

THE YPRES SALIENT: REBUILDING AND REMEMBERING “THE DEVIL’S PLAYGROUND”¹

- Delphine Lauwers and Matthew Haultain-Gall -

Three years have passed since the centenary of the First World War drew to an end. In our current post-Brexit, pandemic-afflicted times, tourism and travel have come, more or less, to a standstill. This moment may well be the perfect opportunity to look back and reflect not only on the commemorative frenzy of the centenary, but also on more than a century of reconstruction and remembrance activity around the Ypres Salient. In the already complex “palimpsest of... multi-vocal landscapes” that is the Western Front, it is in the former salient that the accumulation of a century’s worth of memory work – the “dint of human will” necessary for the creation of a *lieu de mémoire* – lies thickest². The contributions in this special issue provide nuanced insights into the processes of building and rebuilding, shaping and re-shaping the multi-faceted memorial landscape of the Ypres Salient. The questions tackled range from the pragmatic and concrete to those of a more symbolic nature: What effect did the war have on Ypres’ demographics? What role did the war damage tribunals play in Ypres’ reconstruction? How has greater recognition of Ypres as a multinational *lieu de mémoire* informed relationships between locals and international agents of memory, such as those from China, India and Australia? This issue also gives the floor to key local actors who provide behind the scenes perspectives on representations of Ypres’ reconstruction, the centenary commemorations and what may lie ahead for the salient now the First World War has passed well and truly out of living memory.

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, Ypres found itself thrust onto the world stage. Before then, this quiet, provincial town symbolised the past greatness and prosperity of medieval Flanders. Its major drawcards, the majestic Cloth Hall and St. Martin's Cathedral, were magnificent reminders of this former glory and a source of pride for its some 18,000 inhabitants³. Nevertheless, Ypres' reputation as a tourist destination was rather modest. Apart from the Cloth Hall and cathedral, only the town's eerily calm atmosphere made an impression on visitors. As noted in one guidebook, fully appreciating the Cloth Hall "would take some minutes of brisk emotion" as it was "really a wonder of the world", but the rest of Ypres appeared deathly quiet:

"Who could live in a Dead City, even for one day? The streets were wide, the houses handsome – a few necessary shops; but no cabs – no tramway – no carts even, and hardly any people. It was dead – all dead from end to end"⁴.

This was in stark contrast to the hive of activity the town would become from October 1914 onwards as the epicentre of one of the Western Front's most dreaded sectors. Ypres' repute underwent a dramatic change as well. As the art historian Paul

Lambotte observed, Ypres – "far off" and sporting "less obvious charms" – was overshadowed by Bruges before the war. However, by 1918, "Ypres, that magnificent town, ha[d] never been so much talked about since she no longer exist[ed]"⁵.

The Ypres Salient was a particularly multicultural sector of the front, with over 50 (current) nationalities taking part in the fighting there⁶. It was mainly defended by troops drawn from Britain's globe-spanning empire, and its symbolic importance arguably outweighed the strategic reasons for clinging onto this tiny sliver of Belgium: "All the Ypres Salient is historic ground and every foot is rich in sentiment... There was no strategical reason why this Salient should be held so far east of Ypres"⁷. During the war's opening months, civilians also lived alongside soldiers from all over the world⁸. But even the most reluctant to leave were forced into exile by May 1915, shortly after the Germans launched their first gas attacks on the Western Front to the north of Ypres⁹. For much of the four following years, Ypres and its surrounds were occupied by British and, to a lesser extent, French forces, which included colonial troops and labourers recruited from countries outside of Europe, such as India and China¹⁰. Facing them were imperial German

1. PHILIP GIBBS, *Realities of War*, London, 1920, p. 83.

2. NICHOLAS J. SAUNDERS, "Matter and Memory in the Landscapes of Conflict: The Western Front 1914–1999", in *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, Barbara Bender and Margot Winer (EDS), Oxford, 2001, p. 37; PIERRE NORA, "From *Lieux de Mémoire* to Realms of Memory", in *Realms of Memory: Remaking the French Past*, PIERRE NORA (ED.), New York, 1996, p. xvii.

3. VÉRON DEYNE AND ARTHUR BUTAYE, *Ypres. Guide illustré du touriste à Ypres et aux environs*, Ypres, 1897; J. C. MAGRATH (ED.), *Ypres - Yper: a few notes on its history before the War; with a plan of the town*, London, s.d.; KOEN BAERT, « De terugkeer. Aspecten van de herbevolking van Ieper na 1918 », in *Ieper, de herrezenstad, de wederopbouw in Ieper na 14-18*, Kortrijk, 1999, p. 9.

