



# “ALL QUIET ON THE FRENCH FRONT”: THE FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY IN FRANCE AND THE CHALLENGES OF REPUBLICAN CONSENSUS

«Sin novedad en el frente»: el centenario de  
la Primera Guerra Mundial en Francia y los  
desafíos al Consenso Republicano

**Karine Varley**

University of Strathclyde  
School of Humanities & Social Sciences  
E-mail: [karine.varley@strath.ac.uk](mailto:karine.varley@strath.ac.uk)



**Autores**

The 2014 centenary commemorations of the First World War in France were described by many commentators as being marked by a level of consensus that stood in marked contrast with the broader political environment and the divisive memories of the Second World War. Yet despite shared desires to honour the *poilu* as a symbol of the sacrifices of all French soldiers, this article argues that the appearance of consensus masks deeper tensions between memories of the First World War and the ideas and values underpinning the French Republic. During the war and the period thereafter, myths of the nation in arms served to legitimise the mobilisation and immense sacrifices of the French people. The wars of the French Revolution had established the notion of the responsibility of the French people to defend their country, creating a close connection between military service, citizenship and membership of the nation. However, these ideas were challenged by memories of the mutinies of 1917 and of the punishment of those who had disobeyed orders. Having long been excluded from official commemorations, in 2014 the French government sought to rehabilitate the memory of the soldiers shot as an example for committing acts of disobedience, espionage and criminal offences. The memory of these soldiers fuelled disagreements over how far soldiers had willingly consented to fight and sacrifice their lives. Indeed, claims that soldiers had been unwilling “victims” undermined myths of the “Sacred Union” of 1914 and the very foundations of republican concepts of the nation.



**Resumen**

French Republic; Centenary; First World War; Poilu.  
*República Francesa; Centenario; Primera Guerra Mundial; Poilu.*



**Key words**

Recibido: 17-03-15. Aceptado: 26-03-15



**Fechas**

*Las conmemoraciones del centenario de la Primera Guerra Mundial en 2014 en Francia se han descrito por muchos comentaristas como marcadas por un nivel de consenso en contraposición al entorno político general y a los recuerdos divisivos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Aún así, a pesar de los deseos comunes de honrar el poilu como un símbolo de los sacrificios de todos los soldados franceses, este artículo sostiene que la aparición del consenso enmascara tensiones más profundas entre los recuerdos de la Primera Guerra Mundial y las ideas y valores que sustentan la República Francesa. Durante la guerra y el periodo posterior, los mitos de la nación en armas sirvieron para legitimar la movilización y los inmensos sacrificios del pueblo francés. Las guerras de la Revolución Francesa establecieron la noción de la responsabilidad de los franceses en la defensa de su país, creando una conexión cercana entre el servicio militar, la ciudadanía y la membresía de la nación. Sin embargo, estas ideas se desafiaron por los recuerdos de los motines de 1917 y por los castigos impuestos a aquellos que desafiaron órdenes. Tras haber sido excluidos durante largo tiempo de las conmemoraciones oficiales, en 2014 el gobierno francés procuró rehabilitar la memoria de los soldados que fueron disparados para sentar ejemplo por cometer actos de desobediencia, espionaje y ofensas criminales. El recuerdo de aquellos soldados avivó las discrepancias sobre hasta qué punto habían consentido por voluntad propia a luchar y sacrificar sus vidas. De hecho, las reclamaciones de que los soldados habían sido «víctimas» reticentes socavaron los mitos de la «Unión Sagrada» de 1914 y los mismos cimientos de los conceptos republicanos de la nación.*



