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Forgetting the Great War? The Langemarck Myth between Cultural Oblivion and Critical Memory in (West) Germany, 1945–2014*

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“Next stop: Langemarckstraße” informs the automatic announcement system on bus 33 that orbits Münster’s ring road. Monitors inside the vehicle indicate that it will subsequently call at Flandernstraße. “Langemarck” and “Flandern”—it seems unlikely that these two names, once pregnant with meaning, will stir memories, trigger associations, or spark curiosity among the passengers. Few people will know that these two streets were named during the 1930s after the great battles of 1914 (Langemarck) and 1917 (Flanders). The intention at the time was to create organic forms of commemoration that would subtly infiltrate the everyday. In towns throughout Germany, Langemarck in particular began to leave its mark on the paraphernalia of quotidian life, including visiting cards, directories, and maps. People waited at bus stops called “Langemarckstraße” (fig. 1) and heard the name shouted out on public transport. Today, the great battles fought around the Flemish city of Ypres (Ieper) during the First World War occupy a liminal space between memory and oblivion. They are both “forgotten” and ever present, no longer a mythical presence but still a small part of the fabric and rhythms of urban life.

This article explores the memory of the First World War in the wake of the Second World War—or, rather, it examines the intersecting memories of the two world wars since 1945.¹ It takes issue with a commonly held view, frequently articulated in the run-up to the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, that *der große Krieg* is a “long forgotten war” eclipsed by an even greater conflict.² For Aleida Assmann, the flurry of commemorative activities in

* We are grateful to Philip Boobbyer, Dominiek Dendooven, Charlotte Sleigh, and the journal’s three anonymous readers for their perceptive comments on earlier versions of this article.

¹ Stefan Goebel, “Intersecting Memories: War and Remembrance in Twentieth-Century Europe,” *Historical Journal* 44 (2001): 853–58.

² Heinrich Theodor Grütter and Walter Hauser, “Einführung: Die Rhein-Ruhr-Region und der Erste Weltkrieg,” in *1914—Mitten in Europa: Die Rhein-Ruhr-Region und der Erste Weltkrieg. Katalogbuch zur Ausstellung des LVR-Industriemuseums und des*

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FIG. 1.—Bus stop, Langemarckstraße, Münster. Authors' photograph, August 2013. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Ruhmuseums auf der Kokerei Zollverein 30. April bis 26. Oktober 2014, ed. Heinrich Theodor Grütter and Walter Hauser (Essen, 2014), 11; similarly, Wolfgang Kirsch, "Grußwort," in *An der "Heimatfront": Westfalen und Lippe im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Silke Eilers/LWL-Museumsamt für Westfalen (Münster, 2014), 4.

2014 revealed that Germany had finally left its post-1945 “*Sonderweg* [special path] of forgetting,” since “the forgotten war was on everyone’s lips again.”³ This bold claim by the doyen of memory studies is based on the prevalent, but unexamined, assumption that the cultural memory of the Great War became a nonentity in the Federal Republic, surviving at best in societal niches. The literature on the sociocultural reverberations of the Great War, though mountainous, offers no insights here. Scholars across the board have chosen the years 1939/1940 or 1945 as cutoff points for their research, thereby implying that commemoration of the 1914–18 conflict came to an abrupt end as a consequence of the Second World War.⁴ Nor have studies of the long-term transformations of commemorative cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth century been particularly attentive to memory traces of the Great War beyond the watershed of 1939/45.⁵ A notable exception is Jay Winter’s *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (2017), which examines how Great War culture continued to reverberate in art and literature beyond 1945.⁶

The small amount of scholarship that addresses the memory of the First World War post-1945 focuses almost exclusively on the British and, to a lesser

³ Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens* (Göttingen, 2016), 109, 135. Unless we indicate otherwise, all translations are our own.

⁴ See, for example, Susanne Brandt, *Vom Kriegsschauplatz zum Gedächtnisraum: Die Westfront 1914–1940* (Baden-Baden, 2000); Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Great Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, 2001); Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance, and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge, 2007); Wolfgang G. Natter, *Literature at War, 1914–1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany* (New Haven, CT, 1999); Jay Winter, “Commemorating War, 1914–1945,” in *The Cambridge History of War*, vol. 4, *War and the Modern World*, ed. Roger Chickering, Dennis Showalter, and Hans van de Ven (Cambridge, 2012), 310–26.

⁵ See the otherwise sophisticated studies by Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley, 2000); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990); Gerhard Schneider, “. . . nicht umsonst gefallen”? *Kriegerdenkmäler und Kriegstotenkult in Hannover* (Hannover, 1991); Manfred Hettling and Jörg Echternkamp, “Deutschland: Heroisierung und Opferstilisierung. Grundelemente des Gefallenengedenkens von 1813 bis heute,” in *Gefallenendenken im globalen Vergleich: Nationale Tradition, politische Legitimation und Individualisierung der Erinnerung*, ed. Manfred Hettling and Jörg Echternkamp (Munich, 2013), 123–58.

⁶ Jay Winter, *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge, 2017). See also David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), chap. 11. Intellectual historians, too, have commented on the long shadow of the Great War. See Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1997); Daniel Morat, *Von der Tat zur Gelassenheit: Konservatives Denken bei Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger und Friedrich Georg Jünger, 1920–1960* (Göttingen, 2007).

extent, on the French cases.⁷ Essentially, these are studies in commemorative resurgence rather than in cultural liminality. While this article is not an exercise in transnational or comparative history, the example of Britain offers an intriguing foil of (implicit) comparison and (reflective) contrast that can help throw German peculiarities into sharper relief. In Britain the First World War has retained and even gained in cultural significance since 1945. The symbol of the poppy, the language of “shell shock,” keywords like “The Somme” and “Passchendaele,” or a television phenomenon like the BBC’s *Great War* series have no equivalent in Germany. The term *nullachtfünfzehn* (zero eight fifteen) is one of the very few surviving memory traces of the First World War in colloquial language. The expression, borrowed from the type designation of the new machine gun introduced in the German army in 1915, connotes an unsophisticated product or a meaningless, repetitive task. However, few people today will be aware of its origin in the soldiers’ slang of the First World War; they are much more likely to associate it with the film trilogy *08/15* (1954–55) set during the Second World War.⁸ Even the most public of historiographical debates, sparked by the publication of Fritz Fischer’s *Der Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961 (translated as *Germany’s War Aims in the First World War*, 1967), was only superficially about the First World War. At the heart of the controversy was not the Great War as such but the continuities between the expansionist goals of Imperial Germany and the Third Reich.⁹ Without doubt, the legacies of Nazism and the Second World War came to dominate political discourse and commemorative culture in postwar (West) Germany, pushing the First World War to one

⁷ On Britain, see Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005); Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh, 2009); Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994), 212–42; Samuel Tranter, “The Hope and Faith of Armistice Day during the Second World War: Remembering the Lost Generation,” *Historical Research* 92 (2019): 790–813; Catriona Pennell, “Learning Lessons from War? Inclusions and Exclusions in Teaching First World War History in English Secondary Schools,” *History & Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 36–70. On France, see Nicolas Offenstadt, *Les fusillés de la Grande Guerre et la mémoire collective (1914–1999)* (Paris, 1999), and Offenstadt, *14–18 aujourd’hui: La Grande Guerre dans la France contemporaine* (Paris, 2010). On Czechoslovakia, see Karolina Čwiek-Rogalska, “The Glory of Death? German Memorials of the Great War in North-Western Czech Borderlands after 1945,” *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Studia Territorialia* 18, no. 2 (2018): 11–30.

⁸ Markus Pöhlmann, “Null-Acht-Fünfzehn (Maxim Machine Gun),” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of the First World War*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz, trans. Lynn D. Corum et al. (Leiden, 2012), 790.

⁹ See Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2020), 46–48; Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948–1990* (Darmstadt, 1999), 232–36.

side. It should be recognized, however, that important memory traces remained. Moreover, it is incomplete to write a history of Second World War commemorations with the Great War left out.

Memory and forgetting are not polar opposites but two sides of the same coin, scholars have asserted time and again. Even so, the culture of forgetting has long remained the poor relation of memory studies. The seminal publications on the theory of collective/cultural/social memory by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, the literary critic Aleida Assmann, and the media-studies scholar Wolfgang Ernst barely touch on forgetting.¹⁰ A notable exception to the rule is a long essay, *Oblivion* (2004), by the ethnologist Marc Augé, which suggests that forgetting facilitates memory: “Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea.”¹¹ More recently, monographs by Aleida Assmann and the social anthropologist Paul Connerton have appeared, designed to fill the yawning gap in this field, with both scholars developing a typology consisting of seven forms of forgetting.¹² Their approach has been challenged, however, by two cognitive psychologists who argue that we should “forget forgetting.” Jefferson A. Singer and Martin A. Conway propose to substitute the concept of “relative accessibility” for the much too stark notion of forgetting: “The past in the individual and in culture is available, the question is: Can we access it?”¹³

The emerging plethora of theoretical treatises on memory and oblivion contrasts sharply with a dearth in empirical studies. This is perhaps unsurprising, for studying cultural absences, political silences, and representational voids in practice poses particular methodological challenges.¹⁴ Collective memory requires

¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge, 2011); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011); Wolfgang Ernst, *Im Namen von Geschichte: Sammeln–Speichern–Er/Zählen. Infrastrukturelle Konfigurationen des deutschen Gedächtnisses* (Munich, 2003). On Halbwachs (and how he “forgot” the First World War), see Annette Becker, *Maurice Halbwachs: Un intellectuel en guerres mondiales 1914–1945* (Paris, 2003).

¹¹ Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Minneapolis, 2004), 20. In addition, see the earlier essay by Gary Smith, “Arbeit am Vergessen,” in *Vom Nutzen des Vergessens*, ed. Hinderk M. Emrich and Gary Smith (Berlin, 1996), 15–26.

¹² Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*; Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge, 2009), and Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” *Memory Studies* 1 (2008): 59–71.

¹³ Jefferson A. Singer and Martin A. Conway, “Should We Forget Forgetting?,” *Memory Studies* 1 (2008): 279–85.

¹⁴ See Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, eds., *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford, 1999); Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2010); Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871–78: The Politics of Forgetting* (Manchester, 2007).

guidance and direction; agents of remembrance such as war memorial committees have left behind dense paper trails. In addition, material culture provides ample evidence. Yet, with the exception of political acts of *damnatio memoriae*, forgetting can be an elusive thing, only sparsely documented, often requiring the historian to read between the lines.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this article is based on extensive research in German national, local, and institutional archives (with supplementary research in some British and Belgian archives). In addition, we have undertaken site visits to inspect street signs and memorials, and we have also benefited from the study of maps and plans held at land-registry offices and building authorities.

The cultural memory of the Great War after 1945 is potentially a vast topic. This article will focus on one real-and-imagined battlefield in particular: Langemarck in the Ypres salient.¹⁶ Without doubt, postwar representations of Verdun or Tannenberg would be equally viable and fruitful research topics, but for reasons both pragmatic and programmatic we shall concentrate on the theater of operations in West Flanders.¹⁷ The Ypres salient was a microcosm of the Western Front, intensely fought over in five major battles between 1914 and 1918 and also the site of commemorative campaigns after 1918. For many a contemporary, West Flanders *was* the Western Front. There the German advance had ended in a stalemate in autumn 1914, giving birth to what was, arguably, the most enduring myth of the First World War: the Langemarck myth about the collective self-sacrifice of Germany's youth. At Langemarck, a village nine kilometers northwest of Ypres, so the story goes, young volunteers, all students, had charged toward death singing "Deutschland über alles." It was the final assault, the end of the war of movement, before the military stalemate of trench warfare set in. The myth-making about Germany's lost generation began immediately after the battle. It had its origin in an army communiqué that the press, starved of exciting war news, eagerly reprinted: "West of Langemarck, young regiments broke forward singing 'Deutschland über alles' against the first line of the enemy's positions and took them."¹⁸ Military leaders knew full well that this story had no substance; not even the location was correctly given. Yet even the official historians' attempt at debunking the myth (calling it an "overhasty attack")

¹⁵ On commemorative purges, see Winfried Speitkamp, ed., *Denkmalsturz: Zur Konfliktgeschichte politischer Symbolik* (Göttingen, 1997).

¹⁶ On "real-and-imagined places," see Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden, MA, 1996).

¹⁷ See Ingrid Krüger-Bulcke, "Der Hohenzollern-Hindenburg-Zwischenfall in Marburg 1947: Wiederaufleben nationalistischer Strömungen oder Sturm im Wasserglas?," *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 39 (1989): 311–52; Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford, 2009), chap. 9.

