–72; Macleod and Inall, ‘A century of Armistice Day’, p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Todman, *The Great War*, p. 57; Mycock, ‘The First World War centenary’, p. 156.

<sup>53</sup> Todman, *The Great War*, pp. 52, 131–2.

<sup>54</sup> Fiona Reid, ‘From first Remembrance Day to remembrance today’, *HistoryExtra* (9 May 2012), available at {<https://www.historyextra.com/period/first-world-war/from-first-remembrance-day-to-remembrance-today/>}; Todman, *The Great War*, p. 130.

<sup>55</sup> T. F. Lister (1921), quoted in King, *Memorials of the Great War*, p. 209.

<sup>56</sup> Basham, ‘Gender, race, militarism’.

<sup>57</sup> Macleod and Inall, ‘A century of Armistice Day’, pp. 64, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Croft, *Securitizing Islam*, p. 132.

<sup>59</sup> Todman, *The Great War*, pp. 221–7; McCartney, ‘First World War soldier’, p. 303.

<sup>60</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 43–4.



of self.<sup>61</sup> Thus, ontological insecurity generated a desire for vicarious identification with ancestors (a dynamic I return to later). But what stories did subjects tell about their ancestors, WW1, and themselves? The fascination with death during this period was motivated, Todman argues, by subjects seeking a meaningful connection with history: 'Looking back on a century that seems particularly full of violence and tragedy, do we perhaps want a violent, tragic event in our own past? Is this a way to seek entry to a global community of suffering?'<sup>62</sup> Importantly, while ancestral links with WW1 offered subjects 'a chance to participate in the national heritage' and experience vicarious pride, for many Britons seeking to understand their place in modernity, an ancestral loss read through WW1's negative mythology provided a cautionary tale of the violence that the liberal state could subject its own citizens to. Such readings, McCartney notes, were reinforced by the burgeoning family-history industry in the 21st century to foster emotional engagements with military ancestors.<sup>63</sup>

While remembrance experienced renewed popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, practices such as the silence and poppy-wearing assumed more individualised meanings in the absence of imperatives for national unification.<sup>64</sup> And although the practices themselves remained associated with WW1, for younger generations the linguistic signifiers of remembrance discourse relating to 'sacrifice' in the name of 'freedom' were increasingly associated with WW2.

### *British war commemoration during the war on terror*

From 2001, the RBL assumed renewed relevance in the context of Britain's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Veterans and their families again required material support in the context of a perceived government shortfall in welfare provision.<sup>65</sup> But the smaller demographic of Britons affected directly by the wars, coupled with the conflicts' unpopularity, generated significant elite anxiety around the possibility of a public failure to rally behind the military, thus prompting intensive efforts to promote support for 'the troops'. These worked to discursively distance the armed forces from the conflicts through their sympathetic portrayal as heroic victims of misguided wars and political ineptitude.<sup>66</sup> They also emphasised that the burden of Britain's safety was borne by a broader armed forces community, including 'military families', urging public support for those who had not themselves chosen war.<sup>67</sup>

Absolving the military of responsibility by emphasising their passive victimhood, as McCartney argues, proved highly effective in bypassing war critics, with support for the armed forces undiminished even as the wars themselves became increasingly unpopular.<sup>68</sup> However, portrayals of the conflicts as 'unnecessary' and 'badly prosecuted' also invited problematic comparisons with WW1's reputation as a 'futile and mismanaged' conflict, rendering the victimised figure of the WW1 'Tommy' a reference point for understanding the plight of modern soldiers. For McCartney, the extension of remembrance to modern conflicts – whether through the addition of names from recent conflicts to WW1-era memorials or the prominence of modern veterans in ceremonies marking the passing of 'the last Tommy' Harry Patch in 2009 – served to '[link] recent military deaths symbolically with those of the First World War'.<sup>69</sup> While acknowledging that 'commemorative rituals provide a space for multiple interpretations', McCartney argued that WW1's negative

<sup>61</sup>Todman, *The Great War*, p. 70.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.

<sup>63</sup>McCartney, 'First World War soldier', pp. 304–7.

<sup>64</sup>Macleod and Inall, 'A century of Armistice Day', pp. 59–62.

<sup>65</sup>Helen B. McCartney, 'The military covenant and the civil–military contract in Britain', *International Affairs*, 86:2 (2010), pp. 411–28 (p. 411).

<sup>66</sup>Rachel Woodward, Trish Winter, and K. Neil Jenkins, 'Heroic anxieties: The figure of the British soldier in contemporary print media', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 2:2 (2009), pp. 211–23.

<sup>67</sup>King, 'The Afghan War'; Basham, 'Gender, race, militarism', p. 888.

<sup>68</sup>McCartney, 'First World War soldier', pp. 311–12.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 314.

mythology meant that commemorative linkages between the past and present tended to ‘solidify the image of the soldier-victim in both conflicts’ and perpetuate negative interpretations of WW1.

While these concerns were certainly valid, however, the incorporation of modern veterans into remembrance frameworks also enabled a range of more affirmative associations which complicate the soldier-victim image. As Millar notes, remembrance discourse suggests ‘that the duty of commemoration ... accrues from a more enduring, structural relationship’: one underpinned by ontological claims about the necessity of military sacrifice.<sup>70</sup> This ‘covenant’ between the armed forces, government, and public crucially inscribes military personnel with *agency* and *motive*, depicting them as having volunteered their lives for the nation. Beyond emphasising the need to remember veterans as objects of pity, remembrance discourse highlights their *causal* significance: that, but for ‘their’ actions, ‘we’ would not be safe, free, or even exist – thus activating ‘civilian anxiety’ (a concept to which I return later) and prompting citizen efforts to service their existential debt.<sup>71</sup> These associations were foregrounded by a tonal shift towards celebratory remembrance which, as Basham notes, ‘conjoined the long-standing narrative of the poppy as one of sacrifice ... with the veneration of serving military personnel’.<sup>72</sup>

