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Transcript

The Great War: The Soldier, the League, the Imagination

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Dr Patricia Lewis:

My name is Patricia Lewis, I'm the Research Director here for International Security, and it's my great honour and privilege to be hosting you this evening to talk about 'The Great War: The Soldier, the League and the Imagination'. We have a line-up of excellent speakers, and this panel coincides with the publication of the March issue of *International Affairs* – and you can see I have been reading it and marking it – which commemorates the outbreak of the First World War and includes contributions from the speakers and other authors specializing in the military, political, social and artistic legacies of the war. I don't know if you've had chance to look at it yet but it's one of the most amazing issues with really extraordinary essays in it and we are very lucky to have some of the authors with us tonight.

We also have an exhibition of photographs at the back by Michael St Maur Sheil that depicts the battlefields of the western front as they are today. And I think if you have had a look or if you manage to get a look afterwards, it really is quite incredible how the legacy a hundred years later is still quite apparent.

First of all I'm going to turn to Michael. Michael began working as a photographer in Northern Ireland after studying in Oxford. He's a member of the British Commission for Military History, and a badged member of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides. Combining a passion for history and landscape, this exhibition 'Fields of Battle 14-18' is a unique reflection on the transformation of battlefields of the Great War into the landscape of modern Europe. He was awarded a World Press Photo Award in 2002 for his work on child trafficking in West Africa. Michael.

Michael St Maur Sheil:

Thank you very much indeed. Well thank you all for coming. I feel very honoured because the exhibition you see here, this is its actual first showing in public in the United Kingdom. It was conceived along with the late Professor Richard Holmes, who I'm sure many of you will know, and we wanted to produce something for the First World War which we felt - because it had involved everybody in the country - we wanted to create an exhibition that would reach out to everybody. The exhibition that you see here is intended for schools because this was very much part of our desire was to reach out to the younger generation. The main exhibition will be shown as a street gallery. It is opening in Paris in the Jardin du Luxembourg, I've been. The French government have declared it an official project and it will be opening there on 8 April and will be there for four months. It's coming to this country in August; it will be in St James's by the Guards Memorial, we've

been granted St James's Park which I think, I feel very honoured by that. The purpose of this exhibition – I'll be quite honest ladies and gentleman – it is not for you. You are interested in the First World War. We want to reach out to people who know nothing about it, have no interest, and may not even have heard about it, which is why we are doing it as a street gallery: because a large number of people would never go to a museum, never go to an art gallery but what we want to do is to have it on the street where people will come across it as they are going around their daily lives. That is the purpose of the reason why it will be outdoors. It will consist of 60 pictures. It is not to explain the history of the First World War, it is to interest people in the subject, to draw them in and then they can go and do their own research. We've got the support of the Imperial War Museum and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, so that is the general idea behind it.

The actual pictures themselves - the First World War is no longer a war of memory, it's a war of history, and these photographs Richard and I wanted to look at the battlefields in a different way. We decided that after 100 years these places of horror and killing have now become places of beauty and tranquillity. So if you like, time and nature have healed the wounds of war. There are some of them are still obvious, but that is the theme behind the exhibition. I do hope you'll see it as I said; it opens on 4 August in St James's Park, so I do hope you'll see it. And do let us know, if you have positions of responsibility, do encourage your local towns to have it because we do want this to tour. We have already got cities around the country where we're going to be going to, but as I said, it is really to reach out to people who know nothing else about the First World War. I've been told I have three minutes and I think I've finished.

Dr Patricia Lewis:

Thank you Michael and thank you very much, thank you very much for allowing us the first showing as it were. And I want to also thank and mention Caroline Soper and her team at *International Affairs* who brought all of this together and made this exhibition happen, so thank you.

Ok, so our next speaker is Helen McCartney who is going to talk about the portrayal of the soldier and how it has changed during and after the First World War. And looking at the various trends that have reinforced today's victimised soldier. She has written in *International Affairs* 'The First World War soldier and his contemporary image in Britain'. Helen is senior lecturer at the Defence Studies Department at King's College London, based at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. And her work is on British civil-military

relations contemporary and historical, and she's the author of two books on the First World War and has published a range of articles on the subject of British military-societal relations. She's currently researching a new history of the social-cultural myths of the Great War. Helen.