¹⁸ This episode is discussed in detail in Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel, *Ypres* (Oxford, 2018), 30–34.

did not nothing to undermine it during the interwar years.¹⁹ Langemarck enshrined a story of heroic failure, one that transcended conventional notions of victory and defeat. The soldiers' baptism of fire in November 1914 would become the nucleus of a new national community overcoming older divisions of social class. The subsequent battles of Ypres in 1915, 1917, and 1918 were thus fought in a landscape saturated with memory. With the exception of the relatively "quiet" year 1916, the salient was the scene of heavy fighting throughout the war, notably during the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917, simply known as "Flanders" or "Passchendaele" in Germany and Britain, respectively. "The final act" was the fighting at Mount Kemmel—known as the "inviolable sanctuary" of German arms—in the southern sector of the Ypres salient in 1918.²⁰

Like Tannenberg and Verdun, Langemarck became a powerful symbol in the last years of Imperial Germany, one that was revived and reconfigured during the Weimar Republic and further cultivated after 1933. November 11—Langemarck Day—became a fixture in the national calendar and an antipode to both Armistice Day (November 11, observed in Britain and France) and the founding day of the republic (November 9). During the Third Reich, Langemarck was elevated to a state-sponsored myth, effectively becoming a prism through which the First World War in its entirety was seen; "Langemarck" stood for "the sacrifices [made] on *all* the fronts."²¹ Hitler presented himself as a veteran of Langemarck (paying a visit to the war cemetery en route to Paris in June 1940; fig. 2), while both the German Students' Association and the Hitler Youth were vying for custodianship of the legacy of the battle. Unlike Tannenberg, Langemarck stood both for a historical event and a political idea, transcending time and space. Unlike Verdun, Langemarck also gave stimulus to the creation of a commemorative infrastructure made up of dedicated sites, rituals, and organizations, one that the Nazis appropriated for their own purposes from 1933 right until the dying days of the Third Reich. Thus Langemarck—and the memory of the Great War more generally—became inseparable from Nazism and its legacy.²²

¹⁹ Reichsarchiv, ed., *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande*, vol. 6, *Der Herbst-Feldzug 1914. Der Abschluß der Operationen im Westen und Osten* (Berlin, 1929), 25.

²⁰ Gustav Goes, *Kemmel: Sturm und Sterben um einen Berg*, Unter dem Stahlhelm, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1932), 200.

²¹ See, for example, the title of Günter Kaufmann, ed., *Langemarck: Das Opfer der Jugend an allen Fronten* (Stuttgart, 1938), our italics.

²² On the Langemarck myth in Germany before 1945, see Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), and Baird, *Hitler's War Poets: Literature and Politics in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2008); Bernd Hüppauf, "Langemarck, Verdun, and the Myth of a *New Man* in Germany after the First World War," *War & Society* 6, no. 2 (1988): 70–103; Uwe-K. Ketelsen, "'Die Jugend von Langemarck': Ein poetisch-politisches Motiv der Zwischenkriegszeit," in *"Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit": Der Mythos der Jugend*, ed. Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz, and Frank



FIG. 2.—Hitler visiting the Langemarck war cemetery, June 1940. Photograph by Heinrich Hoffmann. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich, Bildarchiv.

The argument we want to develop is this. After 1945 the First World War ceased to be regarded as *der große Krieg*. But even though that war's legacy of death and violence was overshadowed by the horrors of an even greater war, the 1914–18 conflict was never completely “forgotten.” The past remained “accessible” and continued to speak to (West) German culture, although not everywhere and not all the time. Hence this article distinguishes between five, occasionally overlapping, phases of Great War memory/oblivion during the postwar era. What became consigned to oblivion, however, was first of all the topography of remembrance that had emerged between 1914 and 1940. Memory traces of the Great War lost their connection with the landscape of the battlefields that had formed them. Once resonant place names like Dixmude or Kemmel faded from the imagination; and the Langemark of the postwar was an altogether different place. So, first, the spatiality of remembrance that had been so important to the commemorative culture in the aftermath of 1914–18 changed fundamentally after 1945. Our second line of argument is that one can observe how the memory of the First World War moved progressively out

Trommler (Frankfurt, 1985), 68–96; Gerd Krumeich, “Langemarck,” in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 3, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (Munich, 2001), 292–309; Arndt Weinrich, “Kult der Jugend—Kult des Opfers: Der Langemarck-Mythos in der Zwischenkriegszeit,” *Historical Social Research* 34 (2009): 313–30.

of the realm of grief and bereavement. There was a strong tendency among Germans to approach the First World War in a different register, one that was reflective and judicious rather than emotional and mournful. Thus this article extends and expands on Alf Lüdtke's tentative observation, made in a review article in the *Journal of Modern History*, that West German efforts of "coming to terms with the past" entailed an "increased 'rationality'" and an avoidance of "public emotions."²³

I. PURGING THE PAST: SPATIAL TRACES, 1945–49

In April 1945, in the chaos of the final days of the Nazi regime, Max Bock, an accountant and so-called "half Jew" from Berlin, emerged from hiding. For the previous two years he had been sheltered by friends or lived rough in the city. Bock used his newly gained freedom to perambulate his hometown. The scene of devastation he witnessed at the once so beautiful Tiergarten shocked him deeply. "Most of the trees have lost their crowns and are sprouting from the sides and from a few remaining branches. It reminds me of the Houthulst Forest," he confided in his diary.²⁴ A war veteran who had seen action in Flanders in 1918, Bock tried to understand the Second World War in terms of the First.²⁵ In doing so, he effectively followed a pattern of representation established by wartime propaganda. From the outset, the prism of the Great War had provided an important lens for contextualizing the new conflict. The Wehrmacht's Blitzkrieg campaign, overrunning positions where the advance of the Kaiser's troops had come to a halt in autumn 1914, had been celebrated as a "Second Langemarck" in 1940. As late as early 1943, Nazi propagandists had invoked the spirit of collective self-sacrifice of the war volunteers of 1914 in a rallying call to the Sixth Army encircled at Stalingrad.²⁶ The British, too, had remobilized the memory of the Great War. Justifying the carpet bombing of German cities, the British press had suggested in December 1943 that air power "means no more Passchendaeles."²⁷

²³ Alf Lüdtke, "'Coming to Terms with the Past': Illusions of Remembering, Ways of Forgetting Nazism in West Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993): 542–72, 555.

²⁴ Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, 10800, Diary of Max Bock, trans. Lilli Segel, fols. 34/49, May 17, 1945. We are grateful to Paul Cornish for drawing this source to our attention.

²⁵ For another example, see Viktor [*sic*] Klemperer, "Der Höllentanz," *Deutschlands Stimme*, February 10, 1950.

²⁶ See the "collective diary" compiled by Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot: Ein kollektives Tagebuch. Januar und Februar 1943*, vol. 2, 18. bis 31. Januar 1943, 4th ed. (Munich, 1993), 508; see also Arndt Weinrich, *Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher: Jugend zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nationalsozialismus* (Essen, 2013), 289–91.

²⁷ Cited in Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A New History of Bomber Command in World War II* (London, 2001), 114.

Around the same time as Max Bock was invoking the landscape of the First World War in his private diary, the memory of that conflict was being gradually expunged from the public domain. On April 24, 1945, two weeks before the Reich's unconditional surrender, workers from the civil engineering inspectorate in Freiburg removed *Werwolf* (Nazi partisan) graffiti and, at the same time, took down the street signs in Langemarckstraße.²⁸ Both were considered a matter of urgency, although the surviving correspondence is silent about the rationale behind the latter measure. Were they afraid that the story of war volunteers marching willingly to their deaths with the *Deutschlandlied* on their lips would reek of Prussian militarism? Were they thinking of how right-wing associations had used the Langemarck war cemetery to rally against both the Versailles settlement and the Weimar Republic? Did the Nazis' concerted efforts to turn the story of Langemarck into a state-sponsored national myth in the 1930s loom in their minds? Or were they aware of how the legacy of Langemarck had become implicated in the racist war on the Eastern Front through the actions of SS-Sturmbrigade "Langemarck" and SS-Grenadier-Division "Langemarck"? Whatever the concrete reasons, one thing seemed clear: Langemarck, tainted by Nazism, would have no place in a future postwar order.

Similarly, in spring 1945 Stuttgart's administration was busy working toward the new regime, compiling lists of streets to be renamed following the demise of the Third Reich. In one document, a clerk noted, somewhat vaguely, that Flandernstraße, Kimmelbergstraße, and Ypernstraße, located in the outer district of Cannstatt, "commemorate some sort of battle or place from the world war 1914/18."²⁹ In the event, all three streets retained their names, for they were considered insignificant residential roads (fig. 3). Yet, elsewhere in the Swabian capital, two Langemarckstraßen and one Langemarckallee disappeared by the end of 1946. Although "Ypern" and "Langemarck" had often been used synonymously between 1914 and 1940, the former now seemed innocuous, whereas the latter appeared unsavory. On the form used for the renaming of streets, the official

²⁸ Stadtarchiv (hereafter StdA) Freiburg, C5/3368, Tiefbauamt to Oberbürgermeister, April 26, 1945; see also Volker Ilgen, "'Ein sichtbares Zeichen zum Gedächtnis der Helden errichten': Krieg in Straßennamen," in *Kriegsgedenken in Freiburg: Trauer-Kult-Verdrängung*, ed. Christian Geinitz et al. (Freiburg, 1995), 131–69. For an introduction to the growing literature on street names and the politics of honors, see Rainer Pöppinghege, *Wege des Erinnerns: Was Straßennamen über das deutsche Geschichtsbewusstsein aussagen* (Münster, 2007); Matthias Frese, ed., *Fragwürdige Ehrungen!? Straßennamen als Instrument von Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur* (Münster, 2012); Dietmar von Reeken and Malte Thießen, eds., *Ehrregime: Akteure, Praktiken und Medien lokaler Ehrungen in der Moderne* (Göttingen, 2016).

²⁹ StdA Stuttgart, 850/1, Nr. 14, Vorschlag zur Änderung von Straßennamen in Bad Cannstatt, 1945; see also Peter Poguntke, *Braune Feldzeichen: Stuttgarter Straßennamen in der NS-Zeit und der Umgang nach 1945* (Stuttgart, 2011), 94–96.



FIG. 3.—Street sign, Ypernstraße, Stuttgart. Authors' photograph, August 2014. Color version available as an online enhancement.

ticked “militaristic” and “National Socialist.”³⁰ There is nothing to suggest that the residents either objected to or welcomed these changes. Challenging the authorities was not yet part of the political DNA of ordinary Germans, and, in any case, people had more pressing concerns in the immediate aftermath of the war.

In Freiburg the overzealous officials were eventually reprimanded and the street signs reinstalled. Contradictions and inconsistencies abounded when it came to dealing with the legacy of Langemarck. Across Germany, there were significant local variations depending on the zone of occupation, the zeal (or ignorance) of bureaucrats, the prominence of the location, and, to some extent, the emerging new political culture. In the Soviet Zone of Occupation all visible reminders of Langemarck were removed from street signs and the official address books. By contrast, in the Western occupation zones (where the vast majority of Langemarck streets were concentrated), confusion was rife, compounded by the fact that the Western Allies themselves were not entirely clear about how to interpret Control Council Directive No. 30 concerning the liquidation of German

³⁰ StdA Stuttgart, 125/1, Nr. 45-3, Statistisches Amt, *Bennennung der Strasse/Platz/Weg [Isolde-Kurz-Straße]*, December 15, 1946.

military and Nazi memorials.³¹ Did it, or did it not, include commemorations of the First World War? Dortmund's administration adopted a stringent interpretation of the directive, implementing it without delay in July 1946, when both Flandernstraße and Langemarckstraße were renamed. However, in nearby Gelsenkirchen, once a communist stronghold, Langemarckstraße was inexplicably overlooked.³² In neighboring Essen (where a Langemarckstraße exists to this day), city hall employees were aware of the directive (though not in possession of a copy) but were dragging their heels, citing the sheer cost involved—an unconvincing argument given that many of the street signs had been literally bombed away during air raids.³³ Virtually every major city and most of the smaller towns, too, had boasted a street named after the battles of Langemarck and Flanders by 1939.³⁴ The percentage of streets renamed in the aftermath of the Second World War is difficult to establish with precision. Statistical evidence is available only for Westphalia, where 88 percent of streets (that is, 14 out of 16) dedicated to Flanders, Langemarck, or Kimmel were given new names between 1945 and 1949.³⁵

In Dortmund the city authorities simply reverted to the original street names, while elsewhere politically resonant new ones were chosen. These were instances of what Aleida Assmann calls “constructive forgetting” driven by an urge to leave the past behind and start afresh.³⁶ Thus Langemarckstraße was re-baptized Karl-Marx-Straße in Mannheim (1946) and Stresemannstraße in

³¹ The National Archives, Kew, FO 1006/145/1, fol. 24, HQ Military Government Schleswig-Holstein Region, Control Council Directive No. 30, June 19, 1946; see also Jutta Schemm, “Straßenumbenennungen in Kiel zwischen 1900 und 1970,” *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Kieler Stadtgeschichte* 79, no. 5 (1998): 177–240, 201; Marcus Weidner, “‘Mördernamen sind keine Straßennamen’: Revision und Beharrung in der Straßenbenennungspraxis der Nachkriegszeit—Westfalen und Lippe 1945–1949,” in *Fragwürdige Ehrungen!? Straßennamen als Instrument von Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur*, ed. Matthias Frese (Münster, 2012), 99–120.

