



Belgo-British Conference
London, October 2013

**HISTORY AND RECONCILIATION
ENGAGING A NEW GENERATION**



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Conference Participants 2013 at Lancaster House, London

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Scene-setter

At a time when all states involved in the First World War were preparing to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its outbreak and were organising a rolling series of war-related centennials up to 2018, the 14th Belgo-British Conference brought together representatives and practitioners from the realms of education, culture, sports, media, diplomacy and International Law to discuss how to engage the new generation in order to keep history alive and reflect on lessons learned from past conflicts.

Reconciliation was key to peace building, but the European experience showed that it was a very complex and slow process. The 20th century promise of the international community ‘it should never happen again’ was not enough. Today, most of our continent was at peace. When the Nobel peace prize was awarded to the European Union in 2012, the Norwegian Nobel Committee highlighted ‘how, through well-aimed efforts and by building mutual confidence, historical enemies can become close partners.’

We needed to have a sense of history if we wanted to have a sense of the future. When thinking of conflicts that in our present world appeared to be intractable, it was useful to record that for so long Europe was also a continent of permanent conflict. Had we forgotten? Was there a danger that a new generation, faced with serious and often acute social and employment problems and confronted with resurgent populism, would take peace for granted and thereby erode its solidity?

What were national institutions in Belgium, Britain and elsewhere in Europe doing to engage new generations to ensure that these events are remembered and reflect on the democratic and human rights values that underpin this peace? To what extent were commemorations of world wars and of other major conflicts and their atrocities contributing to a better understanding of the importance of these values for our societies? How could social media be used to stimulate discussion on history and reconciliation? How did we engage those with a non-European background in reflections on a global war?

How did we get the right balance between the individual and family history and the global? What original approaches could be used to bring a fresh perspective on histories which we thought we knew but often did not? How could we inspire the young generation to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by past conflicts and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy? How could we encourage the new generation to cultivate a sense of moral responsibility so that they would consolidate the tools and structures needed to respond to the challenges that confronted our world?

The Conference focused on ‘best practices’ as demonstrated by interventions by representatives from art and history museums, veterans’ institutions, schools and universities, sports associations and international jurists.

Ministerial Speeches

UK Minister for Europe, The Rt Hon David Lidington

Opening the Belgo-British Conference, UK Minister for Europe the Rt Hon David Lidington MP explained that this year's conference would look towards the Centenary of the First World War and how to engage a new generation.

The Minister emphasised how the UK and Belgium had always been strong allies, standing together in both world wars and more recently both countries being involved in NATO campaigns. This strong link was one of the reasons why the UK had decided to hold a remembrance event at the St Symphorien Military Cemetery in Mons on 4 August 2014.

The Rt Hon David Lidington MP highlighted the work that was going on in Belgium on commemorations at all levels and how touched the UK had been by the selfless time and effort communities put into remembering the British fallen – as well as those from all the other nations who had fought on Belgian soil.

The Minister for Europe concluded by echoing the wish of the Prime Ministers of Belgium and the UK for the centenary to provide the foundations upon which to build an enduring cultural and educational legacy: to put young people front and centre in our commemoration, and to ensure that the sacrifice and service of one hundred years ago is still remembered in one hundred years time.



From left to right:

UK Ambassador Jonathan Brenton, Honorary Ambassador Lode Willems, UK Minister for Europe The Rt Hon David Lidington

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Trade and European Affairs Didier Reynders

Joining Minister for Europe David Lidington to open the Conference, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Didier Reynders welcomed the shared history of the UK and Belgium, especially during the two World Wars in which thousands of Britons lost their lives fighting in Belgium. It was absolutely right therefore that, on the eve of the Centenary commemoration of the First World War, the Belgo-British Conference should address the theme of remembrance and reconciliation.

It was important to come together to reflect on how to organise reconciliation processes in post war situations and how to engage new generations to ensure that these events were remembered. It was important also to reflect on the values that underpinned the peace in which Europe had been living now for so many decades.