Dr Helen McCartney:

Thank you. As you can probably tell from that introduction, my academic interests really span both the First World War and contemporary civil-military relations and that's really what this article is about. It's almost looking at contemporary civil-military relations and looking at their implications for the First World War. The image of the soldier-victim of the First World War has become - I think - entrenched, in the British popular imagination during the last thirty years. It is not a view that's necessarily reflected in the academic literature, and it wasn't the dominant view that was seen at the time during the First World War, but I think it's become more and more entrenched over the last thirty years. Now there's a debate over the timing of when this reductive script came in of looking at war from the view of it being pointless and from the view of it being mismanaged. I am not really going to rehearse some of those arguments, what I want to look at today really is the three key trends that I think are reinforcing this reductive script about the pointlessness of war, the mismanagement of war, and ultimately the portrayal of the soldier as victim.

Now these three key themes that I want to look at are: family history and the impact that is having on the way in which we perceive the soldier; increasing public interest in psychological reactions to war; and current British attitudes to the use of force. So I'll just now go and have a little look at each of those three key trends.

Family history first then. I think that family history is really important. I think we can all agree that it has been rising in popularity over the last twenty years. And it's often the point at which people who don't know much about the First World War become interested and get interested. The way in which family history is set up, the way in which people do family history, actually helps to reinforce the soldier-victim image. Because I'd argue that family history is very individualised; you approach it through an individual. And it often encourages an empathetic approach; you imagine what it felt like to be your ancestor. And imagining how soldiers felt or thought is difficult enough if you've got a wide knowledge of social, political and cultural trends and you've also got diaries and memories there to interpret. But often family historians don't have that kind of information, often they have very little information, so

they often fill in the gaps with this empathy that I think helps to reinforce this soldier-victim image.

There's also the point that British society in general has become more accepting of the idea of victimhood; to be a victim isn't necessarily now a particularly negative thing and I've argued that actually this growth of this idea in society can help to provide a point of connection that relatives seek with those in the past. If they feel their relative, their soldier relative, was a victim, they've got that point of connection. That's the family history argument.

The second trend that I want to look at are the increasing public expectations that all soldiers are going to suffer from psychological damage as a result of participating in war. Now it's the First World War that first links psychiatric injury with wartime experience. The term 'shellshock' enters the British lexicon in 1915, and although it's quickly rejected as a diagnosis, actually the British public take it up and it helps to partially legitimize psychological illness as a result of war. It doesn't remove stigma but it helps to reduce stigma attached to a psychological diagnosis. The victim image though of the shell-shocked soldier is only one of a variety of conceptions of the soldier after the war, and while psychologically damaged veterans weren't always branded cowards, they weren't necessarily lauded as heroes either. So we get a whole diversity of views of what the soldier was about up until the 1980s. In the 1980s we can trace a much greater public sympathy for traumatised veterans, due in part to the US experience in Vietnam and a change in British cultural attitudes to those which promoted self-expression rather than perhaps self-restraint. And I think this has been taken even further in the last decade where there's now an even greater public expectation that whatever the reality soldiers will be damaged by their experience of war. And this has helped to reinforce the victim image, the soldier-victim image, of the First World War.

A good example of how this is played out is the Shot at Dawn Campaign. Now the Shot at Dawn group successfully campaigned throughout the 1990s to rehabilitate those British soldiers who were executed for military crimes during the First World War. It was the government that eventually agreed to a conditional pardon by 2006. The arguments put forward by the groups stressed the youth of those who had been executed but also their psychological vulnerability. And that was a key plank of their argument; they argued that they had become victims of a very arbitrary discipline system which automatically dismissed psychological injury as a defence. Now the campaign fitted in very neatly with the victimised soldier image and the reductionist narrative of this pointless, brutal war, but it failed to really engage

with the fact that yes, the psychiatric profession was in its infancy in the early 20th Century, and yes sometimes court martial officials weren't very familiar with psychological problems as a result of war and there were undoubtedly miscarriages of justice, but even by the rules of the time the vast majority of the estimated 200,000 British psychological casualties didn't find themselves in front of the firing squad. So I think it's almost been taken out of proportion – this idea of psychological casualties automatically being executed.

The language of victimhood is also important in this debate. It was used by many groups, and many different individuals that were involved in discussing it and some campaigners suggested that those executed were just as much victims as those killed by the enemy and they sought to establish the parity of victimhood. In doing that, in seeking to align the experience and image of those executed with the ordinary soldier, they revealed the extent to which that victim image had already become accepted by the 1990s.