This shift was consonant with ‘support the troops’ initiatives promoting greater public recognition of the armed forces’ *contribution* to national life. At a moment of significant anxiety around Britishness and Britain’s place in the world generated by successive crises including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, domestic terrorism, and the 2008 financial crisis, as well as a broader sense of ‘postcolonial melancholia’<sup>73</sup> and longing for greatness (later channelled through calls for Brexit),<sup>74</sup> militarism was perceived as reinforcing ontological security by recapturing lost greatness and remasculinising society, with supporting the troops presented as an apolitical blueprint for, and condition of, good citizenship.<sup>75</sup>

However, at a time when only a minority of Britons believed that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were enhancing either those countries’ or Britain’s security,<sup>76</sup> claims of a military contribution to security were heavily dependent upon references to the past. The reference point for such invocations has typically been WW2, its hegemonic status as ‘the good war’ contrasting starkly with the cultural ambivalence around WW1.<sup>77</sup> Notably, however, attempts to rehabilitate the military by invoking the past have increasingly blurred the boundaries between specific wars. Tidy’s study of military-themed ‘vintage nostalgia’ products sold to support veterans’ causes, for example, notes that while WW2 is a key touchstone for such products, their branding reproduces a discourse in which ‘all wars – past, present, and future – are conflated within imaginations of a nostalgically omnipresent “good war”: a hybrid of World Wars One and Two’.<sup>78</sup> By compressing the participants of Britain’s wars into an homogenised and sanitised discourse of heroic military sacrifice, militarised mythology provides a seductive basis for ontological security-seeking.

<sup>70</sup>Katharine M. Millar, “‘They need our help’: Non-governmental organizations and the subjectifying dynamics of the military as social cause”, *Media, War & Conflict*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 9–26 (p. 13).

<sup>71</sup>Millar, ‘What do we do now?’

<sup>72</sup>Basham, ‘Gender, race, militarism’, p. 885.

<sup>73</sup>Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>74</sup>Christopher S. Browning, ‘Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44; Ian Manners, ‘Political psychology of European integration: The (re)production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate’, *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1213–32.

<sup>75</sup>Millar, “‘They need our help’”.

<sup>76</sup>A 2007 ICM poll found ‘while 5% thought Britain was a safer place since the Iraq war, 55% said they felt the country was less safe’; similarly, a 2014 BBC poll found that 42% of respondents thought that the Afghanistan war had made Britain less safe, with only 14% agreeing that it had made the UK safer. BBC News, ‘Third “think Iraq War was right”’, BBC News (20 March 2007), available at: {<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6467147.stm>}; ‘Last British troops leave Helmand’, BBC News (27 October 2014), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-29784195>}.

<sup>77</sup>Croft, *Securitizing Islam*, p. 132.

<sup>78</sup>Joanna Tidy, ‘Forces saucers and eggs for soldiers: Food, nostalgia, and the rehabilitation of the British military’, *Critical Military Studies*, 1:3 (2015), pp. 220–32 (p. 227).

The rehabilitating effects of homogenising discourses has been found in several aspects of commemoration. Trott identified a shift in attitudes towards WW1 soldiers around 2008 in online reviews of the autobiographies of the last British WW1 veterans, noting a tendency for reviewers to emphasise familiar contemporary militaristic tropes such as heroic sacrifice.<sup>79</sup> A 2013 *British Future* report on the centenary reached a similar conclusion when reflecting on a YouGov poll of public attitudes towards WW1. The survey found public ambivalence towards WW1, with 51 per cent of respondents refusing to castigate it as futile, while a narrow plurality of respondents (35 per cent) denied that it was a ‘just war’. In contrast were attitudes towards the war’s participants, with 82 per cent agreeing that ‘the centenary of the Great War is an important reminder that we are forever in the debt of those who died to protect the British way of life’, and 87 per cent viewing the war’s human toll as evidence that ‘the cost of peace and freedom is high.’<sup>80</sup> This cognitive dissonance, evident in the substantial numbers of respondents refusing to affirm the war’s worthiness but still attributing their freedom to the sacrifices of the soldiers themselves, was attributed by the report to respondents’ apparent lack of knowledge about the war – corroborating Trott’s suggestion that subjects often fill knowledge gaps about specific wars with remembrance scripts.

While this blurring of past and present might have paved the way for uncritical approaches to the WW1 centenary,<sup>81</sup> remembrance discourse’s invocation of a ‘hybrid’ war notably entails that WW1 is seldom invoked on its own terms, with its contentious meanings elided by its grouping with WW2. Moreover, while remembrance discourses are based in WW1 iconography, their extension to subsequent conflicts means that remembrance events are moments when the nation is ‘ReMembered’ from a variety of reference points, with no specific focus.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, the centenary was intriguing because it would ostensibly focus on a specific conflict with a difficult place in the national imaginary: one with the potential to disrupt homogenising remembrance narratives around the soldier figure upon which national ontological security was based. Given the RBL’s dependence on remembrance for its modern charity activities, a centenary reproducing WW1’s negative mythology threatened to undermine its aforementioned promotion of celebratory remembrance and positive public perceptions of veterans.

### Militarised vicarious identity promotion

In what remains, I argue that the RBL’s centenary initiatives worked to rehabilitate WW1 and its veterans in a manner conducive to its modern charity activities. Such revisionism is perhaps unsurprising. As Mälksoo argues, contested memories often prompt elite efforts to reassert a singular, favourable memory narrative and marginalise rival narratives seen as destabilising collective ontological security, with the success of such efforts depending upon custodians’ ability to make them resonate with contemporary anxieties and priorities.<sup>83</sup> What is intriguing however, is *how* the RBL approached this. Before examining the initiatives, I consider how their underlying strategies sought to make the centenary relevant to Britons by instrumentalising contemporary dynamics mentioned in the previous section.

A key contextual touchstone in RBL attempts to encourage nationally affirming engagement with the WW1 centenary has been efforts to rally public support for unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through the reinvigoration of the liberal civil–military contract with military personnel at their centre. Military subjectivities – especially the figure of the combat soldier – often serve

<sup>79</sup>Vincent Andrew Trott, ‘Remembering war, resisting myth: Veteran autobiographies and the great war in the twenty-first century’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 6:4 (2013), pp. 328–342 (pp. 338–9).

<sup>80</sup>Jo Tanner, ‘Routes to remembrance’, in Jo Tanner (ed.), *Do Mention the War: Will 1914 Matter in 2014?* (London: British Future, 2013), pp. 22–23 (p. 23).