Coming to terms with the consequences of war and establishing peace was the essence of diplomatic activity, he said, be that in the Balkans, in Rwanda or Somalia, to name but a few examples. The European Union winning the Nobel Peace Prize was a reminder of how far Europe had come since the wars of the last century; it did not entitle us to give lessons to the world, but it showed there was useful experience to share about reconciliation.



From left to right:

Honorary Ambassador Lode Willems, UK Ambassador Jonathan Brenton, UK Minister for Europe The Rt Hon David Lidington, Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Trade and European Affairs Didier Reynders

Dr Andrew Murrison MP, UK Minister for International Security Strategy and Prime Minister's Special Representative for the Centenary Commemoration of the First World War

Dr Andrew Murrison also spoke on the opening night of the conference. The Minister highlighted how, out of more than 14,000 parishes in England and Wales, only around 50 so called "thankful parishes" saw all their soldiers return. Every single community in Scotland and Northern Ireland lost someone. Such was the scale of sacrifice across the world, what the Minister described as "the extraordinary sacrifice of a generation."

Polling data in the UK suggested the British public knew there was a war from 1914, and that the UK and Germany were enemies and that it involved mud, trenches, barbed wire and a Christmas truce. Thereafter it all got a bit hazy, he said. It was vital to do better than that. The job of government was to provide the framework for this to happen.

For example, for the opening day of the centenary on 4 August next year the UK would focus on three events:

A wreath-laying service at the cenotaph in Glasgow following a special Commonwealth service at Glasgow Cathedral;

an event at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission St Symphorien Military Cemetery in Mons in Belgium. The cemetery had an equal number of British and German soldiers interred, and was where the first and last British Commonwealth uniformed casualties of the war were believed to be buried;

a candlelit vigil of prayer and penitence at Westminster Abbey finishing at 11pm our time - the moment war was declared.

Over the four year period the UK would run a major programme of activities including building an educational programme to create an enduring legacy for generations to come.

Diana Souhami, author of a biography on the life of Edith Cavell

On the opening night, author Diana Souhami spoke about Edith Cavell, the nurse shot at dawn by the German occupying army in Brussels on 12th October 1915. What prompted Diana Souhami to write about Edith Cavell, she said, was the idea of altruism, the concept of goodness. Her crime had been to smuggle allied soldiers, separated from their regiments, out of war-torn Belgium. It was hard not to be moved by her story.

In 1907 Cavell was invited by a leading Belgian surgeon to go to Brussels as head matron of his hospital and set up a training school for nurses there. She introduced modern nursing practice into Belgium.

The First World War interrupted her work. In August 1914 she watched as fifty thousand German soldiers marched into Brussels. After the battle of Mons, a resistance network grew up to help wounded allied soldiers separated from their regiments. In Brussels, Edith Cavell's nursing school became a central safe house for them.

Her network was watched and rounded up. Of those arrested Edith Cavell was singled out for execution and spent ten weeks in solitary confinement. 'I have no fear or shrinking' she told the English priest before her execution. 'I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me.' He told her she would be remembered as a heroine and a martyr. 'Don't think of me like that,' she said. 'Think of me as a nurse who tried to do her duty.' And she made the comment now engraved on her monument in Trafalgar Square: 'I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone.'

Main Conference Debate

Opening, Honorary Ambassador Lode Willems, Belgian Chairman of the Conference, reflected on 100 years of history between Belgium and the United Kingdom. He remarked that the European Union winning the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize was a reflection of reconciliation in Europe. However, it was a source of concern that many were surprised and cynical when the EU received the prize. Ambassador Willems explained that today's conference was for practitioners to transmit their ideas and values to the new generation.



Plenary Session One

The first plenary session focused on reconciliation processes in Europe after the First World War, as well as highlighting the experiences of the Balkans and Ireland.