Finally, the third contemporary trend that I want to have a look at is contemporary attitudes to war. British attitudes to the use of force today have an impact on how we view the soldier from the First World War. The increasing public unease with the use of force and the experience of recent conflict has led to, what I've argued in other places, to the contemporary British soldier being cast as the victim sometimes of government incompetence, sometimes of flawed strategy. Often these come out in popular narratives.

What I want to argue here is that the linkages that have been made between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the First World War have proved mutually reinforcing for that victim image. The linkages have been made in lots of different areas and in the article I go into this in a lot more detail, but I just want to take one instance of commemoration to illustrate this. The death of the last veterans of the First World War in 2009 provided some of the best opportunities to make explicit links. The remembrance service held in Westminster Abbey after the death of Harry Patch involved the symbolic linking of Iraq and Afghanistan and the First World War, with two contemporary Victoria Cross winners laying a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Talking to the press at the service the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown linked the bravery and sacrifice of that First World War generation with men and women serving with distinction today. He was referring to those serving in Afghanistan at the time. But government attempts to legitimize the war in Afghanistan during what was a particularly contentious period of the conflict, were countered by the national press and blogs making

much more negative comparisons, highlighting futility, tragedy and unnecessary casualties of both conflicts.

The First World War came to be a useful example to illustrate arguments about the validity and nature of contemporary conflict. So despite the very different political contexts in which contemporary conflicts and the First World War were fought there were really striking similarities in the public interpretation of their meaning and conduct today. So in varying ways, Iraq and Afghanistan and the First World War have all been assessed as futile, mismanaged and it follows therefore that the soldiers who fought in them were victims of both the meaning and the conduct of those wars.

So quickly, with one minute to go, where does that leave us today? Well I think the centenary of the conflict provides an opportunity to build a more complex and nuanced view of the soldiers' experience. There's a significant public desire to understand the First World War and historians have proved actually very interested in trying to engage with the public through a range of different media and a range of different organizations. But historians and their research have only a very small part to play in the process of constructing the public scripts about the First World War, and I think those trends that I've identified: family history; psychological damage; and attitudes to war are going to make it quite difficult for historians and other organizations to make any change to diversify that dominant victimised soldier motif. Thank you.

Dr Patricia Lewis:

Our next speaker is Patricia Clavin who is Fellow and Tutor of History at Jesus College and Professor of International History at the University of Oxford. Patricia is going to speak about the Austrian hunger crisis, the genesis of international organization during the First World War and its impact on the League of Nations. Her research and publications have explored the relationship between international security and economic and financial stability, and the role played by international and regional, particularly European, organizations. She's currently researching the origins of concern with international development. Patricia.

Professor Patricia Clavin:

Thank you Patricia. I came to this project really and the material in the article, by pulling on a red thread. In the sense that Patricia's said in her introduction, my research so far has focused on the cooperation and coordination and the great depression in the Second World War and inside the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s, but there there was this constant reference back to

what had happened in Austria in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. So that's what's led me to this and what I've tried to do in the article first and foremost, is really two things: One is to underline that though the League of Nations presented itself as an organization made new and dedicated to international peace, and that peace was the opposite of war in 1919 when the organization was set up, in fact there's a continuity from the war into the peace. And actually if you read Hew Strachan's very rich and illuminating review of recent books on the First World War in this issue [of *International Affairs*] too, he makes exactly the same point. So there's civil war, there's revolution, there's episodes of ethnic cleansing in the immediate aftermath of the First World War that kill around 4-5 million people between 1918 and 1923, so though I talk about the beginnings of international order and international peace in 1918, in fact there's not very much peace to be had.

The second thing I try to do in the article is to show the ways in which the League of Nations reflected the wider sense of security that we have today. In the last 20 years or so we've begun to think about international security in broad terms that the UN calls human security - so we are more aware of the ways in which war triggers migration movement, war brings about epidemic and famine. Whereas in the past security certainly before that was set in the ways people thought about it in the cold war and it was dominated much more by a sense of hard security – so weapons, disarmament – and that also reflected how people historically have researched into the League of Nations.