³² “Neue Straßenbezeichnungen,” *Bekanntmachungen für Groß-Dortmund*, July 19, 1946.

³³ Erwin Dickhoff, “Die Entnazifizierung und Entmilitarisierung der Straßennamen,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Stadt und Stift Essen* 101 (1986–87): 77–104, 88–89; Herrmann Josef Bausch, “Straßennamen: Denkmäler der Geschichte? Politisch motivierte Straßenbenennungen in Dortmund (1918–1933–1945),” *Heimat Dortmund* 1 (2011): 3–18, 12.

³⁴ Bundesarchiv, Berlin, NS 38/3819 and NS 38/4146, Propagandaaktion für die Schaffung von Langemarckstraßen und -plätzen mittels Umbenennungen, 1937–38 and 1937–39.

³⁵ LWL-Institut für westfälische Regionalgeschichte, “Die Straßenbenennungspraxis in Westfalen und Lippe während des Nationalsozialismus: Datenbank der Straßenbenennungen 1933–1945,” December 11, 2015, <http://www.strassennamen-in-westfalen-lippe.lwl.org>. However, this excellent database does not list Langemarckstraße in Gelsenkirchen.

³⁶ Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, 61.

Wuppertal (1947); in Mönchengladbach Langemarckplatz was called (again) Platz der Republik (1947), two years before the founding of the Federal Republic; and Langemarckwall in Bonn-Gronau became Charles-de-Gaulle-Straße (1978).³⁷ The peculiar case of Bonn, the town that became the political capital of the Federal Republic in 1949, illustrates that Langemarck was not universally considered a dangerous legacy to be eradicated. While Langemarckstraße in the Bad Godesberg district of Bonn was renamed in January 1947, a street by the same name in the Oberkassel ward of the town was not, despite the fact that from 1924 to 1937 it had been called Friedensstraße (Peace Street) in memory of the adoption of the Dawes Plan at the London Conference of 1924. Even if this had been an administrative oversight, another opportunity was missed to correct it in 1953 when the name Langemarckstraße was even extended into an adjoining street.³⁸ More incredible still might seem the decision by the neighboring municipality of Sankt Augustin to create an entirely new Langemarckstraße in 1956—a decision indicative of the changing political climate of the mid-1950s.³⁹

II. NEUTRALIZING LANGEMAR(C)K: LINGUISTIC FRAGMENTS AND MONUMENTAL LEGACIES, 1950–59

The impetus to break with the past—including the First World War—was strongest in the weeks immediately before the collapse of the Third Reich and in the first two years afterward. These commemorative purges extended to “militaristic” traditions dating back to the First World War. By the mid-1950s, however, the erstwhile iconoclasm had waned, giving way to more subtle forms of re-fashioning the legacy of the Great War. This trend coincided with what Norbert Frei terms the advent of *Vergangenheitspolitik* (politics of the past), a political pincer movement that enabled democratic politicians to rescue some elements of the recent past, all the while affirming the anti-Nazi consensus.⁴⁰ To be sure, there was no systematic “politics of the past,” no concerted effort to revive memory traces from 1914–18. Yet *Vergangenheitspolitik* created a political climate in which it was easier to “access” (to cite Singer and Conway) aspects of the past considered poisonous only a few years earlier. Take the case of the Langemarck

³⁷ Manfred Wittmann-Zenses, “Vom ‘Platz der Republik’ zum ‘Langemarckplatz’—und zurück? Straßenbenennungen in M. Gladbach und Rheydt zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus,” *Rheydter Jahrbuch für Geschichte, Kunst und Heimatkunde* 24 (1998): 11–67, 47.

³⁸ StdA Bonn, Ok 12, fol. 18, Niederschrift über die nichtöffentliche Sitzung des Gemeinderates Oberkassel, October 30, 1953.

³⁹ StdA Sankt Augustin, ME 1416, fol. 50, Auszug aus der Niederschrift über die Sitzung der Gemeindevertretung der Gemeinde Menden, December 17, 1956.

⁴⁰ Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb (New York, 2002).

Barracks in Göttingen. In the second half of the 1950s, the newly formed Bundeswehr sought to take possession of the land and buildings, now known as “the former Langemarck Barracks.” The legal situation was complicated, and an extensive correspondence unfolded between various ministries over several years. Seemingly, the name of the barracks was never an issue, yet uncertainty prevailed over the exact spelling. In several typewritten memoranda, civil servants have crossed out by hand the letter “c.”⁴¹ What at first glance might seem a trivial question of orthography carried strong political connotations—connotations of which the civil servant may or may not have been fully aware. In deconstructionist theory a word is used *sous rature* (under erasure) if it appears suspicious, a strategy akin to placing it in inverted commas. “Langemarck”—as we will see in the next section—had become a dirty word in certain circles. Spelled with “ck,” “Langemarck” was a political myth, originating in First World War propaganda, further cultivated by the political right during the Weimar Republic, and finally elevated to official status in the Third Reich. “Langemarck” without the “c,” by contrast, was a mere place name. This small intervention illustrates geographer David Lowenthal’s observation that “neutralizing its relics tames the past.”⁴²

Gradually, Langemarck was being replaced by Langemark during the 1950s—a process that was never straightforward and often fraught with contradictions.⁴³ Inexplicably, in the first postwar edition of Erich Maria Remarque’s bestselling war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a “c” crept in; the “Langemark” of the original 1928 edition became “Langemarck” in 1950. In all likelihood, this was the typesetter’s fault, which the new publisher duly corrected in 1968 (when, for the first time, the title page also made clear that this was a *Roman* or “novel”).⁴⁴ In the intervening years “Langemarck” had officially been consigned to history. The Langemarck war cemetery—the principal site of memory on the former Western Front during the interwar period—was renamed “Langemark soldiers’ cemetery.” A minute variation in the name’s ending signified a massive change in meaning. Ostensibly, this alteration reflected merely the new, official spelling of the town’s name. More crucially, it signaled the cultural demobilization of the Langemarck myth. On the one hand, the myth was tainted by association

⁴¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter BArch-MA), BW 1/62035, Langemar[c]k-Kaserne Göttingen; hier: milit. Infrastrukturforderung, December 7, 1956; *ibid.*, Langemar[c]k-Kaserne Göttingen, February 19, 1957.

⁴² David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* (Cambridge, 2015), 140.

⁴³ See, for instance, “Auf dem Friedhof der Kriegsfreiwilligen von 1914,” *Kriegsgräberfürsorge* 28, no. 4 (1952): 43–44.

⁴⁴ Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Berlin, 1952), 136, and Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues: Roman* (Cologne, 1968), 180. Compare Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (London, 2013), 169.

with Nazism and genocidal war; on the other, the whole notion of heroic “self-sacrifice”—applied to an entire generation—had become anathema in the second postwar era.⁴⁵ “From monuments to traces”—this is how Rudy Koshar sums up the transformation of German commemorative culture.⁴⁶ Traces remained visible at Langemark. Consider the cemetery’s motto, “Germany must live, even if we must die,” which survived the postwar redesigning of the cemetery. A line borrowed from a 1914 poem by Heinrich Lersch, it had been used by Nazi propaganda as a rallying cry during the battle of Stalingrad. At the new Langemark cemetery, the inscription was subtly amended rather than erased, adding “Heinrich Lersch, 1914.” This was a cunningly pragmatic solution—a taming of the wartime rhetoric hinging on what the poet Robert Graves called “big words”—that alluded to the historical context and suggested an implicit distancing from the sentiment.⁴⁷

The specter of erasure and oblivion had hung over the Langemarck war cemetery (consecrated in 1932) from the outset. During the Weimar Republic, student organizations and the conservative press had claimed that the dead of Langemarck had been callously abandoned by the German authorities. “The ‘officially’ forgotten [‘von Amts wegen’ vergessenenen] students’ cemeteries” had become an indictment of Weimar’s political system.⁴⁸ A 1929 flyer distributed by the Langemarck-Spende (a subsidiary of the German Students’ Association tasked with collecting funds for the construction of a war cemetery in Flanders) juxtaposed British and German war cemeteries. Two photos show the splendor of the Menin Gate and orderly rows of white headstones; four others capture the dilapidated appearance of German war graves. The images are captioned “Thus the enemy pays honor” and “Thus do we forget.”⁴⁹ After the Second World War, however, the language of forgetting was put to a completely new use, now to justify a massive program of liquidation of war cemeteries in Flanders. Between 1955 and 1957 over 134,000 soldiers were exhumed from 270 different sites to be reinterred in four concentration cemeteries at Langemark, Hooglede-Ost, Menen-Wald, and Vladslö-Prætbosch. The mortal remains of all unidentified soldiers, some 25,000 men, were transferred to a mass grave at Langemark. All other cemeteries

⁴⁵ See Jörg Echternkamp, *Soldaten im Nachkrieg: Historische Deutungskonflikte und westdeutsche Demokratisierung 1945–1955* (Munich, 2014), esp. 196, 262.

⁴⁶ Koshar, *Monuments to Traces*.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of military cemeteries in the Ypres salient constructed during the interwar years, see Connelly and Goebel, *Ypres*. See also Bernd Ulrich, Christian Fuhrmeister, Manfred Hettling, and Wolfgang Kruse, *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin, 2019). On “big words,” see Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990).

⁴⁸ “Die ‘von Amts wegen’ vergessenenen Studentenfriedhöfe,” *Deutsche Zeitung*, April 24, 1929.

⁴⁹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (hereafter PA AA), R 47834, “Die Langemarck-Spende der Deutschen Studentenschaft,” n.d. [1929].

were dissolved.⁵⁰ This drastic, cost-saving measure—disturbing the *Totenruhe* and breaking the interwar promise of eternal commemoration—represented, in the bureaucrats' language of the 1950s, the "final solution" of the war-graves question.⁵¹ The "ghosts of war," which Monica Black suggests shamed and plagued the living after 1945, clearly did not bother the functionaries of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (German war graves association)—at least not the "ghosts" of the First World War.⁵² Finances were tight, and the construction of cemeteries for the dead soldiers of the Second World War had absolute priority. Lommel, the largest German war cemetery in Western Europe, opened in 1959. Thus a distinct topography of memory emerged in eastern Belgium simultaneously with the dissolution of war cemeteries in West Flanders.⁵³

The disinterment and reburial of the war dead in concentration cemeteries was a highly rational decision. The Volksbund, acting on behalf of the Auswärtiges Amt (Foreign Ministry) in Bonn, surmised that it would not cause much emotional pain, given the supposedly "waning interest" of families.⁵⁴ Who would make a fuss about the forgotten dead of a forgotten war? Dan Todman argues that the perceived need to respect the feelings of the bereaved continued to have a restraining influence on British commemorative practices well into the 1960s.⁵⁵ This was plainly not the case in West Germany. The Volksbund proceeded with the destruction of personal grave markers without consultation of the bereaved. The number of formal complaints received was, in fact, small—insignificant, from the Volksbund's point of view. It is difficult to say whether this lack of reaction was because the relatives did not care or because they did not feel empowered to protest or because they simply did not know until after the work had been completed and reported in the press.⁵⁶ One man who did take up his pen expressed his shock at learning that his brother had been exhumed

⁵⁰ Anette Freytag and Thomas Van Driessche, "Die Deutschen Soldatenfriedhöfe des Ersten Weltkriegs in Flandern," *Relicta: Archeologie, Monumenten- & Landschapsonderzoek in Vlaanderen* 7 (2011): 163–228, 189–91.

⁵¹ Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge Archiv, Kassel (hereafter VDK), A. 100–899, Endgültige Lösung des Problems der deutschen Soldatengräber 1914/18 in Belgien, December 8, 1956. On the political use of the term "final solution" after 1945, see also Norbert Frei, "Coping with the Burdens of the Past: German Politics and Society in the 1950s," in *The Postwar Challenge: Cultural, Social, and Political Change in Western Europe, 1945–58*, ed. Dominik Geppert (Oxford, 2003), 34.

⁵² Monica Black, "The Ghosts of War," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. 3, *Total War: Economy, Society, and Culture*, ed. Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze (Cambridge, 2015), 654–74.

⁵³ On the microgeographies of remembrance, see Connelly and Goebel, *Ypres*.

⁵⁴ PA AA, B 92/52, Generalsekretär Markgraf to Auswärtiges Amt, June 22, 1955.

⁵⁵ Todman, *Great War*, 58–59, 141–44.