4. PERCY FITZGERALD, *A Day's Tour. A journey through France and Belgium, by Calais, Tournai, Orchies, Douai, Arras, Béthune, Lille, Comines, Ypres, Hazebrouck, Bergues, and St-Omer*, London, 1887, p. 52 and 54.

5. PAUL LAMBOTTE, « Ypres and other Flemish cities before and since the war », in *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 12 April 1918, p. 349.

6. DOMINIEK DENDOoven AND PIET CHIELENS (EDS), *World War I, five continents in Flanders*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2008.

7. COLONEL J. A. CURRIE, "The Red Watch": *With the First Canadian Division in Flanders*, London, 1916.

8. This cohabitation could range from warm – certainly during the open stages of the war – to unfriendly. For a wide-ranging survey of British Expeditionary Force relations with Belgian (and French) locals, see Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914-1918*, Cambridge, 2014.

9. BAERT KOEN, « Wonen in de verwoesting, omstandigheden en getuigen », in Jeroen Cornilly (ed.), *Bouwen aan de wederopbouw 1914/2050*, Ieper, Erfgoedcel C07, 2009, p. 18–22; MICHAËL AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil: les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale, France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas, 1914-1918*, Bruxelles, Coll. « Histoire », 2008. See also Pieter Trogh's paper in this special issue.

10. DOMINIEK DENDOoven, *Asia In Flanders Fields. A Transnational History of Indians and Chinese on the Western Front, 1914-1920*, Antwerp - Canterbury, University of Antwerp - University of Kent, PhD dissertation in history, 2018.

soldiers who also suffered terribly, but whose experiences ended up “almost completely marginalized in th[e] British-dominated memorializing programme” of the post-war years¹¹. It did not help that their means of commemorating the Great War *in situ* were extremely limited as travel to the former front was impossible before 1924 – partly because of restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles – and remained difficult afterwards¹². Through the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge¹³, practices were developed during the interwar period to allow for a form of “imaginary tourism” and mourning for Germans who could not travel to the former front¹⁴. This is not to say that the Germans did not leave their mark on the salient¹⁵. To this day, the Langemarck and Vladslo German military cemeteries, the latter of which includes Käthe Kollwitz’s powerful sculpture “the Mourning Parents”, remain popular and symbolically loaded sites¹⁶.

As for the “British-dominated memorializing programme” that was so influential in shaping the landscape after the war, it was rooted in a form of “figurative colonisation” that took place over four years of tragic fighting in the Ypres Salient¹⁷. British soldiers used whatever means they could to cope with the unbearable. While trench humour and camaraderie could be important sources of comfort, they also tried to impose a semblance of normality on the surrounding chaos of the salient.

The ruined streets of Ypres and the devastated fields and countryside surrounding the town were given recognisable, anglicised names. “Passiondale”, “Wipers”, “Plugstreet”, “Hell Fire Corner”, “Essex Farm”, and the like became very familiar places to soldiers, while simultaneously being elevated to the status of ‘holy ground’ in press reports the world over¹⁸.

The destruction of the cultural and architectural heritage of Belgium and Northern France provoked a worldwide wave of indignation and was considered a form of German atrocity in its own right¹⁹. Far from the frontline, many civilians in Belgium and throughout the British Empire collected pictures and sketches of Ypres’ ruins and pored over daily descriptions of the salient’s gradual devastation²⁰. Ypres soon took its place alongside Reims and Leuven in the pantheon of the most tragic and irrefutable witnesses to German barbarism. It was depicted as a “new Pompeii”, compared to the Parthenon, and used as a benchmark of destruction to which the other cities on the front were compared. Its ruins were sacralised, romanticised and “hero-ised”, like other famous spots along the “Voie Sacrée”²¹. So much so that an embryonic form of a war tourism industry began to emerge around Ypres as early as 1915. Soldiers visited the ruins, collected, bought and sold souvenirs, and civilians developed new practices of “remote tourism”, which included creating war museums,

11. MARK CONNELLY AND STEFAN GOEBEL, *Ypres: Great Battles*, Oxford, 2018, p. 88.

12. SUZANNE BRANDT, « Le voyage aux champs de bataille », *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire*, 1994, n° 41, p. 21-22.

13. The German organisation that has been largely responsible for taking care of German military cemeteries since 1919.

14. SUZANNE BRANDT, *Von Kriegsschauplatz zum Gedächtnisraum, die Westfront 1914-1940*, Baden-Baden, 2000, p. 145-162.

15. See for instance George Mosse’s works, including the classic: *De la grande guerre au totalitarisme: la brutalisation des sociétés européennes*, Paris, 1990, or « National cemeteries and national revival: the cult of the fallen soldier in Germany », *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1979, n° 14, p. 1-20; Jan Vancoillie, “Historical overview of the German military cemeteries from the First World War in Flanders”, *Forensic Science International*, 2021, n° 318, p. 1-10.