Professor Sophie De Schaepdrijver, Associate Professor of Modern European History, Pennsylvania State University

Professor De Schaepdrijver argued that the First World War commemorations were less about global events, but more about the war's impact on individual lives. Commemoration efforts tended to have two elements in common – an emphasis on experience and a rejection of war.

We had to approach the war as archaeologists. The “real educational moment” resided in digging deeper into society and the lives of the people in it. More could be learned from accepting the complexities of the war, she stated.

Television shows, such as the BBC's “Blackadder,” viewed the Western Front as a theatre of the absurd, she noted; this was wildly inaccurate. There was also an idea that war had been imposed on people from above. We needed to understand that the peace message was necessary but not all that helpful.

Belgium was central to the First World War because the invasion of the country was linked to the wider question of whether a small country had the right to autonomous existence. We needed to understand that many contemporaries had been enthralled by the culture of volunteering.

She called on people to open themselves up to the complexities of the war, rather than “frogmarching themselves into sound bites.” We needed to say ‘complex things in an accessible way’.

Professor Sir Hew Strachan, Chichele Professor of the History of War, Oxford University

Professor Sir Hew Strachan said the centenary of the war required reconciliation to be central for some communities, such as those in central Europe and central Asia. However, in Western Europe that required less effort, he added. The UK could be reasonably confident that reconciliation in an international sense was not a major priority. However, it was important to do something about reconciliation in a domestic sense.

Professor Sir Hew stressed that Britain had indeed had its moments where the issue of reconciliation would have domestic repercussions, highlighting the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014. In Glasgow, the war was still viewed in sectarian terms and wearing a poppy on 11 November could be viewed as a political statement, he explained. For some the real heroes were the shop stewards of the 1915 strikes. We might remember that the 28 June anniversary of the assassination in Sarajevo was also the same day as the 1314 Battle of Bannockburn.

Internal domestic divisions demonstrated that the war was “inherently controversial.” Professor Sir Hew said he had worked hard to get that point over to members of the Government, and if controversy in the centenary was managed in a constructive spirit then that had an “enormously positive” educational capability. Surveys of UK opinion had shown that people thought the anniversaries were enormously important but did not know much about them.

We needed a real legacy from commemorations not a rhetorical one. Were the next four years just going to be remembrance Sunday writ large? There was a tendency to focus on the local and particular which would avoid the big questions.

We needed a debate which went wider than whose fault it was or the quality of Generals or the proportionality of the casualties. We needed to think about the war’s place in our world.

The Second World War was losing its value as a reference point because it had been simplified as a ‘good war.’ We had stripped ambivalence and ambiguity from the conflict: it was forgotten also that we did not go to war to end the Holocaust.

The First World War was far more instructive for our generation, showing how reasonable men can differ – a point Dr Murrison had made the evening before when he compared the recent UK parliamentary debate on Syria with the debates about the First World War.

We needed to see commemorations in the context of previous commemorations. In 1918, the celebration of victory had been the commemoration of the dead. In November 1928 there were crowds at Douglas Haig’s funeral. Our views now reflected more the views of the 1960s, the ‘oh what a lovely war’ interpretation, rather than the 1920s.

In 2014, NATO forces would be coming out of Afghanistan. That would pose questions about the value of war.

We should also remember that, 88 per cent of all those in British armed forces who went to war came back home, he added. “This centenary has the potential to surprise us – to leave us in a new place in relation to this war,” he concluded.

But if we did not pose the big questions, the long haul of four years of commemorations would be wasted.

Stefan Lehne, Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Europe

Mr Lehne highlighted the reconciliation process in the Balkans, and said coming to terms with the past and the prosecution of war criminals was a crucial part of that. There were still many nationalist politicians in the region that resisted reconciliation, he affirmed. There was a preference for normalisation not reconciliation. Continuing, Mr Lehne stated that 12,000 people were still missing after the war and for their families the conflict had not ended.

Leaders of the region had taken steps to promote reconciliation, including the Presidents of Croatia and Serbia. However, the effect of those efforts was limited because more was needed than a gesture by a political leader. The population needed to support the initiative too, and that had not yet happened, he said.

