

Museums, European Society and the Legacy of 1918

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In 1918 it was a widely-held view that the war that had just ended was the war to end all wars. Tragically, of course, the twentieth century proved to be Europe's most deadly century. But, to what extent are we confident that the chauvinistic rivalries and extremist ideology that propelled nation to take up arms against nation and divided citizens within nations are historical phenomena and entirely absent from contemporary phenomena?

This talk will present an overview of how, in such a context, the museum is positioned; issues to be considered include where responsibilities lie and the challenges that arise. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that celebrating societal and cultural diversity should be a way to recapture traditions of civilization rather than a source of tension; on the other hand, the glorification of national narratives has the potential to sustain old enmities. In recent years there has been a welling up of interest among the public in remembrance and commemoration, and the museum plays a central role in facilitating such processes, sometimes referred to as a vital combination of perpetuation and closure. Above all, when, for the first time in modern history, the vast majority of Europeans have had no direct experience of the horrors of war or warfare, the museum should be a key repository for the authentic and accurate representation to new generations of war and its awful legacy.