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Rectifying Revisionism: Canadian National Identity and War Commemoration

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To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Famously written by Canadian Army officer John McCrae, the final stanza of “In Flanders Fields” carries with it a deep and resounding weight. For the countless numbers of Canadians who donned the uniform, and for the more than “100,00 lives lost in the wars of the past century,”¹ their sacrifices have contributed to the nation’s historiography in a unique way. The remembrance of those who served, and all they endured, forms part of a coherent national mythology. As Benedict Anderson argues in renowned work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, in the forging of a greater national narrative “these violent deaths must be remembered...as our own”². Ottawa, with its “grand architecture, ceremonial boulevards...[and] pantheon of bronze heroes - [as] explicitly mandated by Canada’s postwar Liberal government,”³ is itself a conduit of this remembrance, as a memorial to these past soldiers, sailors and airmen.

Yet despite this scheme of commemoration in the capital, the rows of Canadians buried in Commonwealth graves - and the gravity of such imagery - lay across an ocean, out of sight. War memorials throughout Canada stand solemn and proud, yet mostly unvisited aside from on Remembrance Day, November the 11th. Unlike in France, young Canadian school children are not mandated to journey to national war memorials. In a similar vein, while a recent study prepared for the Department of National Defense showed that surveyed Canadians tended to have relatively positive views of those serving in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), “awareness of and familiarity with the CAF was generally very low; virtually non-existent among those in the younger age group.”⁴

¹ R. Boswell, “The Battleground of Remembrance Struggles at the Intersection of Canadian War History and Public Memory,” *Canadian Issues* 6 (2015): 5.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006): 206.

³ Boswell, “The Battleground of Remembrance,” 6.

⁴ Earnscliffe Strategy Group, “Views of the Canadian Armed Forces 2018 Tracking Study, Executive Summary,” *Department of National Defence* (2018): 2.

For all the monuments and supposed commemoration, for all the vows of ‘lest we forget,’ it seems as if our collective memory of those Canadians whose service is inseparable from our very national identity, is fading. We have been given the torch, but have failed to hold it high; we are breaking faith with those who died. This tragic phenomenon is primarily the result of intentions to erode remembrance of Canadian military heritage through the weaponization of the ‘peacekeeping myth,’ alongside the geographic reality of continental separation from war cemeteries. To counteract the degenerative influences of these factors upon the public’s collective memory of Canadian military sacrifice and, by proxy, revitalize the sacred commemorative element of Canadian national identity, a federally directed, national commemoration curriculum will be proposed.

To develop this policy, Benedict Anderson’s discussion of the nationalist paradigm will first be examined to establish the linkages between conceptions of modern national identity and their relationships to shared commemoration, mythology and historiography. These linkages and their significance will then be considered in the Canadian case. With this theoretical basis established, the impact of the peacekeeping myth and geographic distance upon Canadian war commemoration will then be analysed. An action plan for a national remembrance curriculum will thereafter be proposed, with the objective of healing the damages of past revisionism, to ensure our sacred pact to hold the torch high is fulfilled.

Theory and Background

Why does commemoration matter, and what does it have to do with Canadian identity? Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, delves into this subject by examining our very understanding of nationalism as a concept. Anderson considers “how [nationalities] have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.”⁵ Through this examination, Anderson forwards the thesis that nationalism is a historic paradigm rather than an ideology, arguing that “the nation...is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁶

In the book’s third chapter, Anderson discusses the origins of national consciousness. He argues that the “convergence of capitalism and print technology...set the stage for the modern nation,”⁷ by means of connecting people through shared imaginings, communicated through easily accessible, mass produced texts and imagery. In essence, these connections established far

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

easier methods for the dispersal of ideas, allowing them to be rapidly shared, shaped and internalized by both individuals and groups. Considering that scholars of memory study have widely concluded that memory “is the central faculty of our being in time,”⁸ the implications of collectively-held conceptions on a vast scale, are crucial to understanding “how we define [our] individual and collective selves.”⁹

Anderson’s discussion of this concept in the context of explaining the nationalist paradigm is furthermore supported by previous articulations of ‘collective memory’ as a phenomenon. His argument is reflective of Carl Jung’s hypothesis that there exists a ‘collective unconscious’ in tandem to our own personal psyche, and while the latter is both universal and impersonal, it is identical in all individuals.¹⁰ Jung’s thesis states that “this collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited,”¹¹ and goes onto to further propose that recurring symbology - with its associated meanings - are an extension of a “group’s sense of cohesion founded upon shared, historical experiences.”¹²

Imagined Communities builds upon this concept, specifically in regard to the decline in acceptance of religious and dynastic ideas of time, hierarchical rule, and ontological truth through scriptures, leading to “a new way of linking fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together.”¹³ Anderson argues that this new lens through which to understand time itself, the nature of human relations, and world order, ultimately led to the conception of the nation as “being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity.”¹⁴ This substantial shift in world perspective, served as the foundations for national identity as we understand it today, a new form of transcendent identity limited by geographical borders but equally applicable to all individuals regardless of traditional social divisions of faith, class and locality.