<sup>81</sup>Tidy, ‘Forces sauces’, p. 227.

<sup>82</sup>John Poulter, ‘ReMembering the Nation: Remembrance days and the nation in Ireland’, in David McCrone and Gayle McPherson (eds), *National Days: Constructing and Mobilising National Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 57–72.

<sup>83</sup>Mälksoo, “Memory must be defended”.

as hegemonic symbols of good national citizenship because of their willingness to self-sacrifice for the nation,<sup>84</sup> being viewed as uniquely authoritative when testifying about what war and life is 'really like'. Accordingly, Tidy argues that the 'ground truth' bestowed upon bereaved 'Gold Star' families of deceased US combat soldiers is especially valued by anti-war movements because their authoritative testimony is difficult for others to dispute.<sup>85</sup>

This status makes the military a focal point for elite efforts at vicarious identity promotion to rally public support for wars and reinvigorate patriotism – efforts that depend upon channelling anxiety. While only a minority of Britons have first-hand military experience, liberal societies continue to be constituted by militarised and gendered expectations of 'good citizenship': that all citizens (especially men) should be ready to fight in wartime. Civilians concerned that they are falling short of such expectations can experience what Millar terms 'civilian anxiety', motivating them to show their contribution to national sacrifice by 'supporting the troops.'<sup>86</sup> 'Support' initiatives simultaneously stimulate widespread civilian anxieties while ostensibly offering catharsis through vicarious practices such as wearing military-themed symbols and charitable giving, which allow civilians to experience belonging and pride. Another example is vicarious identification with the subjects of 'military homecoming' videos.<sup>87</sup> By testifying in comments sections to being moved and shedding tears, viewers seek to 'prove' authentic patriotism, thereby hierarchically distinguishing their commitment from others.

However, while civilian identification with military *institutions* is encouraged, identifications with specific esteemed subjects within national hierarchies are controversial. As Browning et al. note, subjects' dependence upon a shared symbolic order means that some claims to vicarious subjectivity are rejected by targets of identification or 'gatekeeper' communities if they are seen to jeopardise the constituent identities of, and hierarchical 'stability and ordering' provided by, the 'hegemonic moral, cultural and symbolic order ... through which people gain a sense of ontological security.'<sup>88</sup> Identifications seen as undermining exclusive 'telling rights' conferred by lived experience are viewed as particularly egregious. Thus, while encouraging civilians to demonstrate patriotism, 'support' initiatives crucially reinforce the exclusivity of military subjectivities by discursively positioning civilians as hierarchically inferior and deferential to military subjects, thus leaving unresolved the possibility that support may fall short of citizenship expectations.<sup>89</sup> Such hierarchies are policed both by official attempts to outlaw military 'passing' and unofficial 'Walter Mitty Hunting Clubs' run by veterans seeking to expose those marching in military parades with no personal military experience or wearing unearned medals.<sup>90</sup> Thus, military subjectivities are tempting, yet off limits to civilians.

In parallel to the revival of militarised citizenship, public interest in family history has continued to grow. As mentioned, this trend's popularity can be attributed partly to its contribution to ontological security in late modernity. Framed as a 'journey of *self*-discovery' around the question 'who do you think you are?', vicarious identification with ancestors can 'anchor' self-identity and bolster feelings of belonging and significance by providing tangible connections to historical events.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup>Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'On beautiful souls, just warriors and feminist consciousness,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5:3 (1982), pp. 341–8.

<sup>85</sup>Tidy, 'The gender politics of "ground truth"', p. 106.

<sup>86</sup>As Millar notes, 'this gendered sense of "coming up short" pertains to all in the liberal polity – particularly, but not exclusively, those whose embodied identification more closely aligns with the normative Western political subject (and soldier), as White, cis, heterosexual, masculine, and so on.' Katharine M. Millar, *Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender, and the Making of Political Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 128.

<sup>87</sup>Lisa Silvestri, 'Surprise homecomings and vicarious sacrifices,' *Media, War & Conflict*, 6:2 (2013), pp. 101–15.

<sup>88</sup>Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup>John Kelly, 'Popular culture, sport and the "hero"-fication of British militarism,' *Sociology*, 47:4 (2013), pp. 722–38.

<sup>90</sup>Paul R. Higate and Nivi Manchanda, 'Exposing fake heroes as a moment of militarisation? The Walter Mitty Hunting Club and the protection of valour,' 11th EISA PEC, Barcelona, 16 September 2017.

<sup>91</sup>Wendy Bottero, 'Practising family history: "Identity" as a category of social practice,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, 66:3 (2015), pp. 534–56 (pp. 535, 538).

Such feelings are enabled by hegemonic heteronormative discourses around descentance which inscribe biological kinship as an especially authentic and ‘natural’ basis for vicarious identity.<sup>92</sup> Kinship confers both inherited ‘telling rights’ for ancestral exploits and responsibilities to sustain their legacy through the intergenerational ‘passing of the torch’. Descendants are also sometimes viewed as ‘living proof’ of past deeds, with the biological ‘essence’ behind those exploits residing in the descendant’s genes or character. Such associations can legitimise, and generate expectations of, expressions of vicarious emotion, conditioned by ‘mnemonic socialization’ into ‘sociobiographical memory’ encouraging subjects to feel certain things about ‘their’ past.<sup>93</sup> While we have seen already that the family-history industry has frequently promoted feelings of grief and tragedy around WW1 ancestors that create critical distance between the subject and state, when framed differently ancestral links can provide emotional reinforcement for subjects’ identification with official memory narratives.

I explore how the RBLs ‘LIVE ON’ and ‘Every One Remembered’ initiatives combined these trends to make the centenary resonant. Through a discourse analysis of public-facing campaign materials issued between 2014 and 2018 including websites, posters, television/online adverts, as well as branding house texts explaining the campaigns’ underpinning logics, two strategies of *militarised vicarious identity promotion* become visible. Firstly, vicarious framing strategies worked to reincorporate WW1 into broader discourses of heroic sacrifice. Scholars have noted how efforts to galvanise public support for morally ambiguous wars often rely upon attempts to link present forces with reassuring mythologised pasts through discourses blurring the boundaries between temporally distinct military subjectivities.<sup>94</sup> Developing these insights, I explore how the initiatives used notably *vicarious* textual and visual frames including namesakes and antiqued visual mimicry to make different subjects ‘speak’ for one another in a way that rehabilitated WW1 and modern military subjects (and their wars), while promoting public empathy for them by encouraging modern subjects to put themselves in the shoes of WW1 soldiers.