16. REGINA SCHULTE, “Käthe Kollwitz’ Opfer”, in Regina Schulte (EDS), *Die verkehrte Welt des Krieges. Studien zu Geschlecht, Religion und Tod*, Frankfurt, 1995, p. 117-49.

17. TODD COPELAND, “‘For ever England’: The figurative colonization of Flanders”, in *Media, War & Conflict*. Published electronically 22 February 2020.

18. JOHAN MEIRE, *De stilte van de Salient, herinnering van de eerste wereldoorlog rond Ieper*, Tiel, 2003, p. 77-84.

19. JOHN HORNE AND ALAN KRAMER, *1914, les atrocités allemandes*, Paris, 2005, p. 274-277; JOHN HORNE, « Corps, lieux et nation. La France et l’invasion de 1914 », in *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, Vol. 55, n° 1, January-February 2000, p. 73-109.

20. JAY WINTER, *Entre deuil et mémoire, la Grande Guerre dans l’histoire culturelle européenne*, Paris, 2008, p. 95.

21. EMMANUELLE DANCHIN, *Le temps des ruines, 1914-1922*, Rennes, 2015. Ypres was one of two cities (the other being Verdun) that was awarded the British Military Cross and French *Croix de Guerre* (1920).

exhibitions and trench reconstitutions, as well as organising battle re-enactments²².

In the aftermath of the war, the Flanders battlefield was seen as embodying the devastation wrought by modern warfare, a form of “anti-landscape” where life could never return²³. Some, in fact, did not want the Ypres Salient to regain its former appearance, but wished it to remain a silent, shattered witness to the horrors of the Great War²⁴. Yet, what many depicted as an empty, lunar landscape was by no means a blank canvas onto which a new narrative could be imposed. First, the region clearly had a rich history before 1914. Moreover, there was no room – symbolically or materially – for a *zone rouge* in Belgium as there was in France²⁵. Not only was the country densely populated, with a rather weak central state and a high degree of local autonomy, but all Belgian citizens were granted the right to rebuild through far-reaching legislation adopted in October 1918²⁶. Those who decided to return after the war

quite naturally wanted to exercise this right and rebuild their homes as well as a familiar, pre-war-like environment²⁷.

The reconstruction of Ypres and the surrounding areas was a daunting undertaking that raised numerous challenges: architectural, technical, legal, logistical, financial and, last but not least, diplomatic²⁸. The “Holy Ground of British Arms” to some, the “Jewel of Flanders” to others, and, first and foremost, “home” to those who returned, the salient found itself at the intersection of different – and, *a priori*, incompatible – meanings, values and projects regarding its future. Both British imperial and Belgian national authorities favoured preserving the town of Ypres, or at least its major monuments, in ruins. Supporters of this plan felt the town symbolised a universal and timeless legacy and reported a “deep anxiety throughout the Empire through apprehension that the sacred monuments of British heroism would be in danger of disappearance”²⁹. Local authorities, on the

22. HUGH POLLARD, *The Story of Ypres*, London, 1917, p. 32; RICHARD WHITE, « The soldier as tourist: the Australian experience of the Great War », in *War and Society*, May 1987, n° 5, p. 63-77; SUSANNE BRANDT, « The memory makers: museums and exhibitions of the First World War », in *History and memory*, 1994, Vol. 6, n° 1, p. 95-122; JENNIFER WELLINGTON, *Exhibiting War, the Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia*, Cambridge, 2017. “Trafalgar Sq. turned into a field of battle”, in *Toronto Star*, 21 November 1918, p. 14.

23. Samuel Hynes calls this “the death of landscape”. See chapter nine of SAMUEL HYNES, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London, Bodley Head, 1990.

24. The fate of the devastated regions of Belgium and Northern France was regularly discussed in Belgium and abroad during the conflict. JEAN DE LIGNE, *Ypres. Essai sur sa formation et sa reconstruction*, Lausanne-Paris, Payot, 1918; HERMAN STYNEN (ED.), *Het verwoeste gewest 15-18/ The devastated region: mission Dhuicque*, Brugge - Brussel, 1985; MARCEL SMETS (ED.), *Resurgam: La reconstruction après 1918 en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1985.

25. The *zone rouge* corresponds to an area of approximately 120,000 hectares of land where, due to the extent of the damage caused by the First World War, certain activities were temporarily or permanently prohibited. HUGH CLOUT, *After the ruins: restoring the countryside of Northern France after the Great War*, Devon, 1996, pp. 28-29.

26. SVEN CARNEL, “Entre espoir et désillusion. Le retour des sinistrés dans les régions dévastées après la Première Guerre mondiale”, in Serge Jaumain (ED.), *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale: nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Bruxelles, 2005, p. 495; DELPHINE LAUWERS, “Rebuilding. A national order”, in *Beyond the Great War, Belgium 1918-1928*, p. 115-120.