⁸ J. Auchter, “The ‘Greatness’ of the Great War: Commemoration and the Politics of Soldier Dead,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 63 (2017): 347.

⁹ Auchter, “The ‘Greatness’ of the Great War,” 347.

¹⁰ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (New York: Pantheon, 1959): 44.

¹¹ Kevin Lu, “Jung, History and His Approach to the Psyche,” *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies* 8 (2012): 14.

¹² Lu, “Jung, History and His Approach to the Psyche,” 14.

¹³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

Applying this paradigm to the development of Canadian national identity, it is important to consider the equalizing and populist sentiments associated with the rise of imagined national communities. The brutality and scale of the First World War replaced “the age of...war monuments commemorating kings and generals...by an era where every dead soldier, even the unknown soldier, was perceived as a citizen meriting recognition and civic honour.”¹⁵ In the context of Anderson’s proposed transition from dynastic imperium to political communities of imagined and populist kinship, the role of the unknown soldier - and their nationalist character - cannot be overlooked. Regarding the impacts of commemoration on society, scholars such as Watkins and Bastian, have provided substantial evidence that “war commemorations influence a sense of pride, awe, admiration, and gratitude for the sacrifices made by the nation’s soldiers.”¹⁶ In this vein, the fallen soldier, sailor and airman themselves, become symbols along the lines of Carl Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious and Anderson’s nationalist paradigm, whose inherently national character becomes inseparable from “memory and identity, both on an individual level and on a national level.”¹⁷

Ypres, Vimy, Hill 70, Passchendaele, Hong Kong, the Atlantic, Italy, Normandy, the Ardennes Abbey, Kapyong, Kosovo, Kandahar; to name only a few. The symbology of the poppy and the unknown soldier, and our collective associations with these fields of Canadian valour, exists part and parcel with the very fabric of Canadian civic identity. So why do some seem so intent on forsaking them?

The Problem

The process of attempting to erode conceptions of the Canadian-warrior spirit and by proxy our sacred commitment ‘to never forget’, finds its roots in deceptive revisionism. Canada’s ‘peacekeeping myth’ forwards that “Canadian soldiers do not fight wars, they fight war itself,”¹⁸ and implies that Canadian national character “is non-violent and non-military... [thus]

¹⁵ R. Lemelin and K. Johansen, “The Canadian National Vimy Memorial: Remembrance, Dissonance and Resonance,” *International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research* 8 (2014): 206.

¹⁶ H. Watkins and B. Bastian, “Lest We forget: The Effect of War Commemorations on Regret, Positive Moral Emotions, and Support for War,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2019): 1085.

¹⁷ C. Dusch, “A Job ‘So sacred:’ The Roots of American Great War Commemoration,” *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies* 10 (2016): 136.

¹⁸ E. Wagner, “The Peaceable Kingdom? The National Myth of Canadian Peacekeeping and the Cold War,” *Canadian Military Journal* 7 (2006): 46.

different and morally superior to the United States.”¹⁹ This blatant revisionism - arising from leftist pathologies - clashes with the historical memory of how “the Canadian military had come of age on the battlefields of both world wars...soldiers were trained for war, and Canadians were good at it.”²⁰

Arguably, while serving to trumpet Canada as “an altruistic middle power...[made of] saints and crusaders in the cause of the just and the weak,”²¹ this revisionist agenda has merely propagated a delusion which has earned “some international reputation for hypocrisy.”²² Despite platitudes from figures such as former Prime Minister Jean Chretien that “we are always there, like the Boy Scouts,”²³ such promotions of a peacekeeping mythology disregard the reality that traditional Canadian peacekeeping operations were undertaken to serve the national interest, by defending “Western interests and [preventing] local conflicts from escalating into nuclear war.”²⁴

The symptoms of this revisionism came to a head under the Harper government, between 2006 and 2015. The Conservatives were criticized for ‘exploiting’ commemorative urges for “ulterior purposes, such as the psychic rebranding of Canada as a ‘warrior’ nation.”²⁵ Despite the testament written by The First and Second World Wars, as well as the Korean War to the reality of Canada’s warrior-spirit, the mainstream media’s wide-spread negative perception of this so called ‘rebranding,’ showcased the effective weaponization of the peacekeeping myth in cultivating disdain for the nature of Canadian military historiography and valour.