This rehabilitation enabled a second strategy. I explore how the campaigns deliberately stimulated civilian anxieties and those around symbolic immortality, while promoting personalised vicarious identification with the WW1 war dead as a route to individual and national ontological security. By prompting people to find family connections to the war dead or develop personalised connections through ‘adopting’ individual WW1 military personnel (often namesakes or local connections), the campaigns encouraged Britons to cultivate *vicarious military subjectivity* – reflected pride derived from personal connection to military participation. Unlike ‘Gold Star’ families whose authority derives from societal recognition of the personal hardships experienced by direct family of the war dead, vicarious subjectivity here stems from identifications with personnel who identifying subjects have no first-hand relationship with. Moreover, whereas other forms of vicarious militarism (e.g. wearing military apparel) offer enhanced belonging, vicarious military subjectivity based on *personal* identifications offers distinctive ways of offsetting civilian anxiety and enhancing status and self-esteem. While ancestral connections imply that families have already ‘done their bit’, adoptive memorialisation can authenticate personal commitment to national sacrifice. While I primarily focus on how RBL initiatives instrumentalised vicarious military subjectivity to *promote* mnemonic socialisation into ‘official’ socio-biographical myth, emphasising the personal stake and pride people could have in the ‘national’ story,<sup>95</sup> Every One Remembered memorials also provide important traces of vicarious identification including narrations of shared identity,

<sup>92</sup> My thanks to a reviewer for this point.

<sup>93</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, ‘Social memories: Steps to a sociology of the past’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 19:3 (1996), pp. 283–99 (pp. 286, 290).

<sup>94</sup> E.g., Tidy, ‘Forces sauces’.

<sup>95</sup> As mass mobilisation events with much wider societal footprints than Britain’s contemporary wars, the world wars are particularly important sites connecting civilians with militarised nationalism.



routinised memorialisation, and vicarious pride.<sup>96</sup> I now explore these strategies' usage during the centenary.

### 'LIVE ON': The centenary and symbolic immortality

Collective anxieties around WW1's contested legacy, which had hitherto largely been elided by homogenised remembrance discourse, were activated once more when prime minister David Cameron announced the 2014–18 centenary commemorations. Cameron argued that the war's impact on Britain and the world and the 'scale of sacrifice' involved made it a 'fundamental part of our national consciousness', rendering the centenary a 'matter of the heart'.<sup>97</sup> This echoed a survey finding that 'nearly nine out of 10 of the British public ... feel that we should mark it'.<sup>98</sup> However, exactly *what* would be commemorated proved more controversial. While some were concerned that the commemorations might glorify a war hitherto associated by many with horror and futility, others worried that 'political correctness' (especially deference to Germany) and the war's mythology might preclude sufficiently patriotic commemoration. Cameron's vision for 'a truly national commemoration' also prompted concerns that the centenary might be instrumentalised to influence the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, and in Ireland where the war has dissonant relevance.<sup>99</sup>

These sensitivities complicated Cameron's desire for government to 'play a leading role' in the commemorations. Besides funding an extensive educational programme, its broader strategy for navigating the centenary's politics consisted of 'provid[ing] leadership and encouragement in organising commemorative acts while not dictating the themes of commemoration itself'.<sup>100</sup> This strategy made *remembrance* 'the hallmark of our commemorations'.<sup>101</sup> In justifying this focus, Cameron invoked words written by Second Lieutenant Eric Townsend a week before his death in September 1916: 'But for this war I and all the others would have passed into oblivion like the countless myriads before us ... but we shall live for ever in the results of our efforts'.<sup>102</sup> Cameron viewed preserving the symbolic immortality of the dead as 'our duty'. The government's special centenary representative, Andrew Murrison MP, maintained that remembrance would be apolitical, 'making no judgment about fault, right or wrong, or indulging in any jingoistic sentiment'.<sup>103</sup> This framing allowed the government to take a back seat in the commemorations, delegating its mission to the custodian of national remembrance, the RBL.

The RBL's centenary initiatives were conditioned by several contextual factors around its remembrance and charity roles. The commemorations coincided with a period of reflection for the RBL regarding its public image, prompted by increased competition over donations resulting from the expansion of the military charity sector during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts and the challenging backdrop of the 2008/9 global recession.<sup>104</sup> Although the RBL remained the largest veterans' charity over this period, its position relative to new charities such as Help for Heroes – formed for veterans of Britain's latest wars – seemed unclear. One survey found that 'the public most commonly associate Remembrance, the poppy and the Legion's work with the First and Second World Wars and elderly veterans' with only 'just over a third' of respondents associating remembrance

<sup>96</sup>Data was gathered from 30 Every One Remembered profiles between October 2014 and August 2020. All were randomly selected except for war poet Wilfred Owen's, which was chosen to examine how visitors negotiated the legacy of his anti-war poetry. All quotations correct as of July 2020.

<sup>97</sup>Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.

<sup>98</sup>Strachan, 'We must do more than remember'.

<sup>99</sup>Mycock, 'The First World War centenary', pp. 157–61.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 158–61.

<sup>101</sup>Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.

<sup>102</sup>Townsend quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup>Murrison, quoted in Mycock, 'The First World War centenary', p. 156.

<sup>104</sup>Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Susan Klein et al., 'Public awareness of UK veterans' charities', *The RUSI Journal*, 159:1 (2014), pp. 50–7.

with veterans of recent wars.<sup>105</sup> This recognition prompted attempts to engage younger generations who sometimes had a more distant relationship with remembrance. And the scheduled withdrawal of British forces from Afghanistan in 2014 added urgency to reminding the public that veterans' needs would continue even as the war itself faded into memory.