27. See Pieter Trogh’s contribution to this special issue for an in-depth study of the return of refugees to Ypres. KOEN BAERT, « De terugkeer. Aspecten van de herbevolking van Ieper na 1918 », in *Ieper, de herrezenstad, de wederopbouw in Ieper na 14-18*, Kortrijk, 1999, p. 9-20; Johan Meire, *De stilte van de Salient, ...*, p. 118-126.

28. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, *Menin Gate & Last Post: Ypres as Holy Ground*, Koksijde, 2001.

29. State Archives of Belgium, Office des Régions dévastées, file 14646. Letter to Paul Hymans, foreign Affairs Minister, 11 June 1920. While cast as an “imperial site of memory”, the salient has not necessarily come to occupy a central place in the First World War memory of other countries within the former British Empire. For example, see MATTHEW HAULTAIN-GALL, *The Battlefield of Imperishable Memory: Passchendaele and the Anzac Legend*, Clayton (Vic), 2021; JONATHAN F. VANCE, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*, Vancouver, 1997, p. 60; GEOFFREY R. BIRD, “Landscape, Soundscape and Youth: Memorable Moments at the 90th Commemoration of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 2007”, in *Battlefield Events: Landscape, Commemoration and Heritage*; KEIR REEVES, GEOFFREY R. BIRD, LAURA JAMES, BIRGER STICHELBAUT AND JEAN BOURGEOIS (EDS.), Abingdon, 2016, p. 52-3, 57; J. Phillips, “Passchendaele: Remembering and Forgetting in New Zealand”, in *The Myriad Legacies of 1917: A Year of War and Revolution*, eds.; M. ABBENHUIS, N. ATKINSON, K. BAIRD AND G. ROMANO (EDS), Basingstoke, 2018, p. 252-4.

other hand, were determined not to let anyone intervene in decisions regarding the fate of *their* town. René Colaert, the Ypres mayor whose name remains closely associated with the town's reconstruction, set the tone at the first post-war city council meeting in February 1919: "We are the masters. We are the ones who should decide whether the town will be rebuilt or not. It is us, the city authorities, who should make this decision. Casting doubt on the reconstruction of the town, is tantamount to casting doubt on our rights"³⁰.

Animated debates centred on whether the Cloth Hall and St Martin's Cathedral should remain in ruins. In addition to important symbolic considerations, arguments of a pragmatic nature were raised in favour of preserving them in their war-ravaged state. As tourist attractions, these ruins were considered to be the region's major – if not sole – source of income. When the city initiated the rebuilding of the Cloth Hall in 1921, some locals protested that they were "kill[ing] the goose that laid golden eggs"³¹. Seven years later, the municipal authorities demanded that work on the reconstruction of the Cloth Hall belfry begin. The Belgian national authorities in charge of the devastated regions deemed the reconstruction of the "last ruins of the horrific world catastrophe" a sign of "real megalomania" that would not serve the economic interests of the city³². In spite of

this criticism, reconstruction continued slowly, but surely, without consigning Ypres to obscurity.

As soon as the former front areas were accessible, the salient became a major centre of battlefield tourism³³. Visiting the battlefields, as a mourner, veteran or civilian, was one of the most popular memorial practices in the interwar years, at least for those who could afford it³⁴. Guidebooks were published in short order to help visitors find their way through the war-torn landscape³⁵. A relatively large British community settled in the salient, the presence of which was closely linked to war tourism-related activities and the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission³⁶. At the same time, makeshift hotels and estaminets sprung up among the ruins while civilians, exasperated by the slow pace of reconstruction, were forced to live in appalling conditions. In post-war Ypres, the profane (tourism and the commercial exploitation of the war) and the sacred (pilgrimage and sites of memory) overlapped and clashed regularly, creating a rather odd atmosphere overall:

"Ypres suffers from the very grandeur of its ruins; it suffers from its fame. The grandiose ruins of the Halles ... make it impossible to see the other ruins: those of the houses of workers, of the petit-bourgeois ... The tourist

30. The meeting took place in France, as the municipal authorities had not returned from exile yet. Ypres city archives, Minutes of Ypres city council meetings, 23 février 1919, p. 3.

31. See, for instance, the minutes of the 3 September 1921 of the city council, entirely devoted to that question. Ypres city archives, Minutes of Ypres city council meetings, 3 September 1921.

32. State Archives of Belgium, Office des Régions dévastées, file 2553, diverse correspondence and notes, 1927-1931.

33. On the history of First World War related battlefield tourism in the interwar years, see: DAVID W. LLOYD, *Battlefield tourism, pilgrimage and the commemoration of the Great War in Great Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939*, Oxford, 1998. See also: BRUCE SCATES, *Return to Gallipoli: walking the battlefields of the Great War*, Cambridge, 2006.