On the eve of the commemorations marking the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, the *New York Times* reported: “all is quiet on the French front”. Despite the tendency of the French people to “disagree on almost everything, the surge of interest in the war hasn’t set off any new debate” (Kauffmann, 2014). *Le Monde* concurred, observing that although the country remained utterly “divided” on every other matter, the First World War centenary was “very consensual” (Flandrin, 2014, August 2). Such claims might seem odd in view of the intense political, social and cultural discord within France, but they seem astonishing in light of the unprecedented scenes of public disorder witnessed at the 2013 armistice day commemorations. Protestors belonging to traditionalist and right-wing groups heckled President François Hollande as he laid a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier, some demanding to reclaim the memory of the Great War as belonging to “the people” and not to an elite “clique”.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores why the First World War centenary commemorations in France have appeared a subject at once of consensus and contestation. With over 1.3 million men killed, over three million wounded and much of the fighting taking place on its soil, France suffered more than most belligerent states. In the years that followed, remembrance centred upon the mourning of the dead whose sacrifices were widely believed to have brought victory for civilisation against barbarism. An estimated 36,000 memorials honoured the fallen across France, and with over eight million men having served in the army, the war lived on in individual and collective memories.<sup>2</sup> The war was transformative and enduring in its impact, bringing into sharp relief some of the paradoxes inherent to the values of the French Republic. It raised questions about

1 See Politi (2013).

2 See Prost (1977) and Sherman (1999).

the relationship between the citizen and the nation, concepts of duty and how the social contract functioned in extreme circumstances.<sup>3</sup> By exploring how the relationship between the memories of the two world wars, the debates over soldiers' willingness to fight, and the role played by colonial forces have played out in the official centenary commemorations, this article argues that the legacy of the First World War has endured as part of France's "living past" (Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2003, p. 189). Official assertions that the war was fought to defend the values of the French Republic have created an impression of consensus. In so doing, however, they have left aspects of contestation unresolved.

## Organising the centenary

One of the reasons that the First World War centenary commemorations appeared characterised by consensus was that the government made conscious efforts to avoid repeating the controversies that had previously arisen over the treatment of France's past. After the row over his proposed *Maison de l'histoire de la France*, which many historians deemed an ideologically-motivated distortion of history, President Nicolas Sarkozy sought to build a consensus.<sup>4</sup> He therefore appointed the historian Joseph Zimet to lead the *Mission du Centenaire* and bring together the opposing historiographical schools (Flandrin, 2014, August 2). Working alongside seven government departments, local authorities and other interested parties, the *Mission du Centenaire* was charged with overseeing the commemorative programme, with the former Chief of Staff of the French Army, General Elrick Irastorza, as President of the Board of Directors. The scientific committee, headed by the renowned historian Antoine Prost, was consciously international, including the French historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, the German historian Gerd Krumeich, Hew Strachan and John Horne from the UK and Ireland, and Jay Winter from the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The stated aim of the *Mission du Centenaire* was to encourage French society to rediscover the "unifying memory" of the First World War. The centenary would be a time for "civic introspection" and "historical reflection" around a narrative that conveyed French values ("Dossier de presse: Centenaire de la première guerre mondiale", 2013). Memories of dissent that had traditionally been omitted were to be reintegrated, while memories of soldiers' élan, which had long been portrayed as a myth, were to be revived as well (Zimet, 2011, p. 67). While France would rediscover its roots, it would be an occasion not for nostalgia but for looking towards the future, with a focus upon local and social engagement.<sup>6</sup> The role of the state was to be largely confined to organising the key national and international events in 2014 and 2018 and supporting major cultural initiatives.<sup>7</sup> The *Mission du Centenaire* also envisaged France as the "epicentre" of global war remembrance, emphasising international reconciliation and European peace (Zimet, 2011, p. 9). It would thus be, in the words of Zimet, a "commemoration communion"

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3 See Chaillan (2013).

4 See Evin (2012).

5 See "La mission du centenaire" (2013).

6 See "Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées. Séance de 10 heures 45" (2014).

7 See Jeanneney & Zimet (2013).

or “communio-memoration” between the belligerent nations as they sought to understand the significance of the past for the present (2011, p. 11).

