

# COMMEMORATION AND DIPLOMACY



DISCOVER LEARN REMEMBER

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## INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday 19 March 2025, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), in collaboration with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), hosted its second conference exploring the future of commemoration. Building on the first CWGC-RUSI event of November 2023 ('Commemorating the Past: Safeguarding the Future'), this conference sought to consider the past, present and future place of commemoration within international diplomacy.

The backdrop to the conference in 2023 had been the return of armed conflict to the European continent, with other prominent themes being the continuing presence of high global inflation and recognition of the ongoing harm being done to the world's climate and eco-systems. The 2025 meeting took place in the shadow of no less troubling international events. With attempts to end the war in Ukraine having stalled, there was new destructive turmoil in the Middle East, while financial uncertainty and environmental concerns continued to affect nations and peoples across the globe.

The event, attended by representatives of international war graves organisations, heritage bodies, the diplomatic sector, academia and the military, looked at the role the commemoration of casualties of war can play in supporting governments in their diplomatic endeavours to meet global challenges. It explored several different themes connecting remembrance and commemoration with international relations. This report is a record of those themes and the key discussions that took place on the day.





# 1. COMMEMORATION AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN A POST-COLONIAL WORLD

In our increasingly uncertain world, where the relevance of institutions and states are sometimes challenged, there are diminishing opportunities for people to come together and reflect on what connects them. However, the practice of commemoration is one area in which this is almost inescapable, a fact that also provides chances to bolster successful and productive diplomatic relations. History has shown that multi-national approaches to commemoration can help foster more inclusive practices and reset relations, something that has seen demonstrable success in Europe since the end of the Second World War.



There are, however, significant opportunities presented by this approach beyond Europe, and particularly between countries that share a history of colonialism. By adopting honest narratives that do not shy away from the difficult history of imperialism and the way in which empires have been mobilised in past wars, it is easier to account for all the dead and ensure the contributions, sacrifices and sufferings of all groups are honoured. At the same time, this will help to ensure present-day communities do not feel marginalised by commemorative activity but are instead actively involved in it. In line with these principles, the CWGC's Cape Town Labour Corps Memorial, unveiled in early 2025, is an example of how rethinking commemoration as a dialogue rather than a state or organisation-imposed concept can help to address historical inequalities in the way the dead are remembered and give voice to those who were previously marginalised.

By engaging with each other through open and welcoming commemorative practices, states can demonstrate cultural competency and acknowledge the contributions and sacrifices made by others in conflict; be they former enemies, allies or the subject people of a colonial power. While unresolved tensions can linger from conflicts long-since passed,

collectively acknowledging these tensions and engaging in honest dialogue will present opportunities to improve relations in the present. Commemorative and heritage organisations can lead and shape these dialogues, both in advisory capacities to government bodies and in the way they welcome and engage visitors at sites and host events. Their operational activities within countries can help develop relationships at national, regional and local levels that can benefit governmental interaction. If a key goal of these dialogues is to help foster improved diplomatic relations, then it is clear this will necessarily be an international collaborative endeavour between the various organisations involved.

There is a limit to what commemorative and heritage organisations alone can hope to influence and achieve in this area. After all, their work, and the presence of First World War cemeteries and memorials, did not prevent the Second World War. These organisations may be restricted in the extent to which they can actively work and advocate in this way and must be conscious of the risk of politicising commemoration in the process. Nonetheless, the act of commemoration provides fertile ground in which diplomatic conversations can flourish, so long as it is engaged with in a thoughtful and inclusive way.



## 2. CONTESTED MEMORY AND DIPLOMATIC TENSION



Identifying and pursuing opportunities to enable these connections means understanding the lingering tensions that are likely to exist between national narratives connected to conflict. Those narratives are anchored in collective memory, something that is subjective and shaped by experience. This is just as relevant at the state level as it is at the personal. Naturally, this is likely to mean the collective memory of a conflict is very different in states that were onetime adversaries, just as those mobilised by former colonial powers will also have different perspectives on what it means to experience war and its long-term consequences.

In the latter case in particular, the populations of post-colonial states might have deeply institutionalised memories of such wars as well as enduring collective trauma stemming from them, something

which may be unknown outside those countries. These issues present real challenges if the act of commemoration is to bring unity and understanding between peoples. To do that means understanding that the inherent tensions that exist in contested memories need not act as a barrier to commemoration and can instead be navigated by the demonstration of cultural maturity and sensitivity.

Acknowledging that states will not always remember and reflect on the past in the same way is an important step in this process, which means accepting the fact that different interpretations of the past can coexist. Memory of war and conflict can be deeply interwoven with culture and politics, which in turn can mean reflection produces deeply emotive responses. Therefore, it is the actual act of remembering that

must serve as common ground, irrespective of how different actors may view or recall the past. To achieve this means giving space and time to the stories of all those involved in conflict, particularly those whose contributions have historically been downplayed, marginalised or forgotten altogether. In this respect, commemoration and storytelling go hand-in-hand.

