

Deaths of soldiers in wartime naturally have a powerful impact on the communities from which they come.

Research by **Edward Pinchbeck, Felipe Carozzi** and **Luca Repetto** reveals how losses in the first world war have reverberated through subsequent generations, shaping local memories, behaviour and social values.

Scars of war

The two world wars of the 20th century are an indelible part of Britain's public consciousness, cultural identity and shared memory. One way in which past wars endure in social and political discourse is through commemorative acts and symbols. These can take on an immense scale, as illustrated by the 40 million poppies distributed in the Royal British Legion's annual appeal.

Aside from their popularity, commemorative activities and symbols that are associated with past wars may

be important for at least two reasons.

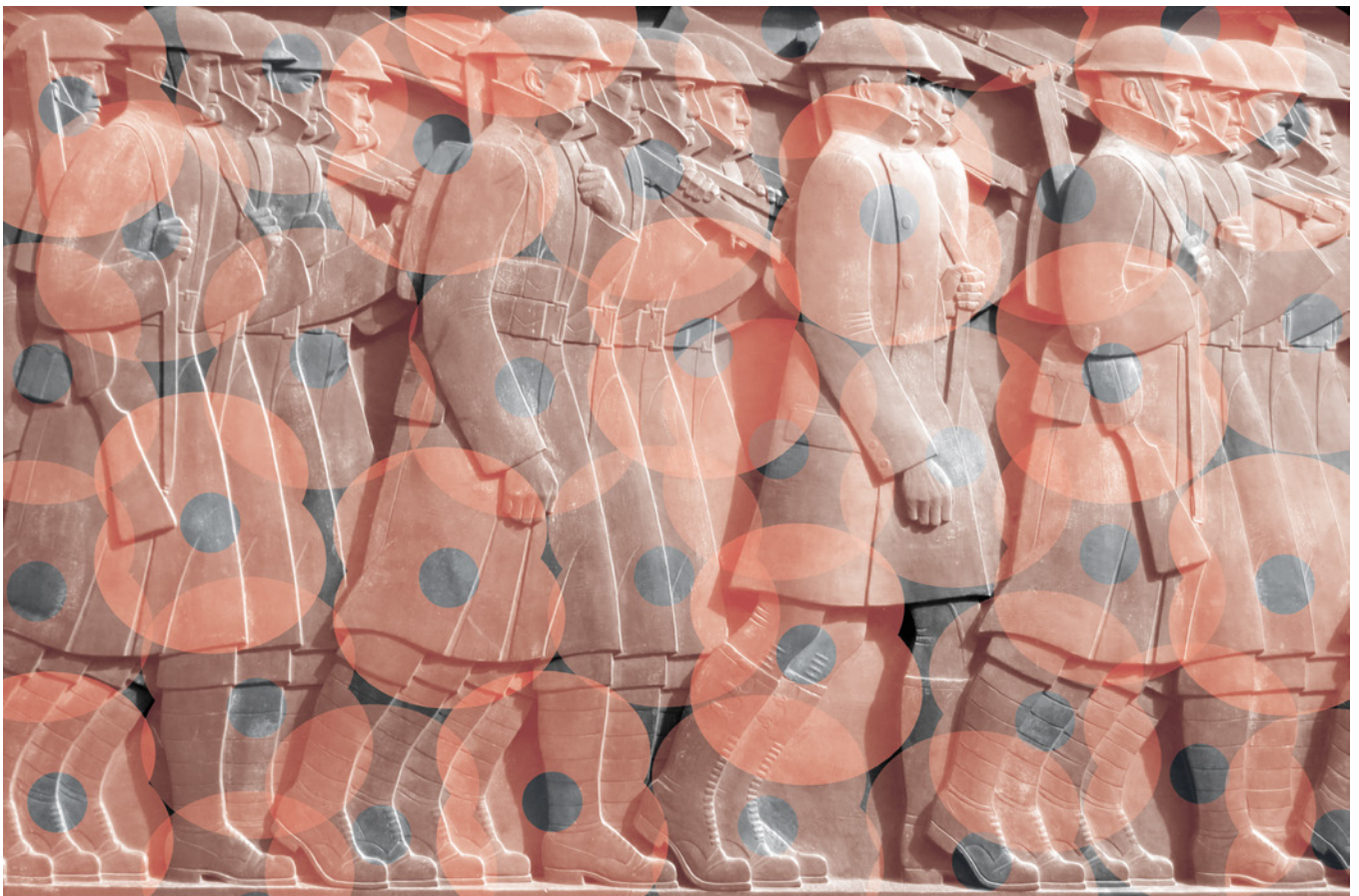
First, narratives surrounding them may be contested or politically charged.