Dr Edward Madigan, Lecturer in Public History, Royal Holloway, University of London

Dr Madigan raised Anglo-Irish relations and said in Ireland it was “ironic but positive” that a shared memory of the First World War had helped people to move away from the violence of the recent past.

The modern Irish state came into being in 1922 and in most of the years since then relations between Ireland and the UK had not been good. Until recently, the biggest bone of contention between leaders of the two countries was Northern Ireland, he explained, referring to The Troubles.

In military terms, the Troubles were a case of sustained asymmetric warfare. Between 1969 and 1994 more than 3,500 died as a result of violence, including 11 killed at the deliberate targeting of a remembrance day commemoration in Enniskillen. Additionally, about 50,000 people were injured. Continuing, Dr Madigan said the territory where most of that killing occurred was very small, and Northern Ireland was only slightly larger than Flanders. Within living memory, the British state was the scene of intense violence.

However, today Anglo-Irish relations were better than they had ever been and the peace process was stable, he stated. Dr Madigan said diplomats, political leaders and grassroots activists had brought about that change. The EU context had had a huge underestimated impact as Ireland and the UK had come to see themselves as partners with close views.

But commemoration had played its role in reconciliation. The Queen had joined the Irish President at the opening of the Irish peace park in November 1998. The peace park remembered soldiers from both North and South, Catholic and Protestant who had died in the First World War (fighting for different ideals). During her historic State Visit in 2011 the Queen had visited the garden of remembrance in Dublin for those who died fighting the UK.

In follow-up discussions, Maddigan concluded that the importance of shared commemoration was that it convinced each side that others were interested in their identity.

Amandeep Singh Madra, Chair, UK Punjab Heritage Association

Mr Singh Madra explained that in the nineteenth century, Sikhs were recognised as warrior people and were sought after by the British Army. On the eve of the First World War, Sikhs made up some 22 per cent of the British army despite representing two per cent of the population. The war marked the high point of Anglo-Sikh relations, he noted.

Today, Sikhs were not well represented in the Army but were represented in other professions, including the media and charitable sectors, he continued.

To mark the centenary of the First World War, Mr Singh Madra said the Sikh community wanted to engage with as many people as possible, particularly with young people. He called on people to come forward as “citizen historians” to understand the actions of their forefathers and their families.

The fact that the Imperial War Museum wanted to work with the Sikh community demonstrated that the role of non-white communities in the war was crucial but remained untold, said Mr Singh Madra. Concluding, he said it was important to ensure that the story would never be forgotten.



Amandeep Singh Madra, Chair, UK Punjab Heritage Association

Plenary Session Two

The second plenary session focused on ways of engaging young people in the processes of remembrance and reconciliation.

Jonathan Williams, Deputy Director, British Museum

Mr Williams used his address to outline the British Museum's plans for the commemoration of the First World War in 2014. He noted that the Museum had decided to take the opportunity to "take a broad view of reconciliation" because of the risk that commemorations for the centenary of the First World War would lead to a British-German narrative focused entirely on the period between 1914-1918.

Announcing a "major season of German exhibitions and events" in the British Museum, Mr Williams said he hoped that greater exposure of the British public to German art would "broaden the focus" of the UK's views of Germany to take in more than only the two World Wars. "We have had reconciliation, but what we don't have is knowledge and understanding," he concluded. There needed to be a bigger audience for Germany in Britain.

Betty de Lanoeye, Communications Manager, Belgian Federal Institute of Veterans and Victims of Wars

Ms De Lanoeye outlined the work of the Belgian Federal Institute of Veterans, which has been very active in trying to make reconciliation and commemoration of war relevant to young people in Belgium. The Institute produces educational materials for schools, as well as organising excursions to battle sites and concentration camps.