The importance engaging with global stories and experiences is of particular significance in this respect as the two world wars have so often been portrayed as distinctly European conflicts. Those wars were not only global because the world came to Europe to fight them, but because in both cases those wars were fought globally. Challenging that Eurocentric focus is of particular significance if all those affected by these wars are to be drawn into any collective effort to remember the dead. While this is true of any attempt at transnational collaboration, it is perhaps of the greatest significance when considering the Global South. Commemorative organisations, with their global footprint and responsibilities for cemeteries and memorials, are well placed to support this activity and foster the necessary conversations between states.



### 3. SOFT POWER AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

That permanent global footprint maintained by war graves organisations is sometimes the only physical reminder of an increasingly distant past that not only speaks to the appalling costs of war but the historical connections between modern states. Maintaining and providing access to these sites offers the public the ability to engage at their leisure with the histories connected to them and provides opportunities to sit at the heart of commemorative events and collective remembrance. These sacred spaces can, therefore, do more than just honour the dead; they can offer space in which people – be they citizens or their representatives – can meet, commemorate and reflect on shared history.

In many instances, cemeteries and memorials already serve as the setting for ceremonies at which those with diplomatic influence regularly attend. This performative aspect of commemoration can demonstrate shared values, such as a respect for history and, of course, the war dead. However, with the right intentions, planning and collaboration, such events also present pathways to reconciliation and new dialogues about the past. In these circumstances, sites take on renewed significance beyond their core function of permanently honouring the dead. They also routinely reflect the



contributions and sacrifices of different nations in war by helping to inform visitors of the stories of those who fought in them. They are invested, therefore, with the tremendous opportunity for educational outreach and the transmission of certain universal values.

Furthermore, the sustained interest in heritage tourism is demonstrative of the cultural influence that the built environment of commemoration can wield. Visitors want to interact with sites, learning about those who are commemorated there and what happened in the local area in the past. This cultural appetite for heritage and war tourism, epitomised by the recent inscription by UNESCO of 139 locations (including 51 CWGC sites) in France and Belgium as World Heritage Sites, presents the keepers of these sites an opportunity to project modern and inclusive narratives of commemoration. By adopting new strategies of sharing these narratives, such as 'digital commemoration', war graves and heritage organisations can be at the forefront of this and help maintain their relevance as the lived memory of distant conflicts wanes.



## 4. DIGITAL COMMEMORATION

Recent years have seen significant developments in the way the public engages with the work of commemorative organisations. Increasingly, digital platforms are being used to enhance educational outreach, enabling a greater number of people to interact with their work than ever before in new and different ways.

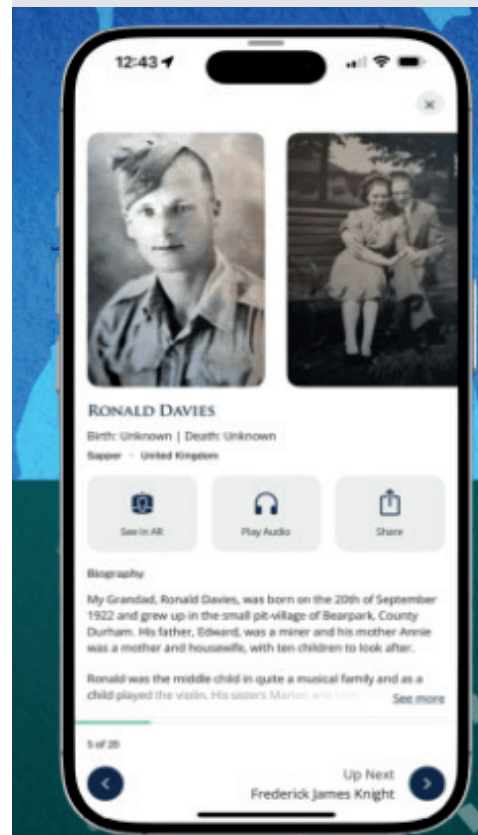
These platforms include initiatives such as digital 'memory banks', where individuals can upload personal stories relating to family members who served in the armed forces, as well as the continued use of social media to share updates on various projects and highlight stories of interest. The capability to reach broader audience groups in new and dynamic ways means that commemoration can become a greater part of public consciousness rather than simply being limited to national days of remembrance.

These digital tools, however, cannot replace tangible history entirely. Rather, digital commemoration should be intended to enhance the physical, providing ways for people to deepen their understanding and encouraging them to visit and interact. The ability to point a smartphone at a particular headstone and learn about a casualty's story, for instance, brings that history to life, reminding the visitor that a real person lies

beneath. The benefits of this are obvious in a world that is increasingly tech-focussed, enabling a visitor to experience the scale and magnitude of loss present at many sites but also to be reminded that each was a human life.

As well as enriching experience, there is also the opportunity to connect people with a history that remains very distant from them. The deployment of British and French colonial forces to Europe and elsewhere, for example, has placed the built commemorative landscape thousands of miles from the communities from which those personnel came. Finding ways for these groups to engage at a