⁵⁶ See "Deutsche Kriegsgräber in Belgien," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 23, 1957.

and reburied in a new location, without his knowledge or consent. Why had he not been informed? What had happened to the gravestone and the zinc coffin that were, after all, his property? And why was it necessary to concentrate the German war cemeteries, while the British continued to maintain all of theirs?⁵⁷ Engaging in an extensive correspondence with both the Volksbund and the Auswärtiges Amt, this man asserted familial sovereignty over the process of commemoration.⁵⁸

The tone of those who oversaw the dissolution of the cemeteries was often chillingly rational. Yet filed away in the archives are a number of touching letters full of anguish. Consider the case of Hans Kollwitz. He was “deeply distressed” by the organization’s plans to dissolve the cemetery at Esen-Roggeveld near Dixmude, he told the Volksbund.⁵⁹ Kollwitz was writing as a son, of the sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, and a brother, of Peter Kollwitz. Peter, a war volunteer, had been killed aged eighteen in autumn 1914 and was buried at Esen-Roggeveld. For the cemetery in Esen-Roggeveld, Käthe Kollwitz had created her most personal and profound work of art, a sculpture of two mourning parents on their knees, placed overlooking her son’s grave in July 1932. The process of designing the monument to Peter had been an emotionally painful one, often revised and put on hold.⁶⁰ The Volksbund gave reassurances to Hans Kollwitz that the *Grieving Parents* and the dead son would be reunited in their new location at Vladslo, about five kilometers to the north of Esen-Roggeveld.⁶¹ In truth, though, the new ensemble departs in a subtle but significant way from the original one. The gap between the sculptures of the father and the mother is much reduced, and the two figures are positioned at the rear rather than the entrance of the cemetery. All this mattered a great deal. War cemeteries are more than simply memorials to the dead, one architectural historian stresses; “they are the architectural embodiment of a personal relationship between soldier and

⁵⁷ PA AA, B 92/52, Otto Kössler to Auswärtiges Amt, August 8, 1955.

⁵⁸ On familial sovereignty versus state control, see Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel, “The Imperial War Graves Commission, the War Dead, and the Burial of a Royal Body, 1914–32,” *Historical Research* 93 (2020): 734–53.

⁵⁹ PA AA, B 92/52, Hans Kollwitz to Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, May 7, 1955.

⁶⁰ Regina Schulte, “Käthe Kollwitz’s Sacrifice,” *History Workshop Journal* 41 (1996): 193–221; Claudia Siebrecht, *The Aesthetics of Loss: German Women’s Art of the First World War* (Oxford, 2013), 3–4; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, “Making Loss Legible: Käthe Kollwitz and Jane Catulle-Mendès,” in *The Intellectual Response to the First World War: How the Conflict Impacted on Ideas, Methods, and Fields of Enquiry*, ed. Sarah Posman, Cedric Van Dijck, and Marysa Demoor (Brighton, 2017), 145–59; Winter, *War Beyond Words*, 145–50.

⁶¹ PA AA, B 92/52, Generalsekretär Markgraf to Hans Kollwitz, May 10, 1955.

architect.”⁶² With the relocation of the war graves, this relationship was irreversibly severed.

Reluctantly, Hans Kollwitz accepted the new arrangements. What sugared the pill for him was the promise that replicas of the two figures were to be placed prominently in a (Second World War) ruin in Cologne. The proposal amounted to a major endorsement for a female, socialist artist, whose legacy was called into question by the East German communists. Importantly, the Cologne scheme was supported by the president of the Federal Republic, a largely ceremonial office that its first incumbent, Theodor Heuss, turned into an important repository of national memory. Ten years after the end of the Second World War, West Germany still had no official “national” war memorial; the *Grieving Parents* were meant to fill this commemorative void.⁶³ In the early years of the Federal Republic, as Michael Geyer remarks, “there was no public sphere of death as there had been in the Weimar Republic.”⁶⁴ The replica sculptures were intended to reestablish such a public sphere by breathing new life into symbols of the First World War. Yet the Cologne figures—the father was carved by Joseph Beuys, then still an art student under Ewald Mataré—were not exact copies but enlarged versions. They were also made of a different material. What is more, the triad that had linked mother, father, and son symbolically and spatially—central to the cemetery memorial—was completely lost. The emotional power of the original ensemble had been deeply rooted in its geographic specificity. Yet, placed in the ruins of St. Alban’s, a church burnt out during the bombing of Cologne, the sculptures derive a new meaning from their new context. While images of Flanders lingered on, they were overwritten by memories of the Second World War and a new narrative of national suffering and universal sadness. At the unveiling of the memorial in May 1959, Heuss referred to the “murderous battles” of autumn 1914, but also to the sad loss of the artist’s model for the *Grieving Parents* in the “firestorm of Berlin.”⁶⁵ He praised the figures as the embodiment of sorrow and grief—grief not only for the dead (that is, those of the last war) but also for the divided nation. The transmutation of Käthe Kollwitz’s design from a

⁶² Tim Godden, “Designing Memory: The Junior Architects of the Imperial War Graves Commission and the Creation of a Spatial Memorial in the British War Cemeteries on the Western Front” (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2020), 92.

⁶³ On the context, see Meinhold Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland*, vol. 6, *Bundesrepublik Drittes Reich* (Heidelberg, 1987), 81–107. On Kollwitz’s reputation in the GDR, see Gerd Dietrich, *Kulturgeschichte der DDR*, vol. 1, *Kultur der Übergangsgesellschaft 1945–1957* (Göttingen, 2018), 415.

⁶⁴ Michael Geyer, “The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History,” *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 5–40, 19.

⁶⁵ “Ansprache des Bundespräsidenten, Professor Theodor Heuss, 21.5.1959,” in *Käthe Kollwitz: Die Trauernden Eltern. Ein Mahnmal für den Frieden*, ed. Hannelore Fischer (Cologne, 1999), 157–58.

personal tribute to a collective symbol was acknowledged by the city's mayor. The new memorial, he stressed in his speech, remembered "all dead. . . . The dead of Cologne, the dead of the nations of the world."⁶⁶

Here was a monument relocated from war-torn Flanders to bombed-out Cologne, a monument from the Great War refashioned and reinterpreted in an effort to represent the Second World War. At first sight, the *Grieving Parents* sculpture seems to run counter to Jay Winter's argument that the horrors of the Second World War "made it impossible for many survivors to return to the language of mourning which grew out of the 1914–18 war when they tried to express their sense of loss after 1945."⁶⁷ On closer inspection, though, one can discern that the postwar *Grieving Parents* did not hark back to the commemorative discourses of the interwar period. There was no attempt to revive older languages of classical, nationalist, or religious reference, no effort to search for "meaning" beyond death in the early years of the Federal Republic. The romanticism, patriotism, and medievalism that had once underpinned war commemorations had evaporated.⁶⁸

III. DEBUNKING THE MYTH: INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSES, 1950s–60s

President Heuss alluded to but did not expressly mention Langemarck in his speech at the unveiling of the Cologne memorial. This most learned of German politicians must have been aware that, in intellectual circles, "Langemarck" had deteriorated into a dirty word. "From Langemarck to Stalingrad" became a slogan of critical discourse post-1945.⁶⁹ It was the theme of a much-reprinted 1957 issue of the cultural magazine *Mosaik*. In the introduction, the editor drew a line

⁶⁶ "Ansprache des Kölner Oberbürgermeisters Theo Burauen, Köln anlässlich der Einweihung der Gedächtnisstätte in St. Alban, 21. Mai 1959," in Fischer, ed., *Käthe Kollwitz*, 156–57.

⁶⁷ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), 9.

⁶⁸ Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, "Introduction: Violence, Normality, and the Construction of Postwar Europe," in *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge), 3; Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, 291–301.

⁶⁹ This point seems to have escaped scholars, with only the title of Ernst Keller, *Nationalismus und Literatur: Langemarck, Weimar, Stalingrad* (Bern, 1970), alluding to it. See Michael Kumpfmüller, *Die Schlacht von Stalingrad: Metamorphosen eines deutschen Mythos* (Munich, 1995); Christina Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945* (Cambridge, 2011); Jörg Echternkamp, "Die Schlacht als Metapher: Zum Stellenwert von 'Stalingrad' in Deutschland 1943–2013," in *Erinnerung an Diktatur und Krieg: Brennpunkte des kulturellen Gedächtnisses zwischen Russland und Deutschland seit 1945*, ed. Andreas Wirsching, Jürgen Zarusky, Alexander Tschubarjan, and Viktor Ischtschenko (Berlin, 2015), 91–105.

of continuity between these two iconic events, extending it even to include Dresden and Auschwitz.⁷⁰ The first use of the formula “From Langemarck to Stalingrad,” however, can be traced back to agitprop material issued by the Communist Party around 1946. For the East German communists, the names of the two battles symbolized the evils of Prussianism and nationalism—a notion later echoed in Hermann Kant’s novel *Die Aula* (1965).⁷¹ “From Langemarck to Stalingrad” also implied a shift in the imagined geography of war: the Eastern Front was the new Western Front. In the Federal Republic it was above all the playwright (and Eastern Front veteran) Wolfgang Borchert who popularized the notion of Germany’s downfall from Langemarck to Stalingrad. He gave the idea of calamitous continuity a distinct generational slant by pointing the finger at the teachers. In “Das ist unser Manifest” (That is our manifesto, 1947), Borchert writes, “Between Langemarck and Stalingrad was just one maths lesson.”⁷² His feeling of a betrayal of trust by the older generation is even more pronounced in what became the signature play of the postwar period, *The Man Outside* (*Draußen vor der Tür*, 1947), about a soldier coming home from the Eastern Front:

They have betrayed us. Betrayed us terribly. When we were quite small they had a war. And as we got bigger they told us stories of the war. Enthusiastically. They were always enthusiastic. And as we got bigger still they thought out a war for us too. And they packed us off to it. They were enthusiastic. They were always enthusiastic. And nobody told us where we were going. Nobody told us you’re going to hell. Oh no, no one. They invented marching songs and [Langemarck] celebrations [*Langemarckfeiern*]. And courtmartial [*sic*] and campaigns. And heroes’ songs and initiation ceremonies. They were so enthusiastic. And at last came the war. They packed us off to it. And they said to us—Make a job of it, boys!⁷³

⁷⁰ Werner Klose, ed., “Von Langemarck nach Stalingrad: Deutsche Stimmen zu den Weltkriegen,” *Mosaik* 15 (1957; 3rd repr., 1963): 3–7, 3; see also Klose, “Soldatentod: Interpretation dreier Texte von Flex, Jünger und Polgar,” *Wirkendes Wort* 8 (1957–58): 33–40.

⁷¹ Bundesarchiv—Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, Berlin, BY 1/3941, fols. 12–26, Von Langemarck bis Stalingrad: Schulungsmaterial über Preussentum und Krieg, n.d. [ca. 1946]; Hermann Kant, *Die Aula: Roman*, 18th ed. (Berlin, 1976), 58.

⁷² Wolfgang Borchert, “Das ist unser Manifest,” in *Das Gesamtwerk* (Reinbek, 1998), 313.

⁷³ Wolfgang Borchert, *The Man Outside: The Prose Works of Wolfgang Borchert*, trans. David Porter (London, 1966), 125, and Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür und ausgewählte Erzählungen* (Reinbek, 1956), 53; see also Ulrike Weckel, “Spielarten der Vergangenheitsbewältigung—Wolfgang Borcherts Heimkehrer und sein langer Weg durch die westdeutschen Medien,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 31 (2003): 125–61. On the prevalent sense of “betrayal,” see Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third*

Langemarck as a symbol of trumped up “war enthusiasm,” and of betrayal and disillusionment, featured also in Carl Zuckmayer’s novella, “Engele von Loewen” (Little angel from Louvain, 1952), one of the few attempts at a literary representation of the First World War produced after 1945. A love story between a poor Belgian war orphan and a dashing young German officer set against the backdrop of the campaigns in Flanders, it lent itself to cinematic adaptation. Helmut Käutner’s film version, under the title *Ein Mädchen aus Flandern* (A girl from Flanders, 1955), starring Maximilian Schell and Nicole Berger with Gert Fröbe in a supporting role, found moderate success with critics and audiences. In terms of narrative structure and plot development, both the novella and the movie were extremely conventional Cinderella stories.⁷⁴ What was novel, though, was a shift in representation away from the military front to the zone of occupation. More in the film than in the original story, the soldiers’ experience at Langemarck is a recurring theme poignantly juxtaposed with the gruesome atrocities, everyday injustices, and gross frivolities of the military occupation.⁷⁵ Paradoxically, in debunking Langemarck—showing that it had been an unmitigated military disaster—Zuckmayer and Käutner unwittingly ended up reaffirming a core element of the myth, that is, the idea of a battle in which a whole generation received its baptism of fire.⁷⁶

A veteran of the Great War, Zuckmayer knew about Langemarck only through hearsay; he himself had served during the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. “I have also almost never spoken about the war, and especially not with people who were not in it. With the others, a phrase sufficed: ‘Somme, 1916.’ ‘Flanders, July 17.’ After that we preferred to fall silent,” he noted in his 1966 memoirs. Apparently, Zuckmayer did not consider his novella a proper war story. “I have not written a war book and have told no war stories. It seems to me impossible to communicate the experience, futile to attempt to reproduce the reality either in a transfigured, a heroic, or a critical way, or in the form of objective reportage.”⁷⁷ What Zuckmayer did not seem to realize is that the very idea that the experience of war was “beyond words”—defying expression or description in language—was in fact the code in

Reich (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 272. On “war enthusiasm,” see Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge, 2000).