In 2014, the Institute will be rolling out a digital channel on war veterans for schools, as well as an online register of information on the 40,000 Belgian war dead. Ms De Lanoeye emphasised in particular that most of the Institute's outreach to young people was driven entirely by social media such as facebook.

Lord Triesman, Member of the House of Lords and former Chairman of the Football Association

Labour peer Lord Triesman, as a former chairman of the Football Association, focused on the role of sport in tackling societal problems. He said that "much can be accomplished through sport and young people's passion," citing as an example the drop in knife crime in the UK after an appeal by footballer Rio Ferdinand.

He nonetheless conceded that sport was "not without its ambiguity" in reaching out to young people, arguing that the competitive element can exacerbate existing tensions. Lord Triesman also stated that big sports events such as the Olympics could also be used for political purposes, citing as examples the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic Games and the recent demonstrations in Brazil during the Federations Cup.

However, Lord Triesman firmly committed to the position that sport “can and should” have an impact on the remembrance of the First World War, using the famous Christmas Day Truce of 1914 as an example of sport (temporarily) bringing together two warring factions. He called on football and other sports to be involved actively in the commemorative events of 2014, saying that young people should understand the “bravery and contribution of the armed forces to peace and security in the world.”

Serge Brammertz, Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia

In his presentation, Mr Brammertz reflected on the role played by international courts and tribunals in delivering reconciliation in post-conflict situations, and in the Balkans in particular. As regards reconciliation, he emphatically defended the need for justice to be done before reconciliation could take place, emphasising that, after armed conflicts, victims needed to see justice done against the “guilty parties”.

In this regard, he praised the European Union for making the surrender of suspected war criminals from the former Yugoslavia a key condition of EU membership for countries such as Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia.

Turning to the role of remembrance, he noted that conflicts involving genocide or ethnic cleansing often also involved the destruction of ethnic art and culture. Mr Brammertz argued that commemorations should also be used to bring a people’s cultural heritage to a younger generation. He noted that the judicial process could be especially helpful in this respect by providing a large volume of written evidence and history, which in turn could be used to “involve and educate younger generations.”

In his closing remarks, Mr Brammertz made a number of recommendations for the future functioning of UN-backed international tribunals. He urged such courts to be established as near as possible to the affected communities that they service, and called for a greater emphasis on outreach sections to ensure the full participation of all relevant parties in their work.

Professor Sophie De Schaepdrijver, Associate Professor of Modern European History, Pennsylvania State University

Following the presentations by the four panel members, Professors De Schaepdrijver and Strachan were invited to comment on the points made and relating to their own presentations from the first plenary session.

Professor De Schaepdrijver linked the upcoming commemorations of the First World War to the process of “cultural demobilisation.” which she described as a waning conviction among a population that the armed forces may expect young people to “die for a common cause.”

She said that the increased scepticism of such military ideals, which were far more prevalent in the early 20th century, explained why there was at present a “reluctance” to engage in

historical revisionism towards the conflict and an increased focus on the impact of war on soldiers' families and loved ones. The general public wanted a narrative of victimisation.

However, the professor warned that the First World War still held relevant lessons for present-day problems. Referring to the young European Muslims that had joined the conflict in Syria, she argued that the process of cultural demobilisation had not developed equally in all segments of society. Concluding, Professor De Schaepdrijver remarked that demobilisation often occurred after big conflicts and then gradually waned in the decades after, implicitly arguing that the notion of sacrifice might make a return in coming years.

Professor Sir Hew Strachan, Chichele Professor of the History of War, Oxford University

Concluding the second plenary sessions, Professor Strachan focused on the polarising effect of war on national and trans-national identities in Europe. He argued that Europeans had felt part of a "single European culture" prior to the First World War, but subsequently attached a much stronger importance to their national cultural identities. Britain had felt close to German culture in the 19th century then, as a result of war, saw it becoming barbarous.