All of these problems, the relationship between, international security and this wider concern of financial crisis and famine was found in Austria in 1918. Austria was the state - which in some ways surprised me - that the British, the French, and the Americans focused on particularly at the end of the war. And it was really because the Austria-Hungarian Empire had collapsed in on itself and Austria was not only being embargoed at the start by the allies but also by its previous states. So Austria is now a very small country of around 4 million people, and its experiencing intense famine and also hyper-inflation. And in the article I try to trace the ways in which the League of Nations became involved in trying to save Austria and to reconstruct both its financial system and its economy and also to provide food relief to the 4 million Austrians who find themselves starving and this is a special problem for Vienna. In some ways I kept asking myself why this preoccupation with Austria and what's clear is that Western concern is not really centred on the threat of communism in the way that it is with food aid to Russia, or the threat to health in the way there are also responses in Greece and in Bulgaria which are related to the flu epidemic and also the refugee movement. Instead in the

case of Austria reflecting recent preoccupations in global history, there's a sense that Austrians are in some ways superior and worthy of Western aid. And that comes around really in a variety of different ways.

The first is the way that the British and the French attempt to cast the Austrians not as Germans but as French. So to give you a citation of something I say in the article, to quote the British Foreign Office, the Austrian people – if there's anyone here in the audience who's Austrian you will be pleased to hear – you are 'sober, hard-working, enterprising..., in some details gay, cultured, chivalrous and when true to yourselves a thoroughly loveable race' 'you're a people not unlike the French' and really 'entirely foreign to what is now known as the true 'German' character'. So part of this project is showing Austrians not as Germans, whereas everybody knows that they are certainly German speaking.

The other strand that's there that's very powerful and it influences Eglantyne Jebb for example who sets up Save the Children whose first major mission is inside Vienna and inside Austria before they move elsewhere is that it also sees Austria and Vienna as the treasury of high culture. It's also that Viennese children, in particular, are the focus of international scientific interest. That's partly to do with [Sigmund] Freud and the advent of modern psychology, but it's also a progressive, around a progressive art movement pioneered by an Austrian – or he ends up Austrian, everyone's been branded several times through this process – Franz Čižek. And Čižek is famous for pioneering child art, so developing the sense that children express their emotions and their sense of self through their own artistic endeavours. His work was already very prominent before the First World War but immediately afterwards the International Red Cross puts together an exhibition of Čižek's children's artwork and this then tours 40 cities across Britain, Northern Ireland, into Ireland and then around the world and the Red Cross, International Red Cross, then puts these pictures on Christmas cards and so on, so it's really about science on the one hand and Austrian culture. But there's also a sense of racial ordering in this, and I've suggested already why the way the Germans, the Austrians are French and not really Germans, and certainly not Eastern Barbarians and so in the article I talk about the way in which the activists, humanitarian activists, compare their experience in Austria to their experience in Moscow, which is altogether more difficult and dirty and unpleasant.

Then the final part of the article talks about how this is also activated in the way that the League of Nations takes over the financial rescue of Austria which is the first international practice of financial oversight that's established

anywhere. So the way that the IMF and now the European Central Bank manages financial crises comes out of this experience in Austria and the management of famine and food at the time was related.

And the final conclusion of the article explores the way that this is driven very strongly by priorities set by the American states, so American agencies are very much a part of this although the Americans never join the League of Nations. And also the way in which the Austrians come to experience and reflect on this that they feel on the one hand that the League of Nations offer them the promise of citizenship, but they were instead the objects of international charity. I'm conscious of the clock.

Dr Patricia Lewis:

Our last speaker this evening is Alex Danchev who is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews who writes extensively on aspects of art and war. He's also the author of a number of acclaimed biographies, most recently 'Cézanne: A Life' and he's working on a biography of Magritte and Alex is going to be considering the ways in which art can illuminate war focusing particularly on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* in 1920.

Professor Alex Danchev:

It's good, thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to invite you to consider the proposition that this war, and all wars, are profoundly shaped in our conception of them by works of art - of all kinds and conditions. So I suppose in our culture I mean roughly speaking, English speaking peoples, we've only to consider war poetry, which has been virtually synonymous with Great War poetry for several decades now to begin to take the measure of just how important to our conception of the Great War, art, in that instance poetry can be. The poetry has, I think, given us one of the leitmotifs of the war, one of the scripts if you will, and a lightening conductor for feeling about it. I mean what we might encapsulate as the pity of war. But I don't want to talk more about poetry just at the moment, though I dare say we might before the evening is out. What I would really like to do is tell you a little story about the painting that Patricia mentioned. A small painting, that packs a terrific punch.

This painting [Painting shown to audience] *Angelus Novus* - the new angel - by Paul Klee. This angel appeared, as I guess it would be appropriate to say, immediately after the Great War 1920. And it, what shall I say, takes off in history, owing to its first owner who is Walter Benjamin - those of you who

are German speaking will forgive my mangling his name - but it is how we know him I think. Walter Benjamin is an all-purpose intellectual, one of the greatest intellectuals of the last century, a man who wrote on practically everything and put the rest of us who try to be intellectuals to shame.