For example, the announcement by former prime minister David Cameron of commemorations for the centenary of the first world war raised questions about tone and some cynicism. Party political logos on a remembrance wreath caused controversy in 2013, and in 2016, the England and Scotland men's football teams were fined by the sport's international governing body for wearing poppies during an Armistice Day match in

defiance of rules classifying the flower as a political symbol. (The ban on its use has since been lifted.)

Second, it is possible that commemoration can encourage pro-social or civic-oriented attitudes and behaviour. For example, an estimated 9.4 million people took part in community heritage projects between 2010 and 2018 as part of the first world war centenary.

The mass remembrance of war in Britain began in earnest after the first world war. The sheer scale of the conflict and the deadly nature of trench warfare meant



that more than 700,000 British soldiers did not return home. Following the armistice of 11 November 1918, memorialisation of the dead became a significant national concern: observed, for example, in the two minutes of silence, the ceremonial laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, and visits to the grave of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey and to the battlefields of the Western Front.

As well as national events, many local customs and traditions arose reflecting the diverse experience of local communities in the war. To honour their dead and to ensure that the sacrifice of their communities was never forgotten, local groups raised funds to erect more than 50,000 war memorials. These monuments, which can still be found in towns and villages throughout the country, served as tangible symbols of the human cost of the war and etched the memory of the fallen and their sacrifice into the very fabric of local communities.

Building civic capital

Our research explores whether sacrifice in past wars, and the way in which it is remembered, have lasting effects on local communities by changing the behaviour of later generations. We examine this in the context of the two world wars. Specifically, we ask if sacrifice in the first world war fed through to the behaviour of subsequent generations of soldiers on the battlefield in the second world war just 25 years later. Virtually all parts of England paid the cost of the wars but not all communities suffered equally.

We hypothesise that past acts of sacrifice and their commemoration motivate soldiers' actions because they foster values that encourage and normalise pro-social behaviour – if you were raised in a community in which past generations are lionised as heroes for their self-sacrifice, you may value social above individual ends. Building on previous work, we refer to these shared community values as civic capital.

Various features of interwar Britain suggest that the memory of the first world war was used to motivate soldiers throughout the second world war. For example, the 1939 Armistice Day radio message of Queen Elizabeth, consort to King George VI, explicitly linked the two wars: "For 20 years, we have kept this day of remembrance as one consecrated to the memory of past and never to be forgotten sacrifice. And now the peace, which that sacrifice made possible, has been broken, and once again we have been forced into war.... We have all a part to play, and I know you will not fail in yours."

To test our hypothesis, we have built new datasets from individual-level first and second world war death and service records. Our first major finding is that community-wide soldier deaths in the first world war strongly predict a community's losses in the second world war, as well as the likelihood that local soldiers are awarded gallantry medals in that conflict (see Figure 1). We use econometric techniques to establish that these connections are causal and are not

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being driven by inherent, pre-determined social and economic characteristics of communities or their residents, such as their health status or wealth levels.