He urged the conference participants to use the commemorations in 2014 as an opportunity to "open discussions on nationality and culture," and to make a break with Britain's "established perspectives" on the First World War. The passing of the veterans' generation allowed us to make a clean break. Contemporary views of the 1914-1918 period had become distorted by the lens of hindsight and "bore no direct relationship to direct experiences of servicemen."

Referring back to discussions of sport, he noted that while we concentrated on stories about the Christmas Truce football matches (ideas that sport could replace war), sport had in fact been central to military recruitment and morale.

Finishing, the professor remarked on the different impacts of oral and written history, saying that memories that were passed down orally had an "immediacy and impact that the written word do not." But we needed to be careful about the distortions of "dodgy oral history."



Breakout Group One

The session was chaired by the British Ambassador to Belgium, Jonathan Brenton, while De Standaard columnist Mia Doornaert acted as Rapporteur.

Vasco Kretschmann, German PhD student

Mr Kretschmann discussed the city museum of Wroclaw (Breslau) in Poland and the role it played in Polish-German reconciliation. He noted that the museum in itself could not effectively foster better relations, arguing that visitor numbers remained low because reconciliation had to occur from the “bottom up” rather than from the “top down.” Separately, he also argued that the EU was “not a project of economic efficiency but a project of political stability and security, which impacts on culture and how people discuss culture and history.”

Susan Woodroffe, Principal of the British School in Brussels

Drawing on her own experience as a teacher, Ms Woodroffe outlined how her school made the teaching of history both relevant and engaging for pupils drawn from over 70 national backgrounds. She argued that international schools such as hers provided a “natural ground for reconciliation” because children had a “natural predilection for dialogue and understanding.” Ms Woodroffe also argued in favour of not shying away from controversial issues in the classroom, to enable children to debate and challenge prejudices and different versions of the same events.

Thierry Zintz, Vice-President of the Belgian Olympic Committee

Mr Zintz spoke about linking reconciliation to sport, saying the Olympic movement sought to disseminate core values such as fair play and mutual respect. He underlined the role sport could play in reconciling former enemies, citing the refurbishment of sports facilities in Sarajevo as an example of bringing together different ethnic groups and Jacques Rogge's support for the Christmas Truce. However, he also acknowledged that sport had both "positive and negative sides" and that the competitive side of sport could exacerbate rather than lessen tensions between communities. Mr Zintz also expressed the hope that in the future teams at the Olympics would be mixed in both gender and nationality.

Questions and discussion

Both the panel and the audience agreed on the need to make educational and remembrance activities related to conciliation more attractive to young people, especially through the use of social media.

A historian in the audience cautioned that remembrance activities could also be used to perpetuate tensions between communities rather than solve them. We should also beware of empathy – we could not just assume that First World War soldiers were like us.

Similarly, one participant used the examples of both Yugoslavia and Glasgow as instances where sporting events were used as a proxy for existing inter-communal conflicts.

Separately, speakers also focused on the "crucial role" of leadership in fostering reconciliation through public disavowal of negative national stereotypes. He argued that the institutionalisation of dialogue, through organisations such as the EU, led to "faceless organisations" that were unable to make the case convincingly for reconciliation.

The role of social media was also noted. It was striking how many projects were facebook driven. But this might also create personal distortions – the way most people thought about the war would be via the 'hole in grandpa's helmet.'

Breakout Group Two

The session was moderated by Ms Catherine Stewart, Chair of Interel European Affairs, with Mr Marc Reynebeau, Senior Writer at De Standaard newspaper, as Rapporteur.

Professor Rudi Van Doorslaer, Director, Centre d'Étude et de Documentation Guerre et Société contemporaine

Professor Van Doorslaer kicked off the debate by noting that the morning's sessions had been rather Anglo-centric, so he would discuss political divisions in Belgium. His suggestion was that the roots of some modern-day Flemish nationalism could be traced back to the Second World War, with some correlation between the separatist movement and families whose ancestors were punished for collaboration with the occupying Germans. Speaking of Flemish nationalism's 'dark past', he said that the idea of revenge lived on in such families, who often had only a vague idea of what their ancestors had been accused, and lamented the fact that access to the relevant archives was very difficult.