⁷⁴ Ruth Herrmann, “Zwischen den Fronten . . . [sic]: Helmut Käutners Film ‘Ein Mädchen aus Flandern,’” *Die Zeit*, February 23, 1952.

⁷⁵ Carl Zuckmayer, “Engele von Loewen” [1952], in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, *Erzählungen* (Frankfurt, 1960), 291–320; *Ein Mädchen aus Flandern*, dir. Helmut Käutner (D: Capital-Film, 1955).

⁷⁶ On the front generation as a social construct, see also Richard Bessel, “The ‘Front Generation’ and the Politics of Weimar Germany,” in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany, 1770–1968*, ed. Mark Roseman (Cambridge, 1995), 121–36.

⁷⁷ Carl Zuckmayer, *A Part of Myself*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London, 1970 [German ed., 1966]), 157.

which many soldiers expressed themselves; and this is particularly true of accounts of the fighting in Flanders in 1917.

Somebody who was never at a loss for words in the face of mass-industrialized warfare was the writer and Flanders veteran Ernst Jünger. His so-called war diary, *In Stahlgewittern*, had popularized the notion of the war as a “storm of steel,” a metaphor that was suggestive of both the forces of nature and industrial modernity. Jünger had reworked his original “diary” several times during the interwar years, publishing five distinct versions between 1920 and 1935. In the course of the revisions, the “steeling” of the battle-hardened front-line fighter was accentuated, while references to “nerves” were rewritten or erased. In the aftermath of the Second World War Jünger subjected the text to another round of revisions; the sixth and penultimate version of *In Stahlgewittern* came out in 1961. If “revision and elision complement oblivion,” as Lowenthal stresses, then the postwar version of *In Stahlgewittern* is the perfect example.⁷⁸ The words that had given the 1924 and 1934 editions their characteristic “steely” flavor gave way to a more humane, debrutalized description of battle.⁷⁹ Even so, the central metaphor still had purchase after 1945. Ernst Jünger’s younger brother, Friedrich Georg, published his own memoirs, *Grüne Zweige* (Green branches, 1951), in which he depicted the battlefield near Passchendaele as “a gigantic steelworks and rolling mill.”⁸⁰ True, the Jüngers’ star was on the wane in the postwar period, yet some veterans of the Great War continued to embrace the Jüngerian idiom as their own. For instance, one former soldier writing in a regimental magazine recalled “the storms of steel of the battles of Flanders.”⁸¹

IV. FORGETTING LANGEMARCK, REVISITING IEPER: GENERATIONAL NARRATIVES, 1960S–70S

Ernst Jünger’s Flanders is a landscape thick with memory. Digging into the earth for shelter during the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917, he recalls finding

⁷⁸ Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 320.

⁷⁹ Helmuth Kiesel, “Einleitung: Ernst Jüngers Kriegsbuch *In Stahlgewittern*. Kriegserfahrung und Bericht, Entstehung und Fassungen,” in Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel, vol. 2, *Variantenverzeichnis und Materialien* (Stuttgart, 2013), 82, 114. On Jünger after 1945, see also Morat, *Von der Tat zur Gelassenheit*, 455–63; Elliot Y. Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Berkeley, 1999).

⁸⁰ Friedrich Georg Jünger, *Grüne Zweige: Ein Erinnerungsbuch* (Munich, 1951), 174.

⁸¹ VDK, A. 100–899, Rudolf Böhmler, “Durch Flandern reitet der Tod: Gedanken über eine Reise mit dem Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge,” *Alle Kameraden* [?], November 1964. To our knowledge, the only postwar novel about Langemarck is Heinz-Joachim Simon, *Das Lied von Langemarck: Eine deutsche Geschichte. Roman* (Munich, 2001).

guns, cartridges, and belts dating from the first battle of 1914, “proof that this wasn’t the first time this ground had drunk blood.” Interestingly, Jünger revised this passage in the 1961 edition, adding the sentence, “Our predecessors here had been the volunteers of Langemarck.”⁸² Jünger felt the need to expand, perhaps to be more explicit for the sake of a new generation of readers for whom the Great War was merely history. Apparently, however, it was not only younger readers who drew a blank; the new crop of writers, too, was unfamiliar with the events of 1914. “Langemarck is no longer a familiar term for the poet of today; the name has escaped him,” concluded a 1966 report in the files of the Volksbund about the place of Langemarck in the German collective memory.⁸³

The report included a poll conducted among 118 Bundeswehr conscripts born between 1945 and 1946. Only eight respondents had even heard of the once-so-famous battle, while a further six could at least name the Langemarckplatz in their garrison. For the overwhelming majority of young men, the name “Langemarck” triggered no recollection. The memory of the First World War was “fading,” the report stated, and soon the battle of Stalingrad would suffer the same fate, that is, “to be forgotten.”⁸⁴ Arguably, the very existence of the report testifies to the opposite: there were still many people in 1966 for whom Langemarck mattered. It is impossible to say how sound the methodology or how representative the sample was. If not representative, the survey was certainly indicative—indicative of a growing cultural anxiety about collective amnesia and a perceived gap in generational memory.⁸⁵ Lamenting the “forgotten war” is best understood as a communicative trope rather than an accurate description. It was a cultural representation in its own right, and one to be conjured with. “Forgetting” had been part of the lexicon of the political right during the interwar period. After the Second World War the Volksbund had used the waning of memory to justify the dissolution of war cemeteries—an act of erasure—on a grand scale; ten years later, though, it invoked the specter of oblivion to strengthen its own mandate as a guardian of memory.

⁸² Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel, vol. 1, *Die gedruckten Fassungen unter Berücksichtigung der Korrekturbücher* (Stuttgart, 2013), 387, and Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (London, 2003), 171.

⁸³ VDK, A. 100–899, Friedrich Gerischer, Langemarck in zeitgenössischer und heutiger Sicht, n.d. [1966], 24. The exact provenance of the report is unclear, but in all likelihood it was commissioned by the Volksbund.

⁸⁴ VDK, A. 100–899, Friedrich Gerischer, Langemarck in zeitgenössischer und heutiger Sicht, n.d. [1966], 21.

⁸⁵ On the concept of generational memory, see Ulrike Jureit, “Generationen-Gedächtnis: Überlegungen zu einem Konzept kommunikativer Vergemeinschaftung,” in *Die “Generation der Kriegskinder”*: Historische Hintergründe und Deutungen, ed. Lu Seegers and Jürgen Reulecke (Gießen, 2009), 125–37.

The report identified war veterans as important custodians of the memory of the Great War—in particular, the *Grünes Korps*, a veterans' association originally formed during the Weimar Republic with the explicit aim of fostering the cult of Langemarck. While the major national veterans' organizations that had dominated commemorative affairs during the interwar years had disappeared for good, the *Grünes Korps* resumed its activities, offering organized trips to the former battlefields of the First World War from the late 1950s.⁸⁶ The veterans' journey to Flanders in June 1964, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, marked a special occasion. Naturally, the group visited the redesigned German war cemeteries at Langemark, Menen, and Vladslo, but they also paid their respects at Tyne Cot (the largest cemetery maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) and laid wreaths at the Menin Gate as well as at French and Belgian war memorials. Moreover, at both Langemark and Ieper, they attended official receptions hosted by the mayors. The souvenir brochure issued by the *Grünes Korps* interpreted the trip as a "symbol of the unity of Europe" and an affirmation of "the pursuit of peace." There was even a cautious debunking of the Langemarck myth, arguing that soldiers had been "forced into heroism" and that their deaths had been "futile." "Out of the national feeling at the time, a glorious manhood demanded an honorable death. Today's man feels differently."⁸⁷

German veterans of the Great War represented themselves as reconstructed pacifists and committed Europeans. However, remnants of the nationalist war myth survived in some pockets of the veterans' milieu. The comrades of the Langemarck-Kameradschaft of Reserve Infantry Regiment 234 from Göttingen attended the same function in the town hall of Ieper in 1964. They subsequently composed a travelogue in which they, too, emphasized their desire for peace and international understanding. Yet these veterans were less prepared to ditch the myth, pronouncing the battle of Langemarck a tactical defeat turned into a strategic victory. To be sure, they dispensed with unrealistic embellishments such as soldiers marching into death singing "Deutschland über alles."⁸⁸ While their battlefield tours were duly reported in the local press, veterans never regained

⁸⁶ The literature on battlefield tourism post-1945 is slim and focuses on cemeteries of the Second World War. See Wiebke Kolbe, "Trauer und Tourismus: Reisen des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge 1950–2010," *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 14 (2017): 68–92; Arnd Bauerkämper, "Reisen in die Vergangenheit: Westdeutsche Soldaten, Kriegsgräberfürsorge und 'Schlachtfeldtourismus' von 1945 bis 1990 in transnationaler Perspektive," *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 76 (2017): 104–31.

⁸⁷ *Flandern nach 50 Jahren: Erinnerungsfahrt. "Grünes Korps" Langemarck 1914/1964* (Düsseldorf, 1964), 3–5. On veterans generally, see Ángel Alcalde, "War Veterans, International Politics, and the Early Cold War," *Cold War History* 18 (2018): 409–27.

⁸⁸ BArch-MA, Langemarck-Kameradschaft des Res.-Inf.-Reg. 234 Göttingen, "Langemarck 1914–1964," n.d. [1964], 9.

their former standing in society.⁸⁹ Unlike British ex-servicemen, whose testimony finally found a public forum (just at the moment when they began to fade away in large numbers), their German counterparts remained fringe figures with little influence on the commemorative mainstream.⁹⁰

At Ieper, however, German veterans were invited into the inner circle. In the city's *Guldenboek* one finds, practically next to the signatures of royalty, generals, politicians, and diplomats, the names of humble veterans (and their wives).⁹¹ The timing is significant. In the 1960s there emerged new audiences for alternative narratives that challenged the formerly dominant "patriotic memory" of war and occupation in Belgium.⁹² The shift toward greater openness about the legacy of the Second World War coincided with the historical milestone that was the fiftieth anniversary of the Great War. At Ieper, the city authorities sought to retrieve a "usable past" from the anniversary celebrations.⁹³ Anxious to shed the city's reputation as a cultural outpost of the British Empire—"the Holy Ground of British Arms"—the mayor and tourist office used the fiftieth anniversary to launch a new, international image for their city—and the presence of former enemies was vital to achieving this aim.⁹⁴ What they envisaged was the Europeanization of the legacy of the Great War—a vision of a European people united in the commemoration of a common catastrophe. For all its idealism, this approach had political potential, because here the geography of memory did for once (in contrast to the Second World War) overlap with the fault lines of the postwar international order.⁹⁵ Once a byword for death and

⁸⁹ For newspaper coverage, see, for instance, "Fünf Tage Kriegsgräberfahrt durch Belgien und Frankreich 1965," *Benrather Tageblatt*, July 13, 1965.

⁹⁰ See Todman, *Great War*, chap. 6, on the British case. On German veterans (of the Second World War), see Echternkamp, *Soldaten im Nachkrieg*, chap. 3. On the interwar period, see Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁹¹ In Flanders Fields Museum, Documentatiecentrum, Ieper (hereafter IFFM), *Guldenboek Stad Ieper, 1939–67*.

⁹² Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and Nazi Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2000); Winter, *War Beyond Words*, 29, 154.

⁹³ See, for instance, "11 november-viering werd waardig sluitstuk van '50 jaar later,'" *Het Ypersche Nieuws*, November 14, 1964. The term "usable past" is borrowed from Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, 2001).

⁹⁴ Stadsarchief Ieper, TOE/55 (336), Herdenkingsjaar 1914–64, n.d. [1964]; *ibid.*, Frans-Belgische herdenkingsdag, October 25, 1964.

⁹⁵ On the geography of memory and the Cold War, see Jeffrey Herf, "The Emergence and Legacies of Divided Memory: Germany and the Holocaust since 1945," in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge, 2002), esp. 191, 204.

destruction, Ieper (as the city was now spelled) was to become a symbol of world peace and, more specifically, European integration. However, the question of Langemarck's place in this embryonic European memory is a moot point. It is not clear whether the local leaders even grasped just how loaded a term "Langemarck" had become in Germany. Their eyes were firmly fixed on Britain, that is, the example of Coventry, the British city that had successfully reinvented itself as an international hub of commemoration-cum-peacebuilding in the aftermath of the German air raid of November 1940.⁹⁶ Significantly, in November 1967, Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" was performed in the finally restored St. Martin's Cathedral in Ieper.⁹⁷ Originally composed for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral in 1962, the requiem was now employed to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Passchendaele. The 1967 performance of the "War Requiem" (which juxtaposes the liturgical text of the Latin requiem mass with the war poetry of Wilfred Owen) was deemed so poignant that it was decided to repeat it the following year, this time in Dortmund's Westfallenhalle under the auspices of the heads of state of Belgium and West Germany. Reviewing the performance, German journalists were impressed by Owen's purportedly "timeless" words, the emotional depth of Britten's music, and the overall message of reconciliation of former enemies.⁹⁸ Implicit was the notion that the First World War was understandable only through the experience of the Second, and, moreover, that political lessons had to be learned from the two conflicts.⁹⁹

According to Tony Judt, the postwar was built on "forgetting as a way of life," for "Silence over Europe's recent past was the necessary condition for the construction of a European future."¹⁰⁰ Yet break the silence they did at Ieper, albeit in a roundabout way by commemorating together the *First* World War. While official receptions for veterans between 1964 and 1968 had involved a degree of mnemonic "amnesty," that is, a polite silence over historical details in the interest of international reconciliation, in the 1970s there was a greater effort to

⁹⁶ Stefan Goebel, "Commemorative Cosmopolis: Transnational Networks of Remembrance in Post-War Coventry," in *Cities into Battlefields: Metropolitan Scenarios, Experiences and Commemorations of Total War*, ed. Stefan Goebel and Derek Keene (Farnham, 2011), 163–83.