This issue is further exacerbated by the distance between average Canadians and the cemeteries of our war-dead. While the sight of white crosses and headstones is common across France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, Commonwealth War Graves are an ocean apart for Canadians. While there may be monuments to the fallen spread across our country, the impact of

¹⁹ Wagner, “The Peaceable Kingdom,” 46.

²⁰ M. Carroll, “Peacekeeping: Canada's Past, but not its Present and Future?” *International Journal* 71 (2016): 169.

²¹ C. Sjolander, “John W. Holmes and the Reconciliation of Immoderate Views,” *International Journal* 65 (2010): 322.

²² Sjolander, “John W. Holmes and the Reconciliation of Immoderate Views,” 321.

²³ Carroll, “Peacekeeping: Canada's Past, but not its Present and Future,” 169.

²⁴ Wagner, “The Peaceable Kingdom,” 46.

²⁵ Boswell, “The Battleground of Remembrance,” 5.

personal epitaphs, crosses of remembrance, and rows upon rows of tombstones, is not felt in the lives of average citizens; making it that much easier for the erosion of our collective memory of Canadian military sacrifice.

The Solution

With the intent to counteract the degenerative influences of peacekeeping mythology and geographic distance upon the public's collective memory of Canadian military sacrifice, a national commemoration curriculum must be implemented. This program can be broken down into three fundamental elements: (1) education, (2) facilitation; and (3) association.

The first component of the program would consist of establishing an expanded and nationwide war-history curriculum for elementary, middle and secondary school students. Younger students would be engaged through war poetry, literature, and art projects. For older students, assigning them sailors, soldiers and air personnel and having them go through their service records to produce small presentations about who they were, as well as discussions of contentious issues such as conscription, would be used as additional educational tools. Furthermore, later into secondary school, the mythology of Canadian peacekeeping must be discussed. Attention should be given to Canada's very real involvement in traditional peacekeeping operations, but also to the role these operations played as part of pursuing Communist-containment policy and Canadian national interest.

Likewise, revisionism regarding Canadian warrior-spirit should be openly discussed. While some similar programs exist amongst the provinces and territories, the curriculums are not standardized, resulting in serious variance in the extent and quality of content addressed. The standardization of these programs should be conducted in consultation with provincial authorities in order to ensure the preservation of important local histories within the overall program, such as that of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and Royal Newfoundland Naval Reserve.

Secondly, students must be provided opportunities to visit war memorials in the context of their lessons and the commemoration curriculum. This component of the program should be threefold: with local programs to bring younger students to monuments near their communities, a domestic program to facilitate trips to Ottawa to visit the city's memorials and the Canadian War Museum, and a smaller international program to facilitate battlefield tours in Europe. While classroom education can be a very useful tool, the experience of visiting physical monuments - and for those who can, war graves overseas - has a unique gravity.

The 'association' facet of the national program would be concerned with directly bringing the experiences of past and serving members of the Canadian military to a more personal environment. Specifically, through visits to individual classes (as opposed to in front of an entire school) serving, ex-members and their direct relatives can interact with students in a far more engaging and humanizing environment. Recorded interviews could similarly be used in the case of generations of veterans who are no longer with us. Personal stories are an essential

element of the greater national project, as the sailors, soldiers and air personnel are themselves the focus of commemoration.

Conclusion

Canadians have been given the torch, but are failing to hold it high, and are breaking faith with those who died. This is primarily the result of eroding remembrance of Canadian military heritage through the weaponization of the ‘peacekeeping myth,’ and the geographic reality of continental separation from war cemeteries. To support the thesis that war commemoration exists part and parcel with the very fabric of Canadian civic identity, Benedict Anderson’s discussion of the nationalist paradigm in *Imagined Communities*, was examined with reference to Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. In doing so, linkages were established between modern ideas of national identity and their relationship to shared commemoration, mythology and historiography.

On this conceptual basis, a standardized, national commemoration curriculum was proposed in order to revitalize the sacred, commemorative element of Canadian national identity. This program consists of three main drives: (1) education, (2) facilitation, and (3) association. With the aim to heal the damages of past revisionism regarding Canadian military heritage, this policy seeks to ensure that our sacred pact to hold the torch high, is fulfilled.

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