Prof. Van Doorslaer's central thesis was that a lack of historical transparency made reconciliation impossible, and that the first step in the process had to be education. He suggested that television could be an effective educational tool, and regretted that there was no equivalent in Flanders of *Un village français* in France, or *Inspector George Gently* in the UK, which both encouraged a sense of historical consciousness.

Questions and discussion

Opening up debate to the audience, discussion continued to emphasise how complex the situation in Flanders was during both wars, and that the past needed to be confronted rather than abandoned, in order for there to be a real reconciliation process. The question of the EU was also raised, with one audience member stating that he could not understand British euroscepticism and that the EU had a valuable role to play in the reconciliation process, both in countries like Belgium and regions like the Balkans.

Others pointed out, however, that nationalists in various regions of Europe used the EU to legitimise their separate identity. One audience member suggested that national identity would be a good topic for next year's conference.

Ms Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, Executive Director, European Association of History Editors

Ms van der Leeuw-Roord, agreed that for the reconciliation process it was important that all the facts were on the table. She focused on how different countries had very different narratives for events, and argued that there needed to be a trans-European approach to history education, so that young people were given the tools to understand different narratives.

She also picked up on an earlier point raised that EU education policy focused too often on competition and entrepreneurship, and if students were taught to understand other cultures

and countries, then it was in the context of ‘beating’ them, which made any reconciliation or deeper understanding difficult.

Questions and discussion

A historian suggested that reconciliation always required time, and if this had succeeded with certain events, then it was only because they were no longer politically relevant. The audience agreed with Ms van der Leeuw-Roord that a historian’s job should not be to tell the national story by defining the state against ‘the Other,’ and that reconciliation required a genuine interest in other people. Both panellists agreed that a trans-national dialogue was a crucial beginning for the process.

Breakout Group Three

The session was moderated by Ambassador Johan Verbeke, Belgian Ambassador to the UK with Mr Paul Lay, Editor, History Today, as Rapporteur.

Mr Martyn Heather, Head of Education, Premier League

Mr Heather explained that he worked with potential premier league players of the future and did so through a number of education programmes. The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a great way to engage young people through football and provided an opportunity to think about many of the other issues they came out through the war.

Professor Dr David Sinardet, Department of Political Science, University of Brussels

Professor Sinardet said there were good examples of engaging young people with the past, and cited work carried out by the Belgian Veterans Institute. It was not enough to send people to visit Auschwitz and in some cases people played too much on emotions and tried to create pity, he argued. He added that the relevance of social media was a complementary aspect of other initiatives but warned against expecting “too much” from facebook and Twitter. Undoubtedly, the evolution towards a genuine public sphere could also be reached through organising remembrance events on a more European scale, he suggested.

Mr Piet Chielens, Director, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres

Mr Chielens explained that the museum tried to focus on the multi-cultural aspects of the conflict, and had long-standing relations with the Sikh community in the UK, as well as China and Canada. People visited the museum for historical reasons. On reconciliation, Mr Chielens said there were both private and public aspects to that and war cemeteries were part of a very public affair. The final part of the exhibition was not just about stopping on 11 November, but marked a century of commemoration.

Questions and discussion

A British representative remarked that there was no problem in engaging young people with the stereotypes of the First World War, but there was an opportunity to leave a “new legacy”

from the conflict. He added that there was an enormous international element that was not talked about as part of that discourse.

A Professor said the commemorative landscape today was vastly differently before the 1950s, and there were 120 German cemeteries. In the 1970s, the percentage of German visitors to the cemeteries was vastly larger than it was today and now it seemed largely British visitors that came to Flanders. Responding to comments about the 1966 World Cup and present-day fixture dates, one football representative said his organisation tried to develop the message that sport was competitive, but also about relationships and respect.