## Clashing anniversaries

By dint of historical and arithmetical chance, 2014 brought not just the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War but the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of France in 1944. The coincidence of the two milestone anniversaries led to a summer calendar that switched between the two wars every few weeks, causing confusion and even commemoration fatigue. More seriously, however, the two conflicts became conflated. In late 2012, the government decided to group the commemoration of the two wars under a single inter-ministerial group overseen by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Kader Arif. The move sparked widespread criticism that the government would seek to present the two wars as one single narrative.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, despite insisting that the two world wars would be treated distinctly, Hollande launched the centenary commemorations in 2013 because he wanted to bring memories of the two conflicts together. After attending the 11 November parade down the Champs-Élysées, Hollande paid homage to the maquisards of Oyonnax whose defiant tribute to the fallen soldiers of the First World War in 1943 had galvanised Churchill’s faith in the Resistance (Hollande, 2013 November 7).<sup>9</sup>

Critics warned that grouping the commemorations together risked returning to Gaullist notions of a “thirty years war” between France and Germany that began in 1914 and only ended in 1944.<sup>10</sup> Many feared that memories of the First World War would be used as a kind of deflective shield for the more divisive memories of the Second World War. As early as April 1945, Charles de Gaulle employed a strategy of conflating the two world wars in order to downplay France’s internal divisions and to hide the shame of collaboration with the Nazis (Rousso, 1990, pp- 31-32). In presenting the Second World War as a continuation of the First, de Gaulle sought to define French national identity in terms of the patriotic virtues exhibited by the *poilus* (infantrymen) in the First World War, rather than the less edifying conduct of the collaborators. In 1964, he explicitly linked the commemoration of the two world wars in the name of French unity, connecting the French mobilisation of August 1914, the battle of the Marne and the battle of Verdun with the Allied landings in Provence of August 1944 (Bertand, 2013, p. 6). Thus, while the Second World War may have overshadowed the First World War in the post-1945 public consciousness, de Gaulle sought to cloak the discomfiting memories of 1939-45 with the more reassuring memories of 1914-18.

Many in France continue to view memories of the First World War as being less problematic than those of the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Zimet (2011, p. 26) contrasted the “divided” memory of the Second World War with the capacity of the First to unite the nation behind memories of four years of collective suffering, resilience and the defiant defence of French soil. Whereas the *poilu* has come to stand as a kind of sacred symbol of the patriotic selflessness of

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8 See “2014, les artifices d’une polémique” (2012).

9 See Hollande (2013, November 07) and “11 novembre: pourquoi François Hollande se rend à Oyonnax” (2013).

10 Ibid.

11 See Soulé (2014).

the ordinary soldier, no such figure exists for the Second World War. Resistance fighters may have been portrayed as heroic, but their actions were often ambiguous, contentious and political. Such perspectives are not shared by many of France's wartime allies, however. Whereas the *Mission du Centenaire* wanted to make the 2014 armistice day commemorations in Paris an international gathering of heads of state, foreign leaders chose instead to attend the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy. For many of France's allies, the war against the Nazis represented a simpler, more heroic narrative than the complex justifications for the outbreak and huge losses sustained in the First World War.

### The war and republican political culture

At a time of deep political, social and cultural division, Hollande sought to use the centenary to unite the nation behind an idealised vision of the "sacred union" of 1914-18 that sanctified the values of the French Republic. In the wake of the bitter rifts triggered by the Dreyfus Affair, and with trade unions threatening the mobilisation of French forces, the "sacred union" proclaimed by President Raymond Poincaré on 4 August 1914 was an attempt to bring the country together in the face of German aggression. The decision by the Catholic clergy and by socialists to put aside their grievances to support the war effort has often been cited as a rare display of unity behind the French Republic, even if many historians argue that it was superficial and short-lived (Becker, 1985, p. 300). Hollande thus sought to renew the spirit of "sacred union" in 2014, citing 1914 as an example of how France had prevailed when all had drawn together as "one single country, one single army and one single nation" (2013, November 7). Prime Minister Manuel Valls echoed the call at the commemorations for the Battle of the Marne in September 2014. Coming just a fortnight after the collapse of the government on 25 August, Valls evoked the resilience of French forces in halting the German advance as a rallying cry for strength through unity.<sup>12</sup> The government consciously downplayed or ignored wartime divisions. The suggestion that unity had been impossible, that the legitimacy of the Republic had still been in doubt and that not all soldiers had willingly consented to fight for France did not fit the desired political agenda of the centenary.