34. Some bereaved and ex-servicemen received financial help in order to visit the grave of a loved one and/or the former frontline through organisations such as the Church Army, the Salvation Army, YMCA, the St. Barnabas Society or the Ypres League.

35. Among which the Michelin series "Guides illustrés Michelin des champs de bataille" are probably the most famous. One volume is dedicated to Ypres in 1919. *Guides illustrés Michelin des champs de bataille, 1914-1918, Ypres et les batailles d'Ypres*, Clermont-Ferrand, 1919.

36. BERT HEYVAERT, *A little sprig of the Empire: de Britse kolonie in Ieper tijdens het interbellum (1918-1940)*, Unpublished Master thesis, Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2002; MARK CONNELLY, "The Ypres League and the commemoration of the Ypres Salient, 1914-1940", in *War in History*, 2009, Vol. 26, n° 1, p. 51-76.

passes by without thinking of the sadness and bitterness hidden in this modest rubble ... It is this misery that the tourist [and] the Belgian do not see, and which they do not care about, moreover”³⁷.

As reconstruction progressed, countless cemeteries, monuments and memorials were erected, visibly and permanently associating the Ypres Salient with the Great War. A few years later, the IWGC’s Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, inaugurated in 1927, became a focal point for commemorative activity at Ypres, with a Last Post ceremony held daily under the gate since 1928. Many of the physical and imaginary evolutions of the Ypres Salient had taken place by the mid-1920s. As a famous guide edited in 1925 stated:

“To travel along and explore the battlefields soon after the Armistice was to bring sudden and vivid realisation of all that had been imagined during the war. To visit them now is to feel balked and bewildered. Yet the appeal is here, our Dead lie here, the history of our manhood’s great day lives here. Try then to picture the town of Ypres as you would have seen it soon after the Armistice”³⁸.

By then, as cultural demobilisation progressed and in line with the “Locarno” spirit of reconciliation that animated international diplomacy, narra-

tives and rhetoric surrounding the First World War were relatively pacified, and the Ypres Salient dramatically transformed³⁹. In some ways, battlefield tourism was already becoming “peace tourism”, as locals now prefer to label it⁴⁰.

The years following the Second World War saw a sharp decline in popular interest in the conflict of 1914–1918 and, therefore, the Ypres Salient. It was only in the 1960s that this trend began to undergo a reversal; popular engagement with the First World War has been on the rise ever since. The 50th anniversary of the war, the inauguration of the first “local” war museum in Ypres⁴¹, the rise of family history in the United Kingdom – where the Great War still is a key event in family and national narratives – and representations of the conflict in mass media, among others, explain this renewed interest⁴². Annual figures confirm this trend; there has been a continuous increase in the number of visitors spending a night in Ypres since 1963, and this number has grown rapidly since the 1980s⁴³.

Unlocking the complex, multi-layered memory-landscape of the Ypres Salient requires a sound dose of imagination. Each visitor, today as in the 1920s, “is/was in one landscape imagining being in another”⁴⁴. While guidebooks in the early 1920s used extensive descriptions to convey what the salient was like before 1914; current guides insist on the need to imagine what it was like during the

37. « Parmi les ruines de Flandre, Le scandale d’Ypres », in *Le Soir*, 16 September 1920. For more on the opposition between the sacred and the profane in the salient, see: JOHAN MEIRE, *De stilte van de Salient*, ..., p. 195-223; Delphine Lauwers, *Le Saillant d’Ypres entre reconstruction et construction d’un lieu de mémoire*: unpublished PhD thesis, Florence, Department of History and Civilization, European University Institute, 2014, p. 337-54.

38. SIR WILLIAM PULTENEY AND BEATRICE BRICE, *The immortal salient, a historical record and complete guide for pilgrims to Ypres*, London, 1925.

39. It should however be noted that cultural demobilisation did not progress at the same pace everywhere and followed different chronologies. JOHN HORNE, « Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre », 14-18: *Aujourd’hui, Today, Heute*, n° 5, May 2002, p. 45-53; EDUARD CLAPPAERT AND MARTIN KOHLRAUSCH, “Between the Lines: Belgian Diplomatic Politics and the Trial of German War Crimes”, *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, XLVIII, 2018, 3, p. 90-114.

40. DELPHINE LAUWERS, “Du tourisme de guerre au tourisme de paix? Ypres comme lieu de mémoire transnational », in *Revue Nouvelle*, November 2018, p. 40-45.

41. The “Herinneringsmuseum 1914-1918”, predecessor of the In Flanders’ Fields Museum.

42. JAY WINTER, “Souvenir de la Grande Guerre dans l’histoire culturelle britannique depuis les années soixante”, in *Sociétés et représentations*, 2006, n°22, p. 17-31; Dan Todman, *Representations of the First World War in British popular culture, 1918-1998*, Cambridge, 2003.