⁹⁷ IFFM, MI 2123, "War Requiem: St.-Maartenskathedraal Ieper," November 4, 1967; see also Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁹⁸ "Benjamin Britten's Totenmesse als Konzert guter Freunde," *Westfälische Nachrichten*, November 13, 1968; "Musikalisches Monument für den Frieden," *Westfälische Rundschau*, November 12, 1968.

⁹⁹ Archivamt für Westfalen, Münster, Best. 115/562, "Benjamin Britten: War Requiem op. 66," November 10, 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London, 2005), 10, 829.

engage with the past.¹⁰¹ Alfred Caenepeel, local historian, founder of the Herinneringsmuseum in Ieper (established 1972), and vice-chairman of the Last Post committee (in charge of the daily ceremony at the Menin Gate), was in the forefront of this development. In 1972 he brokered a spectacular reunion of former enemies. On Christmas Eve 1914 Paulus Renovanz and Auguste Gouiller had fired shots at each other near Gheluvelt, yet in August 1972 they came face-to-face “as friends.” Over the course of three days, the German and the Frenchman revisited the battlefields, laid wreaths, joined the Last Post ceremony, and attended a reception in their honor in the town hall, their every step accompanied by radio and television journalists.¹⁰² Renovanz had previously visited Ieper in 1964 and 1967, on the latter occasion bringing as a gift a copy of the 1927 history of Infantry Regiment 171, which he had co-authored. Fortunately, no one seemed to have read it in any detail. On the whole, the regimental history expressed a sentiment common among veterans before and after 1945: “Whoever did not fight at Ypres [in 1914 and 1915], has no clue as to what it was like back then.”¹⁰³ Controversially, though, it applauded the use of chlorine gas during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 as a demonstration of German “attacking spirit.”¹⁰⁴ So it was probably a good thing that the volume was gathering dust in the library by 1972.

The meeting during which foes became friends was a special occasion that was entered in the annals of the city. Outside the political limelight, there were clandestine reunions of less savory types of veterans. During the Second World War, Flemish volunteers had been assigned to the SS-Sturmbrigade “Langemarck,” which was later expanded into the SS-Grenadier-Division “Langemarck.” For nearly twenty years they laid low, but between the 1960s and 1980s they reemerged as a group coming into sporadic contact with the right-wing *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit* (HIAG), the lobbying group for former Waffen-SS personnel in the Federal Republic. Both the Flemish volunteers and their German comrades wanted to rehabilitate the Waffen-SS as a “normal” military unit distinct from other

¹⁰¹ On “amnesty,” see Jay Winter, “Thinking about Silence,” in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter (Cambridge, 2010), 18.

¹⁰² BArch-MA, MSg 2/2860, Paulus Renovanz to Herr Neikes, February 21, 1973; see also Dominiek Dendooven, *Menin Gate and Last Post: Ypres as Holy Ground*, 2nd ed. (Koksijde, 2003), 146. On international contacts between veterans during the interwar period, see Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman, eds., *The Great War and Veterans’ Internationalism* (Basingstoke, 2013).

¹⁰³ Alexander Kaiser, Major Bucholz, and [Paulus] Renovanz, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 171 im Weltkrieg: Auf Grund der amtlichen Kriegstagebücher bearbeitet im Auftrage des Reichsarchivs*, *Erinnerungsblätter deutscher Regimenter*, vol. 199 (Oldenburg, 1927), 95.

¹⁰⁴ Kaiser, Bucholz, and Renovanz, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 171 im Weltkrieg*, 102.

SS formations, suggesting that it had been essentially a proto–Cold War bulwark against Bolshevism. Proud of their military record, one of their number even self-published a chronicle in 1977 about battles in which the Flemings had participated—in the name of “Langemarck” (with “ck”)—at the Eastern Front.¹⁰⁵ Of course, strictly speaking, these veterans had nothing to do with the First World War, and yet their case shows how the legacy of that war had become inextricably intertwined with the reverberations of the Second World War. While in Britain the 1960s saw the shaping of a distinct cultural memory of the Great War, in Germany it proved impossible to divorce the two conflicts, as controversies of the 1980s would show.

V. CONFRONTING THE NAZI PAST, REFRAMING THE GREAT WAR: LOCAL INITIATIVES, 1980s–2000s

Until the early 1970s, veterans of the Great War were vigorous enough to participate in commemorative activities. Their declining health and ultimately death meant that the living (or “communicative”) memory of the Great War became extinct within a decade. The 1980s, therefore, marked a crucial junction in the reshaping of the “cultural memory” of the Great War.¹⁰⁶ During this decade, Britons, as Todman points out, began to rediscover familial links to the war, a process that was often triggered by the discovery of photographs, medals, and trench art in people’s attics. “For many families, it was indeed where ‘history’ had begun.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Santanu Das observes that for Indians material culture could offer a gateway to the First World War experience of their grandfathers: “War memories in India are like the artefacts in the wardrobe—powerful but subterranean.”¹⁰⁸ Yet in Germany the dislocations caused by the Second World War had obliterated many of the memory aids available to Britons and former colonial subjects. There is nothing to suggest that the First World War was popularly constructed in Germany as an event in family history; that Germans were able

¹⁰⁵ BArch-MA, N 756/193b, (6.) SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade “Langemarck”: Gliederung und Einsätze Mai 1943 bis Sept. 1944, 1963–84; *ibid.*, MSg 2/5303, “Flamen an der Ostfront”: Dokumentation über die Freiwilligen-Legion Flandern im Zweiten Weltkrieg, 1976–88. On SS volunteers and war memory, see Bruno De Wever, *Oostfronters: Vlamingen in het Vlaams Legioen en de Waffen SS* (Tielt, 1984); Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 205–11; David Clay Large, “Reckoning without the Past: The HIAG of the Waffen-SS and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Bonn Republic, 1950–1961,” *Journal of Modern History* 59 (1987): 79–113; Jan Erik Schulte and Michael Wildt, eds., *Die SS nach 1945: Entschuldungsnarrative, populäre Mythen, europäische Erinnerungsdiskurse* (Göttingen, 2018).

¹⁰⁶ On communicative and cultural memory, see Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 34–41.

¹⁰⁷ Todman, *Great War*, 214.

¹⁰⁸ Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs* (Cambridge, 2018), 21.

to reformulate emotional connections to the soldiers of 1914–18; that the former battlefields were perceived as sacred ground. Nevertheless, the demise of the generation of the witnesses heralded not an era of forgetting, but instead the most intense period of engagement with the First World War in post-1945 Germany. In particular, it was the toxic legacy of Langemarck that sparked much controversy during the 1980s. The “memory boom” is often seen as a phenomenon that emerged in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, revealing an increasing preoccupation with the Second World War and the Holocaust in a “global age.”¹⁰⁹ Yet, the 1980s witnessed its own memory boom that showed a greater concern with the First World War and unfolded primarily in a local (rather than an international) context. For politically and historically aware Germans, the First World War became a source of controversy, not of identity.

The new debates about Langemarck often centered on local places that for one reason or another had survived the commemorative purges of the late 1940s. Thus the controversies that erupted in the 1980s were in some ways delayed reactions to the unfinished business of denazification and demilitarization, and they often blended into the post-Cold War “memory boom.” Bremen offers a particularly illuminating example of a long-drawn-out dispute accompanied by intermittent periods of forgetting or silence. The name “Langemarckstraße” dated from 1937 and had been indirectly confirmed in 1950 when the lanes of the street were widened.¹¹⁰ An argument about the street name broke out in 1983, subsided for several years, was reignited in 1988, and seemed settled in 1992, only to reemerge in 2004 and rumble on until its eventual resolution in 2012. Unlike other Langemarck streets in Germany, Bremen’s is not a quiet residential road but one of the main arteries into the city. Moreover, it is where the polytechnic is based—in fact, it had been the intention of the Nazis to impress the name of the great battle on student generations to come. In 1983 it was members of the AStA (the students’ union executive committee) who took matters into their own hands, removing the street signs and rebaptizing the street “Willy-Brandt-Straße.” Attention soon shifted from the street name to the First World War memorial located at the entrance to the polytechnic, which bore the inscription “To Our Heroes.” In the following year architectural students converted the war memorial into a temporary “peace columbarium.” Then in 1988, in a dramatic turn of events, unknown persons toppled the monument, making the provocative dedication invisible. The polytechnic’s initial response was to call in the police to investigate, but soon they realized that tolerating the memorial in its

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia, PA, 2006); Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2006).

¹¹⁰ Staatsarchiv Bremen, 3–S.8.b, Auszug aus den Beschlüssen der Bremischen Bürgerschaft vom 15.6.50, June 15, 1950.



FIG. 4.—War memorial, Hochschule Bremen, Langemarckstraße, Bremen. Authors' photograph, August 2013. Color version available as an online enhancement.

vandalized state—exorcizing a corrupt memory—represented the ideal solution. The monument was left lying next to its plinth, thus blotting out the controversial inscription. This was remembering by means of (partial) forgetting (fig. 4).¹¹¹ Moreover, the toppled monument disrupted the traditional “geometry of remembrance, or the spatial logic of war memorials” by turning a vertical structure (suggestive of upright bravery) into a horizontal one.¹¹²

Since 1992 the monument in its vandalized state has become a permanent fixture, complete with a bronze plaque outlining the (un)making of the monument. Yet the issue of the street name remained unresolved. In 2004, after a hiatus of over ten years, representatives of the Green Party in the local assembly put it back on the agenda, causing a fresh uproar. Local businesses were alarmed at the potential cost involved. In particular, the association of hotel and restaurant

¹¹¹ Renate Meyer-Braun, “Denkmalsturz und Namensstreit—Von ‘Helden’ und ‘Langemarck,’” in *Geschichte im öffentlichen Raum: Denkmäler in Bremen zwischen 1435 und 2001*, ed. Wiltrud Ulrike Drechsel (Bremen, 2011), 64–83.

¹¹² On the idea of a “geometry of memory,” see Winter, *War Beyond Words*, 143–71, 144.

owners made representations to Bremen's senate.¹¹³ Another eight years passed until a *Geschichtspfad* (historical pathway) was installed in 2011–12, with boards providing background information about the battle and the myth as well as the recent conflict over the street name and the war memorial.¹¹⁴ The *Geschichtspfad* along this major road is restricted to the area around the polytechnic, however, and the project website is now defunct. Moreover, tensions appear to persist, for the street signs near the polytechnic seem to be left in a permanent state of disrepair.

University students had been instrumental in shaping the nationalist myth of Langemarck in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1980s it was again student activists who emerged as influential agents of remembrance. Their political outlook had changed radically, however, and their views on Langemarck were strongly influenced by the resurgent peace movement in the wake of the NATO Double-Track Decision. It was not only university students, but *Zivildienstleistende* (young men carrying out the alternative national service) too, who voiced their concern about traces of the Langemarck myth in 1980s West Germany. At Rheine in Westphalia, for instance, a group of *Zivis* embarked on a campaign that prompted a wider discussion in the town, notably among high school students, about the battle of Langemarck and its use in Nazi propaganda.¹¹⁵ Originally the intellectual property of the political right, the Langemarck myth became principally the concern of critical citizens. The founders of the Federal Republic had been wary of plebiscitary democracy, yet on the local level provisions for citizen participation were introduced in the 1970s. Making use of his democratic rights, one history teacher spearheaded a petition in 1986 to the district council of Münster-Mitte requesting that Langemarckstraße (fig. 1) and Tannenbergstraße be renamed after a democratic politician (Joseph Wirth) and a peace activist (Klara-Maria Faßbinder), respectively. The petition warned of the “glorification of militaristic traditions” at a time of heightened threat of nuclear war due to the stationing of Pershing missiles in Germany.¹¹⁶ While eighty-seven people signed the petition, only nine of them were local residents, the

¹¹³ Amt für Straßen und Verkehr, Bremen, Öffentliche Sitzung des Beirates Neustadt Nr. 09/03–07 am 22.4.2004, fax, April 28, 2004; *ibid.*, DEHOGA Bremen to Senator für Bau und Umwelt, April 26, 2004.