Since the late 1990s, political memories and historical debate have become polarised around the issue of soldiers' consent in the First World War. While many on the centre right of French politics have emphasised narratives of willing sacrifice for the nation, the left have focused on the soldiers who were shot by the French army, the munitions and those traditionally excluded from public memories. The divergent perspectives crystallised at the eightieth anniversary of the armistice in November 1998. During the ceremonies at the site of the controversial Chemin des Dames offensive of March 1917, socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin paid homage to the men who had refused to submit to orders, claiming that they had been pushed beyond the limits of human endurance. At the same ceremony, the Mayor of Craonne asserted that the Nivelle offensive had been the first "crime against humanity" (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2002, p. 2). The ill-fated assault had long been contentious, leading to 147,000 French casualties and sparking a series of mutinies within the French army. Yet the speeches added a new dimension to the debate, sending shockwaves across the political establishment and dividing historians.

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12 See "Valls appelle au 'sursaut' à l'occasion du centenaire de la bataille de la Marne" (2014).

For while notions of the soldier as a “victim” had gained common currency elsewhere, the same had not been the case in France.

The claims triggered a particularly intense row between French scholars.<sup>13</sup> Based at the research centre of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, two of the country’s leading historians, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, strongly rejected suggestions that French soldiers were victims and that the mutineers of 1917 were the “true heroes” of the war (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2002, pp. 1-3). In a century of total war, they argued, suffering had become a competition. More had been written about soldiers’ fraternisation with the enemy than about their hatred of them because it was preferable to be remembered as a victim than as someone who had willingly killed. In reality, far from being “sacrificial lambs” to the “military butchers”, French soldiers had forged their own “war culture” grounded in a national sentiment and defensive patriotism that had sustained them through four years of conflict (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2002, pp. 1-3). The interpretation advanced by scholars based at the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* has had significant public impact, shaping the way the war is taught in schools. Yet their argument has in turn been robustly contested by historians based at the *Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918* (CRID). Nicolas Offenstadt has dismissed notions of a “war culture” as “nonsense” and lacking any empirical foundation.<sup>14</sup> Together with Rémy Cazals and Frédéric Rousseau, Offenstadt and the other CRID historians have argued that French soldiers’ resilience was only maintained by state coercion and the suppression of dissent (Purseigle, 2008, p. 11).

The particularities of French political culture, the legacies of the Revolution of 1789 and the paradoxes inherent to republican values have given the debates about soldiers’ consent a distinct significance in France. The notion of the soldier as a victim or as having fought solely out of coercion conflicts with the core republican principle of popular sovereignty. It threatened to undermine not just the legitimacy of France’s engagement in the war but the legitimacy of the Republic itself, implying that soldiers were as much the victims of the French government who sent them into combat as they were of the German enemy and of the brutalities of war. Traditional concepts of military obedience have fuelled narratives of the soldiers of 1914-18 as tragic victims in many countries. Yet such perspectives fail to take into account the distinctive models of consent and obedience that operated in the French army (Smith, 1994, pp. 11-12). The French Revolution redefined the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, advancing a concept of popular sovereignty that sought to reconcile the conflicting imperatives of compliance and liberty by making the citizen at once a source and a subject of political authority. The new ideas on political power also transformed the nature of war. With the Revolution in danger, defending the nation became the primary duty of each citizen. While concepts of the nation in arms later mythologised the citizen soldiers who volunteered to fight for France, the *levée en masse* of 1793 compulsorily mobilised all unmarried men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. However, the new thinking rationalised soldiers’ obedience because the authority of military commanders was deemed to be rooted in the popular sovereignty of the nation (Smith, 1994, pp. 7-8).