43. Ypres city archives, *Jaarverslag over het beheer en de toestand der stadszaken, 1964-2005*.

44. NICHOLAS J. SAUNDERS, “Matter and memory in the landscapes of conflict”, ..., p. 46.

First World War. After all, the salient now bears almost no direct, visible traces of the conflict as it was completely rebuilt in a manner that appeared, at least superficially, identical to its striking pre-1914 form – apart from a few, relatively unpopular attempts at modernism⁴⁵. Yet, Ypres and its surrounds have lost none of their power to evoke the First World War. On the contrary, the salient remains central to the memory of 1914–1918 as demonstrated by the success of the ceremonies organised as part of the centenary. The figures speak for themselves, with an estimated 2,800,000 people travelling to the Westhoek in connection with the First World War between 2014 and 2018 (with a peak of 789,000 in 2014)⁴⁶. The centenary saw the active involvement of many locals, as well as a wide variety of international partners, some of whom were newcomers to the salient's commemorative scene. This major anniversary succeeded in highlighting and bridging local and global dimensions of the conflict in the salient, largely bypassing, as per usual, the Belgian federal state⁴⁷.

There are numerous factors explaining the durability and intensity of commemorative activity in and around Ypres. Some of these owe more to chance, or the fortunes of war, than design, such as: the accessibility of the area for international – and especially British – visitors; the diverse range of memorials and other sites of interest (museums, “authentic” trenches at Hill 60, interpretation centres) in a relatively small space; the short distances between towns; a patchwork of different commemorative traditions and activities; a rich architectural heritage; beautiful countryside; and an abundant supply of accommodation and

restaurant facilities. But perhaps it is the salient's exceptional capacity to blend and preserve different layers of memory that has ensured its continuing – even growing – relevance as a major First World War site of memory. The contested (anti-) landscape of the post-war years is no more, having long been superseded by a multifaceted, shared commemorative space. After many years of undergoing physical and imaginary changes, the Ypres Salient continues to satisfy diverse memory and identity-related needs for both the local population and a global audience whose interest never seems to fade.

Between reconstruction and remembrance

This special issue examines the impact of the First World War on Ypres and its surrounds, shedding further light on the complexities of post-war reconstruction and the evolution of memory making over the course of the last century. What follows is, by no means, a comprehensive synthesis of the memorial dialogues and, occasionally tense, negotiations that have marked the salient⁴⁸. The contributions do, however, reflect research trends as well as broader, public engagement with the history of the First World War throughout the centenary and post-centenary years. It is therefore unsurprising that Ypres' reconstruction is analysed here on its own terms and not through the lens of British commemorative concerns. After all, if much of the attention Ypres garnered between 2014 and 2018 tended to focus on its destruction, locals have now turned to commemorating

45. For instance, the cubist church built in Zonnebeke by architect Huib Hoste, which the local population did not find all that appealing. Aleks A. M. Deseyne, *Huib Hoste en de wederopbouw te Zonnebeke*, Zonnebeke, 1981.

46. *Wereldoorlog I, Herdenkingstoerisme in de Westhoek, Volumes en evoluties 2013-2018*, Westtoer - Toerisme Vlaanderen, p. 12.

47. See the discussion with Piet Chielens and Dominiek Dendooven in this special issue; Dominique Vanneste and Gregory Ramshaw, “2018 Armistice Day in Flanders Fields”, in SHANTI SUMARTOJO (ED.), *Experiencing 11 November 2018: Commemoration and the First World War centenary*, p. 31–44.

48. For well-rounded accounts of Ypres' reconstruction and memorial significance, see MARK CONNELLY AND STEFAN GOEBEL, *Ypres, Great battles*, Oxford, 2018; DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, *Menin Gate and Last Post: Ypres as Holy Ground*, Koksijde, West Flanders, 2003; DELPHINE LAUWERS, *Le Saillant d'Ypres ...*

the resurrection of their town, risen like a *Feniks* from the ashes.⁴⁹ As for those articles considering remembrance practices in the salient, countries with established and enduring traditions of commemoration at Ypres – notably Britain and Australia – are well represented, as are relative newcomers to the scene, China and India, whose memorial activities in the Westhoek have intensified in recent years. Conversely, the Germans are largely, but not wholly, absent. This certainly does not mean that the role of the Germans in shaping the Ypres Salient was insignificant, but does reflect the fact that their recent involvement remains somewhat minimal when compared to that of other major stakeholders. The centenary may have seen increased public interest in First World War history in Germany itself. Not the least thanks to the publication of Chris Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*, which appeared, in the eyes of many, to banish the spectre of German war guilt fifty years after Fischer had summoned it.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this clearly did not lead to an increased desire to officially commemorate German soldiers in Flanders Fields. This is not to say Germans snubbed commemorations at Ypres; officials made pronouncements invoking peace and European unity when invited to do so, but they have remained far less influential than other memory agents working in the salient.⁵¹ The same can be said of the French, who are also bit-part players in this special issue. Their memorial presence around Ypres has never been quite as marked as that of the British and the Germans and their official centenary initiatives concentrated principally on their own territory.⁵²