In addition to challenging perceptions of *who* counted as veterans, by 2014 the RBL was aware of the pitfalls of the culturally pervasive image of the soldier-victim. While such representations insulated the armed forces from the unpopularity of Britain's wars, the RBL's 2014 Household Survey report noted that they had also generated the 'pervading myth that most [veterans] suffer mental health problems, that many veterans end up in prison or sleeping rough on the streets, and that many are suicidal' – impressions that 'may harm the employment prospects of military personnel ... in the civilian world'.<sup>106</sup> The concern was that the nation may be inadvertently stigmatising veterans rather than conferring appropriate recognition. Thus, the RBL recognised the need to discursively rehabilitate veterans and to ensure that fundraising campaigns did not hamper its welfare work. This imperative, coupled with the perceived need to update the RBL's own image, resulted in a 2014 rebranding campaign promoting the RBL's new 'strapline' – 'LIVE ON – to the memory of the fallen and the future of the living'. This rebranding was intended to raise awareness of the RBL's welfare provision for living veterans and to challenge remembrance's association with death. Coinciding with the centenary's commencement, the RBL's own origin in the aftermath of WW1 featured prominently in the rebranding. Its 'Our Brand' webpage stated: 'The Legion was founded by veterans after the First World War. A century on from the start of that conflict, we're still helping today's Service men and women, veterans, and their families.'<sup>107</sup>

The theme of continuity was similarly evident in a 2015 Poppy Appeal print and digital advertising campaign, 'Portraits behind the Poppy', consisting of monochrome photos of British veterans of WW1 taken in 1915, juxtaposed with monochrome photos of veterans of Britain's recent conflicts created with the same camera technology used to make the originals and taken by the grandson of the original photographer.<sup>108</sup> The images, in their 'still' form and in several videos, received wide public exposure, becoming the subject of an art exhibition. While 'reminding audiences that [the RBL's] Poppy Appeal supports both the Armed Forces men and women of the past, and those of today', the use of vintage photos of relatively youthful WW1 soldiers was also aimed at challenging public associations of veterans with elderly, white men.<sup>109</sup> The 'antique' photos imbued both figures with a sense of historical continuity, the juxtaposition of past and present serving to confer authenticity upon modern veterans through vicarious association with WW1 veterans. The 2016 Poppy Appeal similarly encouraged the public to 'Rethink Remembrance' with a series of videos telling 'a story of conflict or injury ... through the eyes of a Second World War veteran, but at the end a twist is revealed'.<sup>110</sup> The 'twist' revealed by captions following the testimonies was that these were not WW2 experiences, but those of younger veterans (subsequently revealed to the viewer).<sup>111</sup> Again, public preconceptions regarding veterans were perceived to necessitate that authentic WW2 veterans initially speak for modern ones, with the affective weight of the former helping to paper over the controversies surrounding recent wars.

<sup>105</sup> Royal British Legion (hereafter RBL), 'Poppy Appeal 2016: The Legion asks the nation to "Rethink Remembrance"', (27 October 2016) available at <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/community/news/poppy-appeal/poppy-appeal-2016-the-legion-asks-the-nation-to-rethink-remembrance/>.

<sup>106</sup> RBL, 'A UK household survey of the ex-service community', The Royal British Legion, London, 2014, p. iv.

<sup>107</sup> RBL, 'Our brand' (2015), available at <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/>.

<sup>108</sup> Y&R London, 'The Royal British Legion: "Portraits behind the poppy"', adforum (2015), available at <https://www.adforum.com/creative-work/ad/player/34525413/portraits-behind-the-poppy/the-royal-british-legion>.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Liz Jackson, 'Is remembrance only for older veterans?', BBC News (27 October 2016), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37789795>; RBL, 'Poppy Appeal 2016'.

<sup>111</sup> RBL, 'Rethink remembrance: I was taught that soldiers don't discuss feelings', YouTube (26 October 2016), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9JRM26I200>.

Significantly, the juxtaposition of modern and WW1 veterans in ‘Portraits’ also disconnected both figures from their historical contexts, suggesting their equivalence and blurring their distinct motivations and experiences of war. Not only was the present historicised in these images, but understandings of the past were altered in the process. This, of course, was the crux of McCartney’s concern that using the mythologised image of the WW1 Tommy as a template for casting modern veterans as similarly tragic non-agentic victims might perpetuate the negative mythology of WW1.<sup>112</sup> As illustrated above, however, it was precisely this passive victim trope that the RBL was attempting to eschew in 2014. Thus, by folding WW1 soldiers into a homogenised account of soldiering, the RBL’s ‘Portraits’ risked problematically reinscribing the WW1 soldier figure with agency and the war itself with positive meaning compatible with contemporary militarism.

Crucially, casting WW1 and modern figures as equivalently agentic encouraged the modern photographic subjects to identify with the WW1 veterans in a way that enabled vicarious *pride*. In a ‘behind the scenes’ video about the creation of the images, upon seeing his own photo one of the modern participants remarked that it ‘makes me feel like part of British military history – it’s just a privilege to be able to be a part of something like that.’<sup>113</sup> Vicariously identifying with WW1 veterans allowed modern veterans to newly perceive their military identities as part of a long-standing tradition. No longer synonymous with victimhood, the WW1 soldier was now a viable object for militarised vicarious identification.

### ‘Every One Remembered’

Vicarious connections were central in the RBL’s flagship centenary project, ‘Every One Remembered’ (EOR).<sup>114</sup> Launched in 2014 using data provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), EOR encouraged Britons to commemorate the 1.1 million British and Empire military personnel killed during WW1, through an online database and memorial. The inspiration for the project was ‘14-year-old Gemma’ who, after visiting a war cemetery in Belgium, wrote to the RBL, ‘I know that not everyone can be remembered as individuals, but I felt it was a shame for some people to have dozens of poppies and crosses while others had no one left to remember them.’<sup>115</sup> Accordingly, the project sought to ‘ensure every fallen hero from across the Commonwealth is remembered *individually*’, with memorialisation intended ‘to keep alive the memory of those who died.’<sup>116</sup> Here, the symbolic immortality of the dead was portrayed as requiring the British public’s support, without which the dead may die a second symbolic death.

The project invited visitors to engage with the website on different levels, including by creating a memorial for a suggested ‘unremembered’ individual, and ‘planting’ a virtual poppy on an interactive map. On a deeper level, visitors were encouraged to remember someone connected to them by searching the integrated database for names, places of residency, and occupations. They were also encouraged to contribute to the database by uploading pertinent documents and biographical details. This complemented the project’s emphasis on ‘helping future generations to remember’ so that they could keep the memory of the dead, alive.<sup>117</sup> The campaign television advert notably featured a young girl poignantly asking, ‘if I don’t remember him, who will?’<sup>118</sup> Finally, fundraising

<sup>112</sup> McCartney, ‘First World War soldier’, pp. 312–14.