The mobilisation of 1914 echoed the contradictions of the French Revolutionary Wars, conflating notions of voluntary and mandatory military service. While the *poilu* seemed like an echo

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13 See Purseigle (2008, pp. 9-14).

14 See Offenstadt (n.d.).

of the revolutionary citizen soldier willingly defending the universal values of the French nation, a lack of available manpower meant that France had to rely on compulsory short-term service, mobilising a greater proportion of its adult male population than any other belligerent state. But the particularities of France's political culture meant that the agency of the common soldier in the French army differed to that of his counterparts elsewhere. Under the Third Republic, concepts of the citizen soldier meant that military authority and obedience were constantly subjected to negotiation. In this sense, the experiences of French soldiers during the First World War were quite different to those of their allies and enemies. As a result, myths of the soldiers as "lions led by donkeys", and as victims of incompetent military and political elites, did not carry the same resonance in France as they did elsewhere. Universal military service served to legitimise the notion that all citizens had a duty to fight and if necessary die to defend France. In countries such as Britain, where compulsory military service was not embedded in the national culture and identity, the enormous costs of the First World War were more widely contested (Winter, 2013, p. 167).

With national service having ended in 1996, however, the close connection between the nation and the army, which had so long been at the heart of the French Republic, was broken (Jeanneney, 2013, p. 70). The experiences of the *poilu* risked no longer having such powerful resonance and interpretations of soldiers' consent risked being distorted by more modern perspectives. Yet in seeking to recapture the mood of the country at the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, the centenary commemorations aimed to obviate any questioning of the war by seeking to evoke the ethos of the time. Hollande's approach was markedly different to that of Jospin in 1998. There was no repetition of the claims that French soldiers had been unwilling victims in the war. Instead, the emphasis was upon honouring their bravery and resolution. The *poilu* was heralded as a humble but heroic figure, a building block of the Republic and an embodiment of the virtues to which all French citizens should aspire.

For many years after the end of the First World War, the memory of the men shot for disobeying orders was shrouded in official silence. Widely perceived to have been executed as an example to other soldiers in order to restore discipline in the wake of the 1917 mutinies, they were not officially commemorated or honoured in any war memorials.<sup>15</sup> Disagreement over how to treat them had turned into an avoidance that was only broken by Lionel Jospin's controversial speech of 5 November 1998. Citing the pacifist writer Henri Barbusse and the poet Louis Aragon, the socialist Prime Minister called for the soldiers who had been "shot as an example" to be reintegrated into the national collective memory, arguing that those who had "refused to be sacrificed" had been exhausted by enemy attacks and had endured an "unending sense of despair" (Jospin, 1998, November 5). The speech triggered a debate that started to transform the view within government. Having initially criticised Jospin's call, as President ten years later, Sarkozy not only paid homage to the mutineers of 1917 but also conceded a degree of culpability by the government and army as well. The executed men were not cowards, Sarkozy argued, but men of whom France had "asked too much" and who had sometimes been "sent to be massacred" because of mistakes made by military commanders (Jeanneney, 2013, p. 72).

As part of the preparations for the First World War centenary, in August 2012, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian commissioned a report into the soldiers who had been shot by the

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15 See Offenstadt (1999).