Comprising five articles and two debate papers, the issue is divided into three main sections: "Refuge, Return and Reconstruction"; "Remembrance"; and "Reflections". Opening the first section is Pieter Trogh's detailed demographic study of the First World War's impact on Ypres' citizenry. Following a similar method to In Flanders Fields Museum's Names List project⁵³, Trogh paints a vivid picture of the war's impact on Ypres' civilian population, using remarkable, underexploited sources to track their exile and, for some, return. He traces how the conflict upended locals' lives, sowing destruction, disease and death before finally forcing those who had not fled the town to leave their homes during the Second Battle of Ypres. Unable to return before the end of the war, many civilians from Ypres sought refuge in France and others headed to Great Britain, while a handful managed to remain in Belgium. Once the war was over, some returned to the shattered remnants of their homes, as did others who had never lived in Ypres, but may have been attracted by the opportunities the ruins presented. The defining feature of these "pioneers" was their relatively young age; rebuilding the town rested on their youthful shoulders. As Trogh himself notes, Ypres' transformation from refuge in the early days of the war to a front and, eventually, "dead" city is rather unique when compared to other Belgian cities. Yet this study proffers a roadmap for future research on hundreds of thousands of Belgian First World War refugees, whose experiences remain understudied to this day.

49. *Feniks*, the Flemish term for "phoenix", is the name of a temporary exhibition at the In Flanders Fields Museum, as well as a wider project – Feniks2020 – that spans the Westhoek region. In Flanders Fields Museum, "Feniks: Reconstructing Flanders Fields", <https://www.inflandersfields.be/en/feniks-e>, accessed 4 February 2021.

50. CHRISTOPHER CLARK, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London, 2012; ANNIKA MOMBAUER, "The German centenary of the First World War", in *War & Society*, vol. 36 (4), 2017, 279–82. See also the heated debate sparked by ULRICH KELLER's *Schuldfragen. Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsch Vergeltung im August 1914* (Paderborn, Schöningh, 2017), which reopened old wounds surrounding the Belgian *franc-tireur* myth. CHRISTOPHE BRÜLL AND GENEVIÈVE WARLAND, "Débats récents sur l'invasion allemande en Belgique en 1914", in *Journal of Belgian History*, vol. 50 (1), 2020, p. 112–24.

51. See "Reflections on Ypres' centenary: An interview with Piet Chielens and Dominiek Dendooven" in this special issue.

52. MARK CONNELLY AND STEFAN GOEBEL, *Ypres...*; Romain Fathi, "French commemoration: The centenary effect and the (re) discovery of 14–18", in *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50 (3), 2015, 548.

53. In Flanders Fields, "The Names List", <https://www.inflandersfields.be/en/kenniscentrum-e/namenlijst-e/>, accessed 4 February 2021.

Sebastiaan Vandenbogaerde and Julie Podevyn's article shifts the focus away from civilians to consider the state's role in supporting Ypres' reconstruction through a close analysis of the activities of the Ypres Tribunal for War Damages between 1918 and 1935. As Vandenbogaerde and Podevyn note early on, very little has been written on the subject of the temporary Belgian tribunals for war damage and their contribution goes some way to rectifying this significant gap in the historiography. They provide fascinating insights into the not-so-smooth running of the Ypres tribunal that was established with the best intentions but failed to live up to expectations. Naturally, much of the discussion centres around the tribunal's formal procedures and case law tendencies. These procedures may have been overly complex, impairing the tribunal's efficiency, but the authors point out that there were also very practical reasons why it struggled to fulfil its remit. The most notable among these being the "logistical nightmare" associated with the establishment of the tribunal's chambers in a devastated city as well as the difficulties it encountered in attracting motivated and experienced staff members who were familiar with the Westhoek.

In the first of three articles in the 'Remembrance' section of this issue, Mark Connelly and Tim Godden examine what they term the "routes of remembrance" which helped shape British understandings of the Ypres battlefield in the 1920s and 1930s. They do this by taking a far broader approach to their subject matter than more traditional studies of First World War memory and commemoration. These have tended to focus on clearly delineated sites of memory, such as war memorials, and the rituals that take place around them. Connelly and Godden concentrate on the how and why visitors – the bereaved, veterans, battlefield tourists – moved through the salient in the ways that they did. In particular, the authors survey the different motivations that underpinned visitors' trips, the means of transport available to them and the organisations and infrastructure in place, all of which influenced how they interpreted the landscape. In doing so, they demonstrate that it was not just the destination of visi-

tors' peregrinations in the Westhoek that was all important; the journey to the war memorials and cemeteries scattered throughout the salient itself was just as meaningful.