<sup>113</sup> RBL, ‘The Story behind the poppy: Behind the scenes’, YouTube (4 November 2015), available at {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCpyv-6pFyg>}.

<sup>114</sup> The project, originally titled ‘Every Man Remembered’, was renamed ‘Every One Remembered’ in August 2017. RBL, ‘Home’, Every One Remembered (2014), available at {<https://www.everyoneremembered.org/>}.

<sup>115</sup> RBL, ‘About’, Every One Remembered (2014), available at {<https://www.everyoneremembered.org/about/>}.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> RBL, ‘Every Man Remembered TV ad’, YouTube (21 August 2014), available at {[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHGgP5Q0\\_co](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHGgP5Q0_co)}.

featured prominently with visitors encouraged to leave optional donations – for which they would receive a personalised commemorative certificate.<sup>119</sup>

As one advertising agency behind the project recognised, however, the war's historical distance posed challenges for engagement: 'how do you help people in the 21st century connect to those who lived in such different times, so long ago?'<sup>120</sup> The chosen strategy was a national advertising campaign emphasising different ways of *identifying* with the war dead. One aspect sought to engage younger generations through several print and digital adverts which 'killed' several prominent British celebrities by featuring their names above birth and death dates.<sup>121</sup> The 'twist' was that these 'obituary' adverts actually commemorated their WW1 namesakes, encouraging people to 'relate to soldiers even if they are not directly related to someone.'<sup>122</sup> Each advert was strategically placed for maximum impact: 'Andy Murray, for example, alongside a Wimbledon story and Harry Styles in the online Entertainment ... pages.'<sup>123</sup> Vicarious identity promotion featured prominently, with the campaign asking the public to put themselves in their own namesakes' shoes. One article about the campaign declared, 'You're dead. You died a hundred years ago in world war 1!' The effect was that people – including some of the celebrities – 'shared the stories [on social media] *as though they were their own*', encouraging others to engage in vicarious identification: 'by asking people to find their namesakes who fell in world war 1, we created powerful emotional connections between people who had no real connection.'<sup>124</sup>

Another campaign strand featured images of celebrities such as West Ham United Chairperson Karren Brady and screenwriter and actor Julian Fellowes holding photos of WW1 soldiers personally connected to them (Baroness Brady and Lord Fellowes held photos of a former West Ham player and a family relative respectively).<sup>125</sup> The television advert featuring modern subjects in everyday settings holding sepia photos of British WW1 veterans similarly promoted engagement through personal commonalities. Each person's connection to the photographic subject was conveyed by a voiceover ('he was the same age as me when he died'/'she was from my village'/'my great-uncle'), emphasising that everyone could emotionally connect with the WW1 dead through different forms of vicarious identification.<sup>126</sup>

### *Militarised genealogy and vicarious military subjectivity*

The EOR advertising campaign attracted '4 million website page views', prompting over '300,000 acts of Remembrance with more than 60% of those from people below 24 years old'.<sup>127</sup> This success was attributed to the campaign's effectiveness in making WW1's military participants *emotionally resonant* for younger generations. However, as implied by McCartney's observation that genealogy projects prior to the centenary channelled emotional engagement with ancestors through WW1's dominant framing as a futile and horrific war,<sup>128</sup> there was nothing inevitable about the emotional content of this connection. Notably, although the campaign avoided making normative claims about the war (perhaps mindful of the commemorations' public sensitivity),

<sup>119</sup>RBL, 'About'.

<sup>120</sup>Media Week Awards, 'Every Man Remembered, Maxus / Royal British Legion' (2015), available at {<https://www.mediaweekawards.co.uk/finalists/every-man-remembered-4/>}.

<sup>121</sup>VMLY&R, 'Royal British Legion / Everyman Remembered' (2015), available at {<https://london.yr.com/work/royal-british-legion-everyman-remembered/>}.

<sup>122</sup>London PR Agency, 'PR campaign of the Week: RIP Harry Styles – Every Man Remembered by the British Legion' (2015), available at {<http://www.londonpragency.com/pr-campaign-of-the-week-rip-harry-styles-every-man-remembered-by-the-british-legion/>}.

<sup>123</sup>VMLY&R, 'Everyman remembered'.

<sup>124</sup>Media Week Awards, 'Every man remembered', emphasis added.

<sup>125</sup>BBC News, 'World War One: Every Man Remembered database launched', BBC News (28 July 2014), available at {<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28519247>}.

<sup>126</sup>RBL, 'Every Man Remembered TV ad'.

<sup>127</sup>VMLY&R, 'Everyman remembered'.

<sup>128</sup>McCartney, 'First World War soldier', p. 306.

it deployed a different tonal palette to influence users' emotional engagement, commensurate with the RBL's rehabilitation of military service and promotion of militarised vicarious identification. As one PR website remarked: 'the adverts are not in the slightest bit gloomy, and the biography given at the bottom of the advert gives the feeling of a celebration of the soldiers' efforts'.<sup>129</sup>

The project website, however, more assertively framed the meaning of the war and its participants: 'More than one million Service men and women gave their lives in the First World War so that future generations could live theirs'.<sup>130</sup> Similar framing was evident in the memorial interface, which restricted unregistered visitors to choosing from a drop-down menu of six pro-forma messages:

- 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.'
- 'We will remember them. Today. Tomorrow. Forever.'
- 'May you live in our hearts forever.'
- 'Thank you to all who lost their lives to save our countries. You will always be remembered.'
- 'Thank you for serving our country. We appreciate your efforts and bravery to keep us safe.'
- 'I wish I had known you and had a chance to thank you for everything you gave to us who survive you'.<sup>131</sup>

While the first three messages relied upon empty signifier-laden remembrance discourse, the latter messages framed the war dead's agency in militarised terms, with the words 'serving' and 'gave' implying that their lives were given freely. Furthermore, the phrases inscribed veterans' motivations: 'to save our countries'/'to keep us safe'. WW1 itself was also portrayed as a necessary conflict to which visitors could ostensibly trace 'our' security. Together, these moves conveyed the debt owed by modern generations to the WW1 dead whose lives, far from being wasted in a futile war, were ostensibly the 'price' of freedom.