French army. The report, produced by a committee of historians including Audoin-Rouzeau, Offenstadt and Zimet, and headed by Antoine Prost, sought to offer possible courses of action. Completed in October 2013, it looked into the cases of 638 soldiers shot for military offences, as well as the 140 executed for criminal offences, 127 executed for espionage, 47 executed for unknown reasons and 55 who were summarily executed. It sought to correct public misconceptions by distinguishing between the executed mutineers in 1917 and men who were shot by the French army on other grounds, and by dismissing the notion that the former had been shot purely as an example to others (“Quelle mémoire pour les fusillés de 1914-1918? Un point de vue historien”, 2013, pp. 1-4). The authors of the report found tensions between contemporary public attitudes and the realities of the First World War. The widespread rejection of the death sentence, together with modern sensitivities about casualties in war and questions over the legitimacy of recent military interventions, had distorted perceptions of the treatment of soldiers in the First World War. At the time, shooting deserters had been a legal and legitimate form of punishment. Whereas there is now much greater understanding of the effects of trauma and shell-shock, during the war the soldiers who disobeyed orders had simply been seen as cowards (“Quelle mémoire...”, 2013, pp. 22-24). The authors of the report therefore concluded that any rehabilitation of the shot men risked distorting the historical truth.

The committee recommended an official declaration explaining that many cases had involved mitigating circumstances, combined with a museum exhibition and an online database as the most appropriate course of action (“Quelle mémoire...”, 2013, pp. 30-31). The historians also considered a range of further options, including a proposal to rehabilitate the shot men so that their names could be included on war memorials. However, they decided that such a move risked wrongly implying that there had been a miscarriage of justice. While the government might amnesty a soldier who had repeatedly deserted his post, the committee argued that to rehabilitate him would represent an “act of violence” against the historical truth. More significantly, the historians warned that rehabilitation threatened to unravel the core values of the French Republic. If the government accepted that soldiers had acted legitimately in disobeying their orders in the First World War, the implication was that the Republic also accepted that it was not, or ever had been, the duty of the citizen to defend the nation (“Quelle mémoire...”, 2013, pp. 27-28).

The government’s decision to accept the committee’s recommendations was part of a wider shift away from notions of the soldiers as “victims” towards an emphasis upon reconciliation and empathy at the centenary. At the launch of the commemorations on 7 November 2013, Hollande argued for an inclusive memory, highlighting not what had driven soldiers beyond despair, but what had kept them going through “hell” (Hollande, 2013). The exhibition at the Musée de l’Armée also sought to take some of the heat out of the controversy. Opened on 6 November 2014, it sought to re-establish a sense of proportion between the high levels of public interest in the relatively small number of men shot by the army and the recognition that the overwhelming majority of soldiers were killed in combat. The exhibition provides touch-screen access to information on the charges levelled against soldiers, including extracts from court-martial documents and explanations from leading historians. The government has also made documents relating to the men shot by the army freely available online, as well as the files relating to all those killed in combat.<sup>16</sup> However, its decision not to permit visitors to the website to search

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16 For more information see Ministère de la Défense, *Mémoire des hommes Website*.



according to the reasons for soldiers' convictions suggests that there remain limits to its claims of transparency (Flandrin, 2014, November 7). It has served to add a new obstacle to attempts to understand the circumstances behind the men's deaths.

The government made only tentative moves towards reintegrating the mutinies of 1917 into the national memory. In July 2014, Hollande became the first French president to visit the site of the Chemin des Dames offensive. However, although the trip was in Hollande's official diary, it was not an official visit. He was ostensibly there to watch the Tour de France as it passed through some of the key sites of the war. He paid homage to the French dead at the Cerny-en-Laonnois cemetery, but his visit was essentially private, his paternal grandfather having spent ten months based in the area during the war. The hundredth anniversary of the offensive will be marked in the official commemorations of 2017, but how the mutinies will be dealt with has yet to be announced.

## Jean Jaurès

The decision to include the assassination of the socialist leader Jean Jaurès as one of the five principal dates in the 2014 commemorative calendar brought a different tone to the centenary. As a leading advocate of a peaceful resolution to the international crisis in the summer of 1914, Jaurès had gained a special status in French memory, transcending party politics.<sup>17</sup> His murder by an extreme nationalist on the eve of the war is widely seen as heralding a turning-point in French politics, uniting left and right and enabling the creation of the "sacred union" (Zimet, 2011, p.70). It has also come to acquire particular poignancy among those who believe that Jaurès represented France's last hope of avoiding war.

