

**Alain Croix, Didier Guyvarc'h, Timbres en guerre. Les mémoires des deux conflits mondiaux, Rennes (Presses universitaires de Rennes) 2016, 214 p. (Histoire), ISBN 978-2-7535-5135-0, EUR 29,00.**

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To be effective, the public memory of war must first be constructed, then reinforced by repetition and familiarity. It cannot be taken as a given, nor is it entirely predictable which images will capture the public imagination. And as recent conflicts have demonstrated, where public sympathy is lost, the wars and the troops who fought in them may struggle for any form of public recognition. The American war in Vietnam and the French intervention in Algeria are two cases where the support of civil society was not obtained and where public memory remains clouded by moral ambivalence.

It was largely to win over their own civilian populations that 20<sup>th</sup>-century governments placed so much emphasis on war propaganda, whether through pamphlets, photographs, radio, the cinema or the design of everyday objects, that would present a consistently patriotic message. Postage stamps were in many ways an ideal medium for this purpose, at least over the period covered by the two world wars, when censorship was widely in force, when public agencies controlled the themes portrayed on each nation's stamps, and when special issues were eagerly awaited by millions of collectors world wide.

It was their sheer ubiquity that made stamps so powerful, a mundane everyday item that entered every home and which could be designed to carry a simple propagandist or pedagogical message, whether it was to urge patriotic behaviour, to spread warnings about enemy agents, to incite national pride or to help those caring for the wounded. During both the world wars postal usage peaked and these messages were carried to millions. And in the years after the wars ended, special issues helped to define their memory, both in the combatant nations themselves and across the world. They were aimed at multiple audiences, both the general public as the recipients of letters and postcards and a more discriminating clientele of investors.

These were the peak years of stamp collecting, too, when postage stamps were treasured items for collectors and new stamp issues were eagerly awaited and purchased by young and old alike. But stamp collecting was a hobby specific to a particular time, and that time has largely passed as the young, always a vital part of the market, lost interest and moved on to other, more contemporary media – most especially, of course, to the internet and the huge archives of images it contains.

Children today are less familiar with stamps, and less intrigued by them, with fewer letters being sent as people increasingly turn to electronic communication. And stamps no longer have the aura of rarity and heritage that once attracted collectors, as countries across the globe use special issues as a source of revenue and profit, printing seemingly endless series featuring everything from plants, birds and animals to moments in their own and others' historical past.



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In all, 187 countries (of those that are still political entities today) issued some 570 000 different commemorative stamps in the century after 1914, some showing an almost demonic determination to extract every penny from the philatelic market. The result has been a process of commodification that has undermined public interest in postage stamps as artistic artefacts and stripped away much of their commercial value. Today, only very old and rare stamps can be regarded as a sound financial investment.

The two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were, unsurprisingly, privileged *lieux de mémoire* for the world's postal services, with country after country using stamps to convey images of patriotism and national identity or to express support for the war effort. In this lavishly-illustrated book Alain Croix and Didier Guyvarc'h, cultural historians of Brittany and specialists in the history of memory – Guyvarc'h has published an in-depth study of the construction of public memory in Nantes since the time of the Revolution – explore the variety of topics that appeared in the special issues on the two wars. Why were particular images chosen? Whom were they aimed at? How far did the contrasting approaches of different countries reflect different political priorities as well as different cultures of war?

The authors show how the two wars were handled very differently as public opinion evolved. In the Great War, images focussed more narrowly on the fighting and the tragedy of the battlefield; whereas in the Second World War there were more frequent glimpses of civilian life, of urban destruction, of the final moment of liberation. This more inclusive approach reflects, of course, the greater involvement of civilians in the Second World War and the higher death rate among them. It was a war whose effects were felt far beyond the battlefield and where whole cities, like Leningrad, were martyred in the cause of their respective nations.

It reflects, too, the priorities of the time, as the focus spread to non-combatant activities like agriculture, war industries, or nursing the sick and wounded. In Belgium, for instance, one of the most influential series looked at the work of doctors, nurses and auxiliaries in the country's hospitals and the exceptional responsibilities they faced in wartime. Peasants, pilots and munitions workers all shared in national commemorations.

Myths were created and ideological messages pressed home. Here no two countries had the same interests or the same memorial priorities. France, whose active war had ended abruptly in 1940, was concerned more with the Free French and patriotic resistance than with the actual fighting, for good reason. Stamps repeatedly returned to France's Resistance hero, Charles de Gaulle, both at home and across France's scattered imperial possessions: yet his was virtually the only voice heard, and the internal resistance to the German Occupation was largely ignored, particularly when it was Communist-led. In the Soviet Union, the war was about the containment of Nazism and the heroic defence of the motherland against a fascist assault: here, unlike in the West, the emphasis was placed directly on the sacrifice of the fighting man, with around 120 stamps across four decades exalting the heroism of the Red Army.

Across much of Eastern Europe philately followed politics, presenting a pro-Soviet interpretation until the fall of the Berlin Wall, then lurching to the support of national independence movements. Most of these countries, of course, did have their own memories of the world wars, and



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often their own axes to grind. Across the globe, countries with no direct experience of either war but with an eye to the philatelic market vied with one another to design the most alluring depictions of battles, aircraft and military hardware, or followed the imperial lead given by London or Paris in marking key anniversaries from the two world wars, from the Somme and Vimy Ridge to Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. These were iconic moments and – especially after the Second World War – it seemed that, in their postage stamps, the world took note.

But perhaps it is not only the events that were celebrated that should be noted; so should the silences, the massacres and genocides that are only rarely commemorated. Nazi reprisals against French Resistance leaders were seldom commemorated in France, but appear on stamps in Soviet Russia; the Holocaust is almost exclusively reserved for stamps issued in Israel; while the new states of sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific that sought to profit from the issue of stamps commemorating the wars – none produced more than the tiny Marshall Islands – had no interest in depicting the uglier face of conflict. In depicting war there was no requirement to be comprehensive, or even-handed, in the choice of subjects.

Each country, it would seem, had an agenda, even if it was simply to maximize revenue, with the consequence that, just as commemorative stamps played their part in forging national memories, so they passed over events in silence and airbrushed them out of public consciousness. After 1989 these silences may seem less pregnant, less obviously the result of political choice, as the power of the postage stamp to persuade waned. Only the new states born of the former Soviet empire seemed set on pursuing the work of memory-creation in a succession of special issues about the wars. It is a reminder of the role they had played across the world in their heyday, when, as the authors eloquently remind us, postage stamps were a powerful tool in the hands of governments and opinion-makers.



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