Of course, these agentic and causal claims are contestable. Absent from this framing is any acknowledgement of conscription or the coercive social pressure to perform militarised masculinities.<sup>132</sup> Problematic, too, is this framework's application to the participation of colonial subjects, with the language of 'contribution', as Ware argues, frequently obfuscating the legacies of colonial oppression underpinning such participation.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, Todman questions whether British soldiers really died for 'our' freedom, noting that while some 'joined up to defend a set of liberal values', others regarded 'gender and racial equality as potentially dangerous side effects of the conflict rather than desirable outcomes'.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Watson and Porter note that the language of heroic sacrifice was often deployed to 'paper over' alternative urges (e.g. revenge) regarded as less compatible with hegemonic narrations of the national war effort.<sup>135</sup> The application of homogenising language reinscribes the figure of the soldier with agency that conforms to contemporary expectations but is potentially as misleading as the victimhood trope. The causal narrative of remembrance discourse (i.e. that the war delivered security and freedom) was likewise contested during the centenary.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>129</sup>London PR Agency, 'RIP Harry Styles'.

<sup>130</sup>RBL, 'Home'.

<sup>131</sup>RBL, 'Remember', Every One Remembered (2014), available at {<https://www.everyoneremembered.org/remember/>}.

<sup>132</sup>Nicoletta F. Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>133</sup>Vron Ware, 'From war grave to peace garden: Muslim soldiers, militarized multiculturalism, and cultural heritage', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 10:4 (2017), pp. 287–304.

<sup>134</sup>Dan Todman, 'Did they really die for us?', in Jo Tanner (ed.), *Do Mention the War: Will 1914 Matter in 2014?* (London: British Future, 2013), pp. 17–21 (p. 19).

<sup>135</sup>Watson and Porter, 'Bereaved and aggrieved', pp. 162–3.

<sup>136</sup>Mycock, 'The First World War centenary', pp. 156–7.



Nevertheless, portraying the military dead as willing contributors to a just war encouraged expressions of national gratitude and *vicarious pride*. Particularly where the person commemorated was a family relative, visitors were encouraged to feel pride in their family's contribution to the national story. Accordingly, one message read: '[r]emembering our great uncle [...] [a] true hero to all his family'.<sup>137</sup> Some visitors alluded to a broader family military contribution. One commemorator noted on their relative's profile (as if in dialogue with him) that 'your son also gave his life in a later war', adding that '[f]ather & son both died in the service of their country [...], we are proud of them both'. While subjects are increasingly unlikely to have first-hand military subjectivity, then, ancestral military contributions may provide them with the resources to claim vicarious military subjectivity. This does not necessarily mean that identifications with ancestors are consciously instrumentalised for such purposes. Many such identifications occur non-consciously and are accordingly recognised as genuine by others.

Other memorials integrated the remembered into (auto)biographical narratives and routines. Some, for example, used the virtual map to plant poppies for distant relatives in places of personal significance: '[I] linked it with an important place in my life'. And some provided insights into real-world practices, including ritualised family pilgrimages: '[w]e are proud to have had as many close relatives as possible visit the [...] memorial where he is remembered'. Such practices sometimes extended to the 'adoption' of non-related personnel. On the profile of another soldier, one commemorator wrote:

I discovered his grave at our local cemetery, adopted him as family, and often put flowers on his grave. It's the least I can do. After all, he made the ultimate sacrifice for everyone, dying at a young age and not marrying or having children of his own.

The commemorator's 'adoption' of the soldier was an expression of the need to attend to 'our' existential debt. Visitors were encouraged to treat these stories as resources for vicarious identification providing lessons about who 'we' are. Memorials frequently interwove family and national biographies, with vicarious identification providing an extended narrative of who 'we' are and where 'we' came from, injecting a sense of the extraordinary into the mundanity of late modern life.

### *The ethics of militarised vicarious identity promotion*

The promotion of vicarious military subjectivity is problematic in several ways. One is the project's selective focus: while ostensibly also memorialising women, EOR (originally launched as Every Man Remembered in 2014) overwhelmingly centred on *male* WW1 personnel, with all the WW1 personnel featured in adverts being male, thereby problematically reproducing patrilineal citizenship ideals, with claims to vicarious military subjectivity being based predominantly on male ancestral connections. Moreover, although the WW1 generation had already passed into memory by 2014 (giving the RBL unprecedented freedom to speak for them without consent), the RBL's decision to focus remembrance on those who died *during the war* allowed it to circumvent the

<sup>137</sup>The following quotes are from {<https://www.everyoneremembered.org/>}. In order to preserve the privacy of individual posters, their identities as well as those of the commemorated are not referred to, except in the discussion of the commemoration of noted war poet Wilfred Owen, where quotes are drawn from posts that have been left anonymously. Moreover, all comments have been further anonymised by making minor edits to their punctuation and grammar to prevent them being traced back to individuals through internet searches. This follows the approaches to ethical internet research of Karen Rodham and Jeff Gavin, 'The ethics of using the internet to collect qualitative research data', *Research Ethics*, 2:3 (2006), pp. 92–97 (pp. 94–5); Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, 'Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0)', (Association of Internet Researchers, 2012); and Raquel da Silva and Rhys Crilly, "'Talk about terror in our back gardens': An analysis of online comments about British foreign fighters in Syria", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10:1 (2017), pp. 162–186 (pp. 167–8).

more dissonant accounts of veterans who survived, such as Harry Patch, who famously described the war as ‘organised murder’.<sup>138</sup>

This symbolic resurrection of the dead (particularly the reincorporation of WW1 veterans into homogenised remembrance discourse) risks replacing one simplistic mythology emphasising futility and tragedy with another depicting a straightforwardly just war – a mythology conforming with a general tendency of Centenary initiatives to sidestep the violent politics of colonialism underpinning the British Empire’s war effort, instead telling a ‘happy story of hands across the ocean’ emphasising nation and commonwealth.<sup>139</sup> Such risks are compounded by EOR’s promotion of emotional vicarious identification. By priming visitors on how to feel about the dead, EOR provides emotional reinforcement for broader efforts to recast WW1 as an origins story compatible with Britain’s contemporary self-image as a liberal, multiethnic society, with military ancestors becoming the basis for decontextualised claims to national belonging. Of course, the excerpts above are illustrative of the kinds of engagements on display in EOR rather than evidence sufficient to make causal claims about the project’s influence upon visitors, or representational claims regarding how most visitors engaged with it. I am not arguing that there is no diversity or resistance in the memorials. Some *did* question the war’s value: ‘[A] life wasted [...] We salute you for your sacrifice but not the war’. Nor am I suggesting that family history necessarily precludes nuanced *historical* engagement, only that it was *discouraged* by the project’s emotional framing which circumscribed acceptable forms of engagement.

Another concern is that the compression of WW1 military personnel into homogenising remembrance scripts may discourage meaningful reflection upon WW1 *altogether*. This becomes clearer when considering memorials to war poet Wilfred Owen, whose work depicting WW1’s horror and explicitly rejecting the logic of patriotic blood sacrifice is a mainstay of British education. While some messages acknowledged Owen’s work, approvingly quoting his most famous anti-war lyric, ‘The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori’, other memorials slipped into invoking the sacrificial language that Owen repudiated. For example, several commemorations read, ‘[t]he honesty of your poetry is what makes it so incredible. Thank you for your work and your sacrifice.’<sup>140</sup> The memorial thus acknowledged his poetry while affirming sacrificial logics. This slippage perhaps exemplifies ‘unthinking remembrance’,<sup>141</sup> which becomes a seductive way for subjects to compensate for knowledge gaps through *affective* rather than critical engagement.

Finally, such homogenising scripts may circumscribe critical reflection on war more generally. WW1’s society-wide impact was emphasised by the RBL to suggest the universal relevance and accessibility of remembrance through personal connections. EOR encouraged visitors to view their ancestors as willing contributors to national sacrifice, and their families as *military families*. When combined with a cultural reluctance to question the dead, such framings may generate depoliticising empathy for the modern ‘military family’, which has been instrumentalised to deflect critique of modern wars,<sup>142</sup> with visitors adhering to remembrance scripts. Homogenised remembrance exacerbates this, with support for modern personnel often presumed to be a logical consequence of support for WW1 veterans. The project’s fundraising aspect relied upon this connection: donations were unequivocally about helping modern veterans. While some may wish to pay their respects without endorsing WW1 and subsequent wars, blurring the past and present renders remembrance discourse increasingly brittle: if criticising *any* war is seen as denigrating ‘the troops’, the scope for critical engagement with war is drastically narrowed.

<sup>138</sup> Patch quoted in Tracy McVeigh and Mark Townsend, ‘Harry Patch, Britain’s Last Surviving Soldier of the Great War, Dies at 111’, *The Observer* (25 July 2009), available at {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/26/world-war-one-veteran-harry-patch-dies-aged-111>}.

<sup>139</sup> Todman, ‘Did they really die for us?’, p. 18.

<sup>140</sup> Both comments were left by anonymous contributors.

<sup>141</sup> Jenny Kidd and Joanne Sayner, ‘Unthinking remembrance? Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red and the significance of centenaries’, *Cultural Trends*, 27:2 (2018), pp. 68–82.

<sup>142</sup> See Alice Cree, ‘“People want to see tears”: Military heroes and the “Constant Penelope” of the UK’s Military Wives choir’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 27:2 (2020), pp. 218–38.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the RBL's centenary initiatives encouraged Britons to vicariously identify with WW1 military personnel to emotionally connect with the nation's history and, in so doing, assuage late modern civilian anxieties. These campaigns played a central role in avoiding ontologically destabilising critiques of British militarism, building on the implicit rehabilitation of the WW1 soldier performed by 'support the troops' discourses since 2006. By incorporating WW1 and modern soldiers into a decontextualised, homogenised discourse of heroic military sacrifice emphasising their shared lineage, the RBL framed the centenary primarily as an opportunity to express gratitude to, and uphold the symbolic immortality of, the British WW1 dead. Such moves relied upon militarised framings discouraging critical reflection upon WW1, and war more broadly.

By the centenary's end in 2018, the theme of gratitude was so embedded that when the RBL urged Britons to say 'Thank You' to the 'First World War generation' with an advert rhetorically asking 'what else is there to say?',<sup>143</sup> it sparked no significant controversy. While there was always *a lot* more to say about such a complex event, this suggests that the war's 'negative' mythology has been partially displaced by a militarised framing conducive to contemporary militarised nationalism. This is not to say that negative readings of the war have disappeared; rather, positive readings have become normalised across British society, not least because a range of subjects have staked their ontological security upon them. Some might argue, of course, that one unsatisfactorily simplistic mythology has simply been replaced by another, with nothing being lost or gained. However, as Todman notes, myths provide valuable shorthand ontological reference points in national life for understanding the world and war.<sup>144</sup> If, as he argues, the negative mythology of WW1 played an important restraining role in national discourse, providing a sobering counterpoint to the more stridently jingoistic attitudes towards WW2, Britons might come to regret both the loss of an important discursive resource and a missed opportunity for an honest reckoning with the colonial underpinnings of British militarism.

Finally, having predominantly focused on the political functions of militarised vicarious identity *promotion* throughout the centenary, the argument also raises questions about the broader socio-political functions of the resulting vicarious military subjectivities themselves. If the conventional military subjectivities explored by Tidy confer authority and authenticity upon their bearers to speak truth about war, it raises questions about how the invocation of vicarious military subjectivity might affect power dynamics in debates around war commemoration. Conceivably, living vicariously through an ancestral subject's military service may confer social capital which is (non-)consciously deployed by bearers to bolster truth claims about war(s). Given that such dynamics frequently pass unnoticed in everyday life and have been overlooked by IR scholars, future research is therefore required to explore the parameters governing vicarious military subjectivities and their political orientations.

**Video Abstract.** To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000160>.

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<sup>143</sup>Royal British Legion artwork gives thanks to WW1 generation, BBC News (3 August 2018), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-45057461>.

<sup>144</sup>Todman, *The Great War*, p. 223.

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