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Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War, by Jay Winter

Main Idea. Historian Jay Winter uses his knowledge of World War I (WWI) to examine the way it influenced sites of memory. He defines sites of memory as physical places where people go to publicly remember a defining aspect of their shared past (WWI and WWII in this case). Winter states that: "Public commemoration is both irresistible and unsustainable. Constructing sites of memory is a universal social act, and yet these very sites are as transitory as are the groups of people who create and sustain them" (p. 73). After WWI, people wanted a place to remember the dead—even just by their names. These sites of memory often looked for meaning in what had happened and displayed power, national identity, or invented tradition. Realizing this goal entails artistic, representational, and monetary challenges (the Holocaust is particularly difficult). To have meaning, a site needs people to have a connection to it through a family memory—generally a death. If these connections disappear, the site soon follows.

Terms. • sites of second-order memory • World War 1, The Great War • commemorative process • collective shared knowledge • institutionalization and routinization • Armistice Day • Holocaust • Shoah • fashioning of narratives about the past • the invention of tradition • utilitarian memorials • business of remembrance • semiotics • medievalism • "lost generation" • family transmission of narratives

Select Quotes.

- "Twentieth-century warfare democratized bereavement. Previously armies were composed of mercenaries, volunteers and professionals. After 1914, Everyman went to war." (p. 68)
- "[T]he extreme character of the Second World War challenged the capacity of art—any art—to express a sense of loss when it is linked to genocidal murder or thermonuclear destruction." (p. 70)
- "Commemorative ritual survives when it is inscribed within the rhythms of community and, in particular, family life." (p. 71)

Questions.

1. Do you have a connection to the events of WWI or WWII through a family memory? If you do, does it influence the way you think about those events? Are there other events (from before your birth) that you have such a connection to?
2. Winter states that it is the natural course of events that sites of memory eventually fade away or change their meaning. Are there sites where that cannot be allowed to happen? What about Auschwitz or Hiroshima?
3. Do you think remembering events through second-order memories and specifically crafted sites is a good idea? Do you think this practice is dangerous?
4. How should sites of memory that society no longer deems worthy be treated? Should we force ourselves to forget certain sites of memory?