¹¹⁴ “Kein Geschichtspfad,” *taz: Die Tageszeitung*, Mai 11, 2011, <http://www.taz.de/!293437>. The original project website is no longer functional, see <http://www.geschichtspfad.de>.

¹¹⁵ Stadtmuseum Münster, Nachlaß Albert Mazzotti sen., Unterlagen zur Entstehung des Langemarck-Denkmal für das Gymnasium in Rheine, 1989–94. See also the essays by high school students submitted to the federal president's history competition in 1993: Verein Alter Dionysianer, ed., *Langemarck und ein Denkmal: Nachdenken über unsere Geschichte* (Berlin, 1994).

¹¹⁶ Vermessungs- und Katasteramt, Münster, Straßenbenennung, Aktenordner 1986, Otto Gertzen to Bezirksvertretung Mitte, June 4, 1986.

land-registry office pointed out.¹¹⁷ Facing stiff opposition from the municipal administration, the district council sought a compromise: retaining the street names while adding a brief historical explanation. In the event, a supplementary sign was mounted only in Tannenbergsstraße. One can only guess as to why Langemarckstraße was omitted. The surviving paperwork shows that it proved difficult to reconcile the need for extreme brevity on a street sign with the enormous complexity of the subject matter. The city archivist certainly struggled to sum up the quintessence of Langemarck—the battle and the myth—in under thirty words.¹¹⁸ It is worth noting that no one objected to the name “Flandernstraße.” Both Langemarckstraße and Flandernstraße had been created at the same time in November 1938, but nearly fifty years on, Flanders no longer functioned as a memory trigger.

Covering the story in its newsletter, the Münster branch of the German Communist Party (DKP) drew attention to another case, one that was making national newspaper headlines in 1986: the Dormagen affair.¹¹⁹ In December 1985 the town council of Dormagen (near Cologne), led by a coalition of Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and the Center Party, carried a motion to baptize a local school “Langemarckschule.” *Der Spiegel* suggested this decision was made out of ignorance. The news magazine poked fun at allegedly dumb local politicians who got lost in the minutiae of spelling (“ck” or “k”) while completely unaware of the political ramifications of their decision.¹²⁰ No doubt, the town councilors were taken by surprise by the political storm that broke loose and during which, reportedly, the federal president Richard von Weizsäcker, veteran socialist Herbert Wehner, Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, and the Israeli embassy in Bonn all voiced their consternation.¹²¹

The intensity of the reaction reflected contemporary concerns over a politically mandated “normalization” of German history during Helmut Kohl’s chancellorship that had culminated in the Bitburg affair a few months earlier.¹²² However, a closer look at the Dormagen case and its history reveals a different set

¹¹⁷ Vermessungs- und Katasteramt, Münster, Straßenbenennung, Aktenordner 1986, Dr. Heinrichs to [Otto Gertzen], October 17, 1986.

¹¹⁸ Vermessungs- und Katasteramt, Münster, Straßenbenennung, Aktenordner 1986, [Hannes] Lambacher to Herr Hannig, August 17, 1987.

¹¹⁹ Vermessungs- und Katasteramt, Münster, Straßenbenennung, Aktenordner 1986, “Langemarck: Symbol der Kriegsbegeisterung,” *Kreuzviertel: Zeitung der DKP-Wohngebietsgruppe*, February 1986, repr. May 1986.

¹²⁰ See “Letzter Seufzer,” *Der Spiegel*, June 9, 1986, 89–91, which relied heavily on the critical history by Karl Unruh, *Langemarck: Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Koblenz, 1986).

¹²¹ Roland Kirbach, “Welche Bedeutung hat Langemarck?,” *Die Zeit*, April 4, 1986.

¹²² For a good summary, see Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried, *Deutsche Kulturgeschichte: Die Bundesrepublik—1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2009), 425–35.

of motivations that had nothing to do with Kohl's controversial identity politics. Already between 1935 and 1968 the school had been called "Langemarckschule." When lessons resumed after the war the school became a Catholic elementary school, yet kept its name. The school chronicle notes that the occupation authorities struck military history off the syllabus, which, ironically, made it impossible to discuss Langemarck in class.¹²³ By 1965 teachers and parents agreed that the name was untenable, but the board of education refused to acquiesce, arguing that the very name represented a *Mahnung* (admonition)—the keyword of war commemoration in the Federal Republic.¹²⁴ Following a reform of the school system, Langemarckschule lost its name in 1968, effectively becoming nameless. Its new official appellation, "Secondary School Dormagen-Center," did not roll easily off the tongue, and colloquially the school continued to be called "Langemarckschule."¹²⁵ In 1985, the year that marked the school's fiftieth anniversary, the school applied to the town council to grant it the name that everybody was using anyway. Embracing the language of *Mahnung*, the headmaster suggested that a *negative* identification with Langemarck should be at the very heart of the school community. The renaming, he argued, would be backed up by a program of "peace education" both theoretical and practical. Pupils would be confronted with the history of Langemarck and also be encouraged to tend the war graves situated in close proximity to the school.¹²⁶ There was a question mark over the sustainability of such a scheme in the long term: would it be possible to instill a critical awareness of the name "Langemarck" in every single cohort, year after year? In any case, the kind of self-reflective memory work and critically engaged learning proposed here bore little resemblance to Kohl's vision of a national past resurrected.

Bizarrely, nobody (except for one Green councilor) seemed to mind that the school was located in a street called "Langemarckstraße" (today written with a simple "k").¹²⁷ It was thus an irony that elsewhere the Dormagen affair triggered so much soul searching about street names. One such case was the town of Nordhorn in Lower Saxony, which saw a highly charged debate over its Langemarckplatz fueled by the frequent interventions of DKP councilors. The communists,

¹²³ Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Dormagen, Schulchroniken: Volks-/Langemarck-Schule Dormagen, vol. 1, 1874–1953, 257.

¹²⁴ Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Schulchroniken: Langemarck-Schule/Hauptschule Dormagen-Mitte, vol. 3, 1965–81, 6–7.

¹²⁵ Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Schulchroniken: Langemarck-Schule/Hauptschule Dormagen-Mitte, vol. 3, 1965–81, 134, 153.

¹²⁶ Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Ratsprotokolle Dormagen, Nr. 350, Bürgerantrag der Städt. Hauptschule Dormagen-Mitte, July 18, 1985; Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Ratsprotokoll, Nr. 336, December 17, 1985.

¹²⁷ Archiv im Rhein-Kreis Neuss, Ratsprotokoll, Nr. 352, Antrag des Ratsmitgliedes Norbert Wrobel, November 30, 1985.

normally a marginal party in the political system of the Federal Republic, gained an unusually high profile through debates over Langemarck.¹²⁸ The local Green Party, too, was in favor of renaming Langemarckplatz, and external support came from the left-of-center German-Dutch reconciliation initiative “Nooit Meer/Nie Wieder.”¹²⁹ Both proponents and opponents of renaming the square employed the language of “oblivion,” though they drew diametrically opposed conclusions. Langemarck was considered a “forgotten” episode in German history, which meant that it could potentially be exploited again (thus the argument of the Greens) or that there was no need for further action (thus the argument of the town administration).¹³⁰ The town’s institutional memory was prone to amnesia, too. In 1986, two years into the controversy, the administration raised the question whether the square known as “Langemarckplatz” did indeed bear that name. Certainly, Langemarckplatz was not signposted anywhere. A detailed report into the matter, based on files held in the town archive, concluded that, in all likelihood, the square had probably been omitted during the wave of renamings in April 1945.¹³¹

The debate was shelved in 1988 but reopened in 1991 when it shifted from the naming of the square to the redevelopment of the war memorial. Impressed by her contribution to the recent international *Skulptur-Projekte* exhibition in Münster, Nordhorn’s deputy mayor approached the American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. It was an unlikely match between a sleepy provincial town and an internationally renowned artist, yet the outcome was one of the most astounding commemorative spaces of the postwar. Nordhorn’s memorial to the fallen soldiers of the Great War had been unveiled originally in 1929, almost ten years before the surrounding space was named “Langemarckplatz.” The design showing a German youth divided opinion during the Third Reich, enthralling the Propaganda Ministry and scandalizing the SA. The sculpture was first removed and then destroyed in 1938, leaving an empty plinth. When the invitation to Holzer to redesign the space was made public in 1991, debates about Langemarck merged with polemics about contemporary art. The local newspaper suspected

¹²⁸ “DKP: Diskussion um Langemarckplatz ist nicht abgeschlossen,” *Grafschafter Nachrichten*, December 1, 1988. For a left-wing critique of the Langemarck myth, see Helmut Kopetzky, *In den Tod—Hurra! Deutsche Jugend-Regimenter im Ersten Weltkrieg: Ein historischer Tatsachenbericht über Langemarck* (Cologne, 1981).

¹²⁹ On critical memory and transnationalism in 1980s West Germany, see Jennifer L. Allen, “National Commemoration in an Age of Transnationalism,” *Journal of Modern History* 91 (2019): 109–48.

¹³⁰ Lebrecht Forke, Werner Straukamp, and Eva Ungar Grudin, *Vom Langemarckplatz zum Schwarzen Garten*, Nordhomer Kulturbeiträge, vol. 4 (Nordhorn, n.d. [1995]), 28–29.

¹³¹ StdA Nordhorn, C IV e 84a, Langemarckplatz, March 9, 1988.



FIG. 5.—*Black Garden* by Jenny Holzer, Nordhorn. Author's photograph, August 2013. Color version available as an online enhancement.

that here a “cultural mafia” was at work wasting taxpayers’ money on art of allegedly dubious quality.¹³²

Holzer’s design is uncompromisingly postmodern. Combining horticultural, sculptural, and textual elements, Holzer converted Langemarckplatz into a *Black Garden* (fig. 5). This garden is decidedly not a green space; it features black and very dark red plants surrounded by benches inscribed with puzzling poems (in English and German) such as “The ocean washes the dead. / They are face up face down in foam. / Bodies roll from swells to open in the marsh.” Conceptually, Holzer’s installation is akin to the counter-monuments that were increasingly erected during the 1990s to commemorate the Holocaust. “The most important ‘space of memory’ for these artists,” as James E. Young aptly puts it, “has not been the space in the ground or above it but the space between the memorial and the viewer, between the viewer and his or her own memory.”¹³³ Memorials in this sense act as facilitators of reflection rather than as carriers of

¹³² Forke, Straukamp, and Grudin, *Vom Langemarckplatz zum Schwarzen Garten*, 31–47.

¹³³ James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT, 2000), 118.

messages. But is the *Black Garden*—opened on May 8, 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War—still a space for reflection about the First World War? Back in 1991 the Christian Democratic youth organization had warned that Holzer’s installation would consign the First World War to oblivion.¹³⁴ Certainly, the *Black Garden* renders the space less concrete. The attentive visitor can find some information about Langemarck, but, fundamentally, the *Black Garden* invites people to reflect about conflict and violence in the twentieth century generally. Here the memory of the First World War has not been deleted, expunged, or obliterated, but reframed, overwritten, and recontextualized. If forgetting facilitates memory, as Marc Augé suggests, then the making of the *Black Garden* (and the unmaking of the old war memorial) illustrates how memory can also facilitate forgetting.

The outcome of the post-1990 “memory boom” was the creation of what is, perhaps, “the most historically self-aware democracy in the world.”¹³⁵ In order to understand how German society got where it is today, one must revisit the earlier debates of the 1980s. It was during this period that the First World War, in particular, was openly and controversially discussed.¹³⁶ It seems that a reworking of the history of the First World War was a precondition for the subsequent memory boom. Coming to terms with the past entailed confronting the multifaceted legacy of the Great War, including its use by the Nazis. Typically, these were grassroots debates triggered by local activists (such as university students, left-wing politicians, or schoolteachers), influenced by, yet removed from, the *Geschichtspolitik* (politics of history) at the national level.¹³⁷ They reflected a renewed interest in locality and *Heimat*, history and heritage during the 1980s. The consequence was that a new, highly localized memory of the First World War, preoccupied with sites of memory at home, became divorced from the traditional topography of remembrance that had centered on the Western Front as both a physical and an imagined space.¹³⁸ With the demise of the veterans’ generation, the Western Front ceased to be a *lieu de mémoire* inhabited by powerful recollections. German battlefield tourism petered out to a trickle—just as a new

¹³⁴ Klaus Albers, “Provinzposse,” letter to the editor, *Grafschafter Nachrichten*, February 5, 1991.

¹³⁵ Mark Mazower, “The History Man: How Saul Friedländer Told His Own Story,” *Financial Times*, November 26, 2016.

¹³⁶ The scholarly literature has focused on the memory of Nazism and the Second World War during the 1980s and 1990s. See, for example, Neil Gregor, “‘The Illusion of Remembrance’: The Karl Diehl Affair and the Memory of National Socialism in Nuremberg, 1945–1999,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 590–633. On street names, in particular, see Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2000), 241–62.