Despite being an internationalist and a pacifist, Jaurès' ideas on the Revolution and the nation enabled socialists to justify supporting the "sacred union" in 1914 (Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 2003, p. 27). While he opposed wars of expansion, he maintained that defending the nation was a just cause for engaging in military conflict (Forrest, 2009, p.180). He believed that the army's close connection with the nation in the French Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s had legitimised its actions and driven it on to victory. With his funeral taking place on the day that Poincaré announced the creation of the "sacred union", speakers such as the trade unionist Léon Jouhaux invoked Jaurès' thinking to argue in favour of supporting the war effort. Claiming that French workers were shaped by the traditions of the Revolution and the soldiers of Year II, Jouhaux maintained that they would be taking up arms against despotic regimes, not people. The soldiers of the Third Republic would thus continue the legacy of the soldiers of the First Republic and their engagement in the war would be legitimate (Forrest, 2009, p.198).

The centenary commemorations emphasised the legacy of Jaurès as a republican and advocate of peace. His memory was explicitly connected with contemporary messages of international reconciliation, reinforcing France's relationship with Germany and the importance of European cooperation. Visiting the Café du Croissant, the site of the assassination, Hollande was accompanied by German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel. He paid tribute to Jaurès as having symbolised "peace and unity, the rallying of the Republic".<sup>18</sup> A major exhibition at the Archives

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17 See "Unanimité autour de Jaurès, cent ans après sa mort" (2014).

18 See "L'hommage quasi silencieux de Hollande à Jaurès" (2014).

Nationales sought to explore Jaurès' significance within the construction of "republican democracy"; analysis of his role as a socialist was confined to academic conferences and colloquia.<sup>19</sup>

## Colonial forces

The twin issues of how soldiers' consent and the values of the Republic fitted with participation in the First World War were particularly contested in relation to the role played by colonial forces. Over the course of the war, 607,000 colonial soldiers contributed towards the French war effort, including 294,000 from North Africa and 171,000 from West Africa. However, their participation has since become refracted through the more recent controversies over France's imperial past. Myths of French colonial soldiers suffering disproportionately heavy losses or of being more readily sacrificed by French commanders have become widely disseminated, even though, in reality, 75,000 or fifteen per cent of French colonial soldiers were killed, compared to 1.4 million or seventeen per cent of French soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Any act of commemoration therefore had to strike a delicate balance between paying homage to the dead and negotiating the contested legacies of French imperialism. As head of the *Mission du Centenaire*, Zimet consciously sought to reflect the diversity of the contemporary French nation by giving due attention to the contribution of the former colonies. However, French public opinion remains sharply divided over the memory of the empire and how far it embodied or conflicted with the values of the Republic (Jeanneney, 2013, p. 83). Disagreements therefore arose not just between Zimet, Hollande and Arif but between veterans' associations, pressure groups and the governments of the former colonies as well.

The official narrative of colonial soldiers' willingness to fight for France, articulated by Hollande and Zimet, clashed with the claims expressed by many descended from the former colonies, including Veterans' Minister Kader Arif. Zimet claimed that Muslim graves at Notre Dame de Lorette would testify for eternity the French Republic's debt to its former colonies, while the blood spilled by African forces was an "eloquent testimony of consented sacrifice" (Zimet 2011, p. 29). Hollande (2013, November 7) also expressed French gratitude, emphasising how the enduring bonds with the former colonial empire resonated in the nation's foreign and domestic policy. Abroad, France was repaying its "debt of honour" by supporting states such as Mali in their struggle against terrorism. At home, Hollande argued that the sacrifices of Muslim soldiers showed that Islam, French identity and the values of the Republic were entirely compatible.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Arif, who was originally from Algeria, conceded that the role played by colonial forces was a "painful" memory for France, and that their participation had, in fact, not always been willing (Cossart & Hainagiu, n.d., pp. 10-11).

