CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND GERMAN MEMORY*

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Anyone undertaking a comparative study of the memory of the war is struck by the disparity between the strong popular and scholarly interest in the First World War in Britain, France, and Italy, and its relative neglect in Germany. To this day, it is known in the former as ‘The Great War,’ ‘La Grande Guerre,’ and ‘La Grande Guerra.’ In the latter the term ‘Der Große Krieg’ is no longer used; although it was in use during the war, ‘Der Weltkrieg’ (the World War) was more common, and after 1939 it was demoted to the status of a dress rehearsal, as ‘Der erste Weltkrieg.’ This neglect should be surprising, given Germany’s central role in the war, the fact that it suffered more military losses than any other belligerent, and the profound political changes occasioned by defeat. Yet neglect does not mean amnesia, and the German memory of the First World War is so multi-faceted that this chapter can merely outline the main themes and point to areas for further research. It discusses collective memory, political culture and historical scholarship in the period 1918 to 1939, the Second World War, and since 1945.

Admittedly, the term ‘collective memory’ is problematic. The war had a place in the memory of everyone who experienced it, directly or indirectly. But to talk about ‘collective memory’ assumes there is a collective social body with a consciousness and a memory. Especially in the polarized political culture of interwar Germany, we are dealing with plural collectives, divided by class, confession, gender, generation, geography, milieu, and politics.

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1 It is a sign of the recent resurgence of interest that the term ‘Der Große Krieg’ has reappeared. Cf. Hinz (2006).
Memory 1918–39

The memory of the war was deeply engrained in German society and culture, especially political culture, after 1918. Although memory of the defeat was repressed in official political culture, war was a constant background presence.²

Historical scholarship on the topic never ceased. Germany’s most prestigious historical journal, the Historische Zeitschrift, reflected from the start the divisions in political culture. A long article by Moriz Ritter in 1920 on Germany and the outbreak of the war was basically an apologia for the German government and military leadership in 1914, on the basis of the very few (and highly selective) documents published at that early stage.³ Ludendorff’s war memoirs were given the honor of a review article in 1920 by Johannes Ziekursch.⁴ Ziekursch took the opportunity of writing a critique not only of Ludendorff’s wartime politics, but also of the constitutional weakness of the Bismarckian state which collapsed in 1918. In 1926, the liberal-democratic historian Veit Valentin, who had been forced by Pan-German agitation to give up his Freiburg professorship in 1916, analyzed the history of the armistice of 1918; his study was based on the documents of the Reich Chancellery and the Foreign and Interior Ministries (which he had published in 1924), and the Reichstag investigation commission on the causes of the German collapse in 1918. Given the limitations of the sources, he wrote a remarkably critical account of Germany’s military leaders, primarily Ludendorff.⁵ Valentin never regained a position at a German university, a sign that non-conformist research was still unwelcome in academia. A short article by R. P. Oßwald in 1927 attempted a retrospective vindication of the wartime German Flamenpolitik, i.e. the policy of encouraging Flemish separatism in order to break up the Belgian state.⁶ In a long review article in 1931 on Austria-Hungary and Serbia and the outbreak of the war Ludwig Bittner concluded that the documentation available to the Habsburg statesmen in July 1914 was completely adequate to justify ‘emergency action in line with


³ M. Ritter (1920).

⁴ Ziekursch (1920).

⁵ Valentin (1926).

⁶ Oßwald (1927).