Benjamin owned this painting and it was indeed his most treasured possession. And something he wrote about it in 1940, another pregnant year, puts it on the historical map. Benjamin wrote this little text in one of his most renowned pieces of writing on the concept of history, he wrote: 'There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it as his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is this storm.'

This has become one of the most celebrated passages in Benjamin's celebrated oeuvre and it gives to us the name, the title, the formulation - the Angel of History. This is the Angel of History. It's a passage that is difficult to interpret – or put another way it is wide open to interpretation – and has been interpreted and reinterpreted ever since. That indeed is part of the power of art I suggest to you: it catches the imagination. Benjamin loved this painting, he loved this angel: he saw in it something of himself and something of his time. For him this was a witness to history. The angel witnesses the great catastrophe - perhaps the founding catastrophe of this terrible century - the Great War. I like to think of where a chain of events appears before us, as all those arguments about causation of the First World War, he sees one single catastrophe. He is perhaps Niall Ferguson come among us – I hope he's not in the audience but no doubt we'll be hearing from him. So this text, this argument between Benjamin and Klee, between Benjamin and his angel is what sparks this argument with history, about history, about what kind of history we confront, about our predicament. The artist then as witness to our time, the artist as moral witness, as a philosopher has said, is a very resonant theme and surely applicable to war in general and the Great War in particular.

The provenance of this painting, who owned it, where it went, is also of tremendous historical interest. It was owned by Walter Benjamin, one of the

great intellectuals of the era, it was owned by his friend Theodor Adorno, one of the other great intellectuals of the era, and it was owned by Gershom Scholem, their friend, a third great intellectual. It passes through the hands of all three men, close friends, separated by wars and rumours of wars. It migrates. This angel migrates from Germany, to France to exile in the United States, until it comes back to Europe and eventually finds its promised land. It is now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. So the passage of the angel through the 20th century, the provenance, is also a kind of parable of the century, a parable of history. I think the provenance of works of art, tracking them, is something we have yet to do much work on in international politics, and can reveal tremendous things to us.

Benjamin then was in dialogue with Klee, the artist, about the meaning of the painting about the meaning of the painting. He was also in dialogue with his friends Adorno and Scholem about the meaning of the painting, and the various meanings or identifications that have been suggested are another layer of fascination in the story. Adorno had his own idea about who this angel represented, who it could be identified with. Adorno wrote this:

'During the First World War or shortly after, Klee drew cartoons of Kaiser Wilhelm as an inhuman iron eater. Later, in 1920, these became the Angelus Novus, the machine angel, who though he no longer bears any emblem of caricature or commitment flies far beyond both. The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel that does not give but takes.'

So here is a suggestion from Adorno that the angel is really Kaiser Wilhelm in disguise, or Kaiser Wilhelm – what shall we say – transmogrified. And Adorno was quite right that Klee did caricatures of the Kaiser. Whether he was quite right that this was the Kaiser with wings, I'm not so sure. But here's one suggestion to you – and Adorno also points out the question – does the angel come to us with the possibility of hope, salvation, redemption, this is after all what angels are often supposed to do. Or is the angel announcing something bleaker, darker, forever driven back the debris piling up. The debris continues to pile up, ladies and gentleman. The idea that the angel is the Kaiser does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities of this image. Most recently it has been suggested that the new angel is none other than Adolf Hitler.

This sounds farfetched but there is in Klee's work of this period Hitler-like images and who knows if he could be the Kaiser transmogrified, perhaps also

Hitler lurks here too. My point is that the image itself is so fertile that it has linked one war with another, it takes us through history. It does something else; it acts as inspiration for more artworks, so in another pregnant year, 1989, the prodigious German artist Anselm Kiefer, produced an angel in 3D. This installation [shows image to audience], this is Kiefer's 'Angel of history: poppy and memory' - a bomber, with a book or books on its wings and poppies also. It is laden with poppies and memories. Poppy and Memory harks back to the German poet Celan, harks back to the Holocaust. The angel then transports us from one war to another through the century, through interpretations of history. This is what art can do for us. Art can somehow give us hope, it can inspire thought, it can come laden with a kind of ethical freight. Here you see a kind of ethical freight made real. It can in the end inspire. Thank you.