The contested legitimacy of the French empire caused significant tensions over how to represent colonial forces in the centenary commemorations. Hollande's decision to invite representatives of the Algerian and Vietnamese armies to participate in a parade of the eighty belligerent countries on 14 July 2014 proved particularly controversial. Intended as a gesture of reconciliation to the two former colonies who only achieved independence after a long, bitter and bloody war against France, it was seen as an act of provocation by many *piets-noirs* (French settlers),

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19 See "Jean Jaurès, figure du centenaire" (n.d.).

20 See the broadcast "La Grande Guerre, ce n'est pas si loin de nos préoccupations actuelles" (2013).

21 See "Hollande soigne les musulmans de France" (2014).

veterans and the far right. The Cercle Algérieniste, an organisation which seeks to defend the cultural legacy of French rule in Algeria, claimed that Hollande's actions were ideologically driven by the government's contempt for the *pieds-noirs* and *harkis* (Algerians who fought in the French army). The Union Nationale des Combattants stated that it would be an "insult" to the families of those killed by terrorists during the conflicts in Algeria and Indochina. The far-right Front National, which owed much of its early support to disgruntled *pieds-noirs*, claimed that the presence of Algerian soldiers would turn the 14 July commemorations into a triumphant parade for the terrorists of the Algerian National Liberation Front (Mestre, 2014).

The Algerian government's decision to accept Hollande's invitation sparked fierce debate in Algeria. Critics denounced what they perceived as an implied imperialism, condemning it as an attack on Algerian sovereignty (Matarese, 2014). The loss of 23,000 Algerian soldiers in the First World War was overshadowed by the bitter legacy of the nation's colonial past and by the silences of official French memory. It was only in 1999 that the French state formally conceded that the conflict over Algerian independence had indeed been a war, and it was only in 2012 that the French government officially acknowledged the killing of Algerian nationalist demonstrators on the streets of Paris on 17 October 1961. While Hollande used the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence to recognise that French rule had been "brutal", he did not issue an apology. Thus, Said Abadou, the Secretary-General of the Algerian veterans' association, the National Organisation of the Mujahideen, maintained that Hollande's invitation should only have been accepted if it had been accompanied by a gesture of repentance for the crimes committed in Algeria. Abdelaziz Medjahed, a retired general of the Algerian army, asked why the French state had sought forgiveness for its actions against the Jews during the Second World War, but not for the French army's massacre of thousands of Algerians in Sétif on 8 May 1945 (Matarese, 2014). The inclusion of the former colonies in France's centenary commemorations thus highlighted how memories of the First World War had become a palimpsest upon which memories of the conflicts that followed had been inscribed. Despite the wishes of the *Mission du Centenaire* and the French government to wind back the clock to recapture the mood of the country at the outbreak of the war, it proved impossible to disentangle one contested conflict from another.

Hollande summed up the significance of the First World War as "the most difficult test ever endured by the French people as a whole" (2013, November 7). Whereas in Britain, there was considerable public debate about the origins of the war and whether the country was right to have entered it in August 1914, in France neither of these questions were contentious. Few contested the legitimacy of self-defence in response to the German invasion; instead, debate surrounded the motives that spurred soldiers to fight and die. In some respects, the centenary commemorations have echoed the divergences of the "sacred union". While France may have mobilised behind the war, the French people did so for their own reasons and ideas. As a consequence, the messages conveyed by the official commemorations have been frequently contested. The struggle to rally a divided country behind the Republic in 1914 was echoed in the struggles of the Hollande administration to do the same in 2014. As in 1914, the consensus at the centenary commemorations was shallow and fragile, but, as in 1914, it conveyed an impression of unity behind the Republic.

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