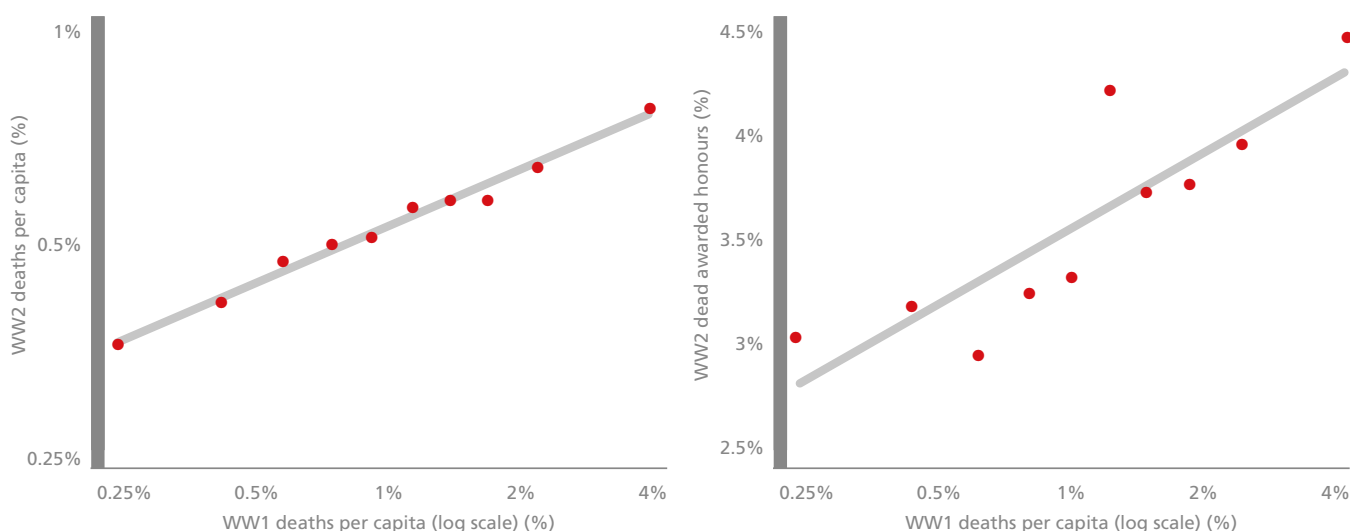
The power of memory

Subsequent results provide evidence that these effects run through past sacrifice leading to the formation of civic capital – that is, those shared values that emphasise co-operation and putting social above individual needs. For example, we establish that the more deaths in a community during the first world war, the more likely the community was to build higher quality war memorials (as measured by listed status) and to open more new charities and British Legion branches in the interwar period.

We provide evidence in favour of the existence of a channel from first world war deaths to second world war

Figure 1:

Rates of death and rates of military honours in the second world war





This article summarises 'Scars of War: The Legacy of WW1 Deaths on Civic Capital and Combat Motivation' by Edward Pinchbeck, Luca Repetto and Felipe Carozzi, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1940 (<https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1940.pdf>).

A version of this piece first appeared as 'How the scars of past wars continue to shape UK society' on *LSE British Politics and Policy* (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/how-the-scars-of-past-wars-continue-to-shape-uk-society/>).

Edward Pinchbeck is a Birmingham Fellow at Birmingham Business School. **Luca Repetto** is an associate professor of economics at Uppsala University. **Felipe Carozzi** is an associate professor of urban economics and economic geography at LSE and an associate in CEP's urban programme.

combat motivation that operates via the accumulation of local civic capital: the memory and commemoration of fallen soldiers and their courage at the community level changes soldiers' subjective value of individual sacrifice and encourages them to take additional risks in combat.

Our findings also reveal a noteworthy relationship between first world war deaths and increased political engagement in subsequent elections, a widely used indicator of civic capital. Using the electoral turnout data from 1910 to 1935, we find that the impact of first world war deaths on electoral turnout persists strongly, extending into the next two decades.

All told, our results indicate that past sacrifice and its remembrance can be powerful

drivers for subsequent generations. Our findings have several implications, including that past wars can be complementary to other forms of motivation such as propaganda or forced mobilisation. A darker interpretation is that war begets war, and the human costs of conflict can become concentrated in particular locations.

The extent to which the legacies of past wars still influence communities today remains an open question, and exploring the enduring effects of war in Britain is a continuing focus of our research.

On the one hand, it seems reasonable to expect that the civic-oriented values that spurred soldiers in the second world war persist

into modern times through a combination of intergenerational transmission of values and the memorialisation of past wars. On the other, some have argued that the best and brightest of the first world war generation were lost on the battlefield, and that this may have contributed to the subsequent decline of Britain as a world leader. The long-term consequences of the loss of talented young men for particular communities is as yet unclear.



Past sacrifice and its remembrance can be powerful drivers for subsequent generations