A delegate asked how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, and raised Islamic fundamentalism. In reply, a political party representative highlighted the popularity of far-right political parties in Austria and France and said he was more concerned about Europeans voting for those politicians. In reply, a participant pointed to the rise of the True Finns in Finland and political events in the Netherlands. He urged society to “keep an eye” on such developments.

Drawing the session to a close, one panellist pointed to the relative absence of German and Austrian voices. He suggested that this was to do with the lack of narrative history that had come from those countries that did not permit as much engagement with public history as it did in the English-speaking world.

Final Session

Following the break-out sessions, participants gathered for a final question and answer session on the issues raised throughout the conference.

Reconciliation past and present

After the Rapporteurs presented the main findings of their respective break-out groups, the discussion turned to the application of past lessons learnt to current conflicts. In this context, the continued ethnic tensions in the Balkans were referenced frequently. Members of the audience underlined the need for the region’s different ethnic groups to break with their segregation and arrive at a common understanding of past conflicts as a prerequisite for reconciliation.

Another speaker noted that the commemoration of the First World War would coincide with important decisions about Britain’s future in Europe, arguing that Germany had anchored its commemorations in the notion of the country’s continued participation in the European project while Britain had rooted its remembrance “in the past”. Members of the audience argued that most Europeans now took “for granted” the peace and stability brought by the European Union, leading to a loss of support for European integration, as seen in the UK.

History was not an exact science. We had to emphasise its complexity and avoid taking comfort in the past. There was a danger that we would always look for the history we wanted – it was notable that battlefield tours were tailored for different nationalities. There was also a question of how much we were obliged to remember: did we also need the courage to forget?

Engaging a new generation

The Rapporteurs and the audience also discussed ways in which remembrance of past conflicts could be made relevant for younger people, to enable the lessons of the past to be passed on to a new generation. One political member said the EU should denounce war as “violence and not an act of bravery.”

Another participant outlined his vision for a renewed engagement through social media and the use of role models, referring specifically to the need for influential figures, including footballers and musicians, to speak up on issues of peace, respect and reconciliation.

Conclusions

British Ambassador Jonathan Brenton drew out some of the key themes which had emerged in the conference:

Reconciliation still remained a political challenge for us in 2014, including in the internal politics of Western Europe. Meanwhile as one participant had pointed out on the other side of the globe, the example of China and Japan showed the risks of international relations where countries had not faced up to the past.

The EU retained an important role in reconciliation. It was not always appreciated, for example, how UK relations with Ireland had been transformed with EU membership.

We needed a rigorous historical perspective to underpin our work on commemorations. There was also a danger of focusing too much on the individual rather than on the larger historical forces and we needed to understand that previous generations were different; thousands had volunteered for war.

There was a tension between those who wanted to see the war dead as victims and those who wanted to honour courage and sacrifice including in the context of present day conflicts. That tensions existed was natural but we might need to consider how public aversion to war might have implications for Europe’s global ambitions.

The First World War – with its ambiguities – was perhaps more relevant to us than the Second (which offered too many simplifications between good and bad). We were still wrestling with challenges such as enforcement of Treaties (including on Chemical weapons - first used in Ypres) and complex conflicts.

Given the degree of public interest, upcoming anniversaries presented **the challenge of delivering complex messages in an accessible way.** This challenge would be amplified by new media especially those like facebook that tended to focus on the individual.

Cliché was always a danger, especially over a four year period. People liked partial history (a tendency all the stronger in regions where oral histories predominated e.g. the Balkans or Afghanistan).

So was provincialism. Views in Eastern Europe were very different and there was a danger of us focusing exclusively on the Western front. Others e.g. Poland saw the world differently and the experience of the Balkans (as set down by Serge Brammetz of ICTY) was a salutary reminder that for some, remembrance of more recent conflicts weighed heavier.

We should remember the historical bond in our bilateral relations. The UK had gone to war to protect Belgian neutrality – as a neutral country threatened by an aggressor. That should not be forgotten.

PARTNERS



SPONSORS

