

Session 3: Representing a past war for whom?

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World War II continues to play an intriguing role in contemporary societies across Western Europe. Seventy years after the end of this conflict, the need for experiences and stories, for discoveries, revelations and interpretations is still strong. Numerous post-war conflicts and other historical developments, from the Cold War to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and from Decolonization to the War on Terror, have not led to a noteworthy decline of this historical public interest (other significant developments may even have contributed to an increased interest in certain aspects).

The impact of these post-war political developments on the content and imagination of the war was perhaps as limited as the influence historians had on the representation of World War II. To what extent does the historians' familiarity with text, their pursuit to follow the sources as closely as possible, yet a rather distant focus on often larger-scale issues match with the public need for war representations? Is the increased dominance of the visual, the need to 'experience' (the recreation of) the war, to see it from an individual perspective, still compatible with academic historiography? Both old and new media, and visual media - from comics to games - in particular, are breaking new grounds here. But their popularity raises two key questions: What have we gained analytically from these new dominant forms of public history? And has this resulted in a new hermeneutics that connect the audience(s) more profoundly with the past, leading to a better understanding?