¹³⁷ On the connection between the two levels, see Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2014), 1010–22.

¹³⁸ On the interwar years, see Brandt, *Vom Kriegsschauplatz um Gedächtnisraum*.

generation of anglophone visitors were renewing their emotional connection to the former battlefields, returning in ever-increasing numbers in search of the graves of both blood relatives and “fictive kin.”¹³⁹ With Germans severing their cultural ties to the landscape of the great battles of 1914–18, the embryonic internationalist impetus of veterans’ meetings of the 1960s and 1970s was largely lost, too. Now the First World War was encountered primarily through local memorials and street signs. This often led to searching questions about who erected them at what time for which purpose. Thus, while for Britons (and Australians and Canadians, too) “Ypres” signified a place in Flanders, a battlefield of the Great War, and one of the densest and most contested sites of memory on the Western Front, for many Germans “Langemarck” connoted more often than not a local street—and, for the historically aware, a political path into an abyss.

VI. CONCLUSION

The cultural history of commemorative codes, gestures, and representations, Jay Winter asserts, is “the study of fragments and images which never add up to a coherent whole.” Rather than striving for an illusory exhaustiveness and representativeness, the practitioner of memory studies ought to “grant the uncertainties and messiness of everyday life the pride of place they deserve.”¹⁴⁰ The exploration of collective memory—its institutions, rituals, and material culture—is challenging enough, but pinning down oblivion is infinitely more difficult. This article has ventured into the largely uncharted terrain of applied “oblivion studies,” using the emerging theoretical literature as a suggestive guide. The ideal types developed by theoreticians—such as the seven variants of forgetting that both Assmann and Connerton have identified—are heuristically stimulating, yet ultimately too neat and limiting to grapple with the messiness of forgetting and its often ephemeral empirical evidence. The processes of forgetting Langemarck and, by extension, the Great War in (West) Germany after 1945 took many, often overlapping and sometimes conflicting forms, including erasing and ignoring (street names), neutralizing and overwriting (linguistic fragments), critiquing and debunking (historical narratives), dissolving and re-designing (military cemeteries), toppling and recontextualizing (war memorials). Forgetting, like remembering, is a fluid phenomenon, fading in and out, subject to shifts and changes over time. Oblivion was never set in stone; sometimes debates over Langemarck erupted unexpectedly after long periods of

¹³⁹ On fictive kinship, see Jay Winter, “Forms of Kinship and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War,” in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge, 1999), 40–60.

¹⁴⁰ Jay Winter, “Author’s Response” [to David Fitzpatrick, review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*], *Reviews in History*, no. 25, April 1997, <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/25>.

silence. Forgetting is relative; it is not the same as total erasure. Hence some scholars prefer to put the term “forgetting” in quotation marks.¹⁴¹

Theoretical discussions are necessarily just that—discussions of theories and abstractions. The study of cultural oblivion in practice is complicated further by the fact that “forgetting” is not only a process or state of affairs, but also a cultural representation in its own right, one that needs to be historicized—a critical insight missing from the prevalent typologies of forgetting. In the postwar era “forgetting” was a mnemonic figure full of ambivalences. It was used to justify a massive act of obliteration (that is, the liquidation of the cemeteries of an allegedly “forgotten” war), on the one hand, and to legitimize the construction of and maintenance work on new sites of memory (such as the redeveloped and relandscaped war cemeteries), on the other. Similarly, both proponents and opponents of redesigned war memorials employed the language of oblivion in arguing their causes. Forgetting as a mnemonic figure clearly served an instrumental purpose, but there was a psychological side to it as well. Those who invoked the specter of oblivion appeared to harbor cultural anxieties about collective amnesia generally and about a gap in generational memory in particular. The past, they feared, would become—to cite David Lowenthal—“a foreign country.”¹⁴²

Langemarck was, of course, situated in a foreign country. After 1918 streets in Germany had been named “Flandern” or “Langemarck” with the explicit intention of bringing the Flemish salient home. Yet after 1945 Flemish place names disappeared again from the maps of most, though not all, German towns. The spatiality of remembering—this is our first main conclusion—became fundamentally disrupted in the aftermath of the Second World War. The microgeographies of the Ypres salient such as Dixmude, Houthulst, Kemmel, Langemarck, and Ieper itself—discrete locations invested with special significance during the Great War and renewed in the interwar period—faded in the postwar era. To some degree, Nazi propaganda had paved the way toward deconcretizing the memory of the Great War by suggesting that “Langemarck” stood for “the sacrifices at *all* the fronts,” effectively turning Langemarck into a symbol that transcended both time and space. After the Second World War Langemarck became Langemark, and the famous “students’ cemetery” became a general war cemetery, the site of one of four new concentration cemeteries in West Flanders. The legendary “dead *of* Langemarck” were now joined by others with no prior association with the place. The Volksbund’s interventions in the commemorative landscape of West Flanders, though seemingly subtle, were in fact so drastic that the term “First World War cemeteries” is a misnomer. Langemark, Hooglede, Menen, and Vladslo are essentially post-Second World War cemeteries containing graves and unidentified mortal remains of soldiers of the First World War.

¹⁴¹ Singer and Conway, “Should We Forget Forgetting?,” 280.

¹⁴² Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.

In the course of abandoning entire cemeteries and reintering bodies in new locations, the *Grieving Parents*—designed for a very specific location—were relocated, too. What is more, in placing replicas in an inner-city ruin (from the Second World War) the link to the Flemish landscape and the soil in which the son was buried was weakened even further. This all happened against the background of an intellectual debate about a German special path “from Langemarck to Stalingrad.” A slogan of critical discourse during the 1950s and 1960s, it stressed temporal continuities between Imperial Germany and the Third Reich. But, significantly, it also created spatial discontinuity by shifting the imagined geography of war eastward. Naturally, veterans of the First World War retained an emotional attachment to the topography of West Flanders. When they “returned” in the 1960s and 1970s, however, they followed a completely new itinerary, visiting places such as Tyne Cot cemetery, the Menin Gate memorial, or the Ieper town hall, places they previously had no deep connection to. This had much to do with the Flemish authorities’ aim to shed “the Holy Ground of British Arms” image and to reinvent Ieper as a site of international understanding. Yet, by the 1980s, battlefield tourism was a thing of the past. West Germans by and large had severed their cultural ties to the historic landscape of the Great War and the microgeographies of the Ypres battlefield. By the same token, a new, highly localized memory of Langemarck emerged that was focused on sites at home. For many Germans living in the 1980s and 1990s, “Langemarck” connoted not so much a distant place in Flanders as a nearby street. In sum, in the postwar period, Langemarck was not so much “forgotten” as it was overwritten, re-fashioned, and, above all, relocated. Historians use spatial terms like *lieux de mémoire* or “sites of memory” often in a metaphorical sense, without paying close attention to the geography of remembrance. It is here, however, that we see a fundamental shift in the memory of the First World War after 1945.

“Lively, picturesque Flanders”—this is how one German travel agent advertised, in the centenary year 2014, a four-day coach tour of a region that, in many British minds, is a byword of death and destruction.¹⁴³ Today, those who pronounce the First World War a “forgotten” conflict in Germany often make an implicitly comparative statement. In Britain the war is still known as “the Great War,” and in France *la Grande Guerre* has a lingering and vivid presence, too. Contemporary British culture, in particular, seems marked by a near obsession with the blood, the mud, and the poetry of the trenches, and with the landscapes of the Great War. Battlefield tourism has been on the rise again since the 1970s (initially slowly, but exponentially since the 1990s), with many a Briton following a family-history trail.¹⁴⁴ A large dose of hyperbole notwithstanding, Prime

¹⁴³ Advertisement in *Westfälische Nachrichten*, May 27, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ On tourism trends, see Stad Ieper, ed., *50 jaar Toerisme Ieper: Catalogus tentoonstelling 26 oktober tot 9 november 2008* (Ieper, 2008). On the revival of battlefield

Minister David Cameron expressed an important point when, in his 2012 speech outlining the government's plans for the centenary of the First World War, he stated that the war "matters not just in our heads, but in our hearts; it has a very strong emotional connection."¹⁴⁵ The comparison with British commemorative culture shows that a weakening of emotional bonds was not the inevitable outcome of generational change; there is no necessary correlation between the presence of "witnesses" and the cultural memory of war.

It is doubtful whether many Germans still feel a deep emotional bond with the dead soldiers of the First World War. So, comparatively speaking, the Great War and its dead may have been "forgotten" in Germany. Of course, such a statement rests on the assumption that memory is an emotion and that the memory of war is "traumatic."¹⁴⁶ Yet—and this our second main finding—since the end of the Second World War Germans have tended to approach the Great War in a different register, one that is cerebral rather than emotional. The commemorative purges of streetscapes in the immediate postwar years followed a clear political rationality. The dissolution of the war cemeteries in Flanders in the 1950s also represented a clear-headed decision reflecting new administrative priorities, although it could still trigger impassioned reactions from some relatives of the dead. True, veterans who revisited the former battlefields during the 1960s and 1970s must have carried with them a kind of sentimental baggage. Many of them, however, were open to reason, becoming converts to the idea of international understanding in a new Europe. During the 1980s the mode and mood of war commemoration changed for good. Now the emphasis was placed on critically confronting the past, on the lessons to be learned from it. Emotions gave way to self-reflection, and mourning to scrutiny. The subsequent "memory boom" of the 1990s only strengthened this pattern. In short, Langemarck may matter in some people's heads, but it touches few hearts; its legacy is perceived as problematic, not poignant.

To be sure, there are numerous instances where the First World War seems to have fallen by the wayside altogether. In total, there remain today thirty-three Langemarckstraßen/plätze/wege, four Flandernstraßen, one Ypernstraße,

tourism, see Jennifer Iles, "Recalling the Ghosts of War: Performing Tourism on the Battlefields of the Western Front," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26 (2006): 162–80; Delphine Lauwers, "Le Saillant d'Ypres entre reconstruction et construction d'un lieu de mémoire: Un long processus de négociations mémorielles, de 1914 à nos jours" (PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence, 2014).

¹⁴⁵ "Speech at the Imperial War Museum on the First World War Centenary Plans," October 11, 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>.

¹⁴⁶ The concept of trauma has provided an important stimulus to memory studies in the 1990s and 2000s. See, for example, Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford, 1999).

and one Kimmelbergstraße, mostly concentrated in the far western regions of Germany. There are also two streets named “Ypern” and one “Flandern” that were created after 1945 with no commemorative purpose.¹⁴⁷ Generally, they are not accompanied by any supplementary sign, so roads named after the battles in Flanders simply blend into the fabric of the built infrastructure. Koblenz has a Langemarckplatz (a stone throw from the Bundeswehr’s museum of military technology) that, curiously, it is not even signposted. In Stuttgart the street signs in Ypernstraße are rusty or overgrown with leaves (fig. 3). In Augsburg tourists can check into Hotel “Langemarck” unperturbed by the name. And in Münster an allotment named “Langemarck” recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary—seemingly oblivious to the resonance the name once had.¹⁴⁸ Hotly disputed in some places, ignored or overlooked in others, the legacy of the Great War today occupies a liminal state between critical memory and cultural oblivion.

¹⁴⁷ The remaining streets named after the battles of Ypres can be found in Schleswig-Holstein (Langemarckstraße, Eckernförde); Bremen (Langemarckstraße, Bremen); North Rhine-Westphalia (Flandernstraße and Langemarckstraße, Münster; Langemarckstraße, Duisburg; Langemarckstraße, Essen; Langemarckstraße, Gelsenkirchen; Langemarckstraße and Flandernstraße, Oberhausen; Langemarckstraße, Neuss; Langemarckstraße, Dormagen; Langemarckweg, Bergisch Gladbach; Langemarckstraße, Bedburg; Langemarkpark, Düren; Langemarckstraße, Troisdorf; Langemarckstraße, Sankt Augustin; Langemarckstraße, Bonn); Rhineland-Palatinate (Langemarkstraße, Niederfischbach; Langemarckplatz, Koblenz; Langemarckplatz, Ludwigshafen; Langemarckstraße, Prüm); Hessen (Langemarckstraße, Bad Wildungen; Langemarckstraße, Eschwege; Langemarckweg, Korbach); Baden-Württemberg (Langemarckstraße, Eislingen; Flandernstraße, Kimmelbergstraße and Ypernstraße, Stuttgart; Langemarckstraße, Freiburg; Langemarckstraße, Lahr; Langemarckstraße, Rastatt); and Bavaria (Langemarckstraße, Augsburg; Langemarckstraße, Gersthofen; Langemarckstraße, Donauwörth; Langemarckplatz, Erlangen; Langemarckplatz, Rothenburg; Langemarckstraße, Gräfelting). Unrelated to the memory of the Great War are Flandernstraße, Essen; Yperner Straße, Bremen; and Ypernstraße, Siegen.

¹⁴⁸ “Baustein des Stadtlebens,” *Westfälische Nachrichten*, October 1, 2015.