Looking at changes to the memorial topography of the Ypres salient over the past two decades, Karen Shelby explores how the experiences of the Indian Expeditionary Force and Chinese Labour Corps in Belgian Flanders have been integrated into a landscape that has long been dominated by the British narrative of 1914–1918. As Shelby points out, attempts to recognise and commemorate the involvement of historically marginalized groups in places like the Westhoek has become a common theme in First World War remembrance projects in recent years. However, "this democratization of commemoration", which is supported by local and state actors, is far from a straightforward undertaking; the formerly colonized can struggle to make a visible impression on what is, ostensibly, British memorial territory. Even if they do, their monuments can be difficult to decipher for those unfamiliar with the iconography employed, as is the case of certain Indian monuments. The consequence, Shelby argues, is that Chinese and Indian monumental additions to the salient may indeed "disrupt" the "imperial postwar landscape", but they do not force a break with the long-established status quo.

Rounding off the "Remembrance" portion of this issue, Matthew Haultain-Gall dissects the memorial relationship between Belgium and Australia. He analyses this relationship through the case of the Menin Gate lions. These two stone beasts originally flanked the now infamous Menin Road entry to Ypres before they were knocked off their pedestals during the war. After prompting by Australian officials, the city of Ypres gifted the lions to the Australian War Memorial in 1936, and they returned temporarily to their hometown in 2017. The rhetoric surrounding such acts of "commemorative diplomacy" has emphasised an enduring and close relationship between Australia and Belgium, but, as Haultain-Gall goes to show, such pronouncements belie the complexity of the Aus-

tralian-Belgian memorial bond. While this study reveals much about the nature of First World War remembrance in Australia, which is, in some respects, remarkably different to that of Europe, it also sheds light on the fragmented nature of Belgian commemoration, where local agents have long been at the forefront of perpetuating the memory of 1914-1918.

The two debate papers in the third and final section of this issue expand on the significant role the local has played in fostering the memory of the First World War at Ypres as well as that of the town's subsequent reconstruction, with a particular focus on recent initiatives. Having worked on the *Feniks* (IFFM) and *herSTELLINGEN* (Yper Museum) exhibitions, few people are better placed than Dries Claeys and Hannelore Franck to present an overview of Ypres' reconstruction from a museological perspective. Exploring how these temporary exhibitions, along with two thematic city walks, approach the topic of reconstruction, Claeys and Franck canvas the intricacies of Ypres' rapid post-war rise from ruins. In particular, this debate paper demonstrates that these initiatives proffer very different perspectives on Ypres' reconstruction, even if the main theme of the exhibitions and city walks overlap. In fact, they take visitors beyond a simple story of bricks and mortar to consider how locals repaired the tears left by the war in the town's social fabric.

The second debate paper is based on an interview with two leading figures from the IFFM, Piet Chielens (IFFM Director) and Dominiek Dendooven (Senior Researcher). Our discussion with them centred on three major themes: their thoughts on Ypres' centenary, stakeholders, and future prospects. The principle elements they brought up reflect those at the heart of this special issue. They reiterated the importance of the individual and the local in shaping the commemorative landscape. It is clear that, for them, in order for First World War commemoration to remain relevant one hundred years after the fact, it must appeal to individuals, especially locals, who not only attend commemorative events, but can lend them vibrancy. On the other side of the (commemorative) coin, not all forms of remembrance are equal or even appreciated in the same manner throughout the Ypres salient. In particular, Chielens and Dendooven expressed concern at the return of rhetoric that echoed the 'high diction' of the war years as well as overly nation-centric forms of commemorations. They do, however, remain optimistic for the future. As long as there is a drive to widen the scope of historical inquiry and to ensure that commemoration becomes more inclusive, the First World War will continue to resonate with meaning for future generations. And nowhere else along the former Western Front does the memory of 1914-1918 resonate louder than in the Ypres salient.

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*Matthew Haultain-Gall holds a PhD from the University of New South Wales and he is a scientific collaborator at the Université catholique de Louvain. His research focuses on the cultural and social impacts of the First World War. His first book, *The Battlefield of Imperishable Memory: Passchendaele and the Anzac Legend*, was published by Monash University Publishing earlier this year. Tracing how Australians have remembered and commemorated the battles of Messines and Third Ypres, it explores why these engagements occupy an ambiguous place in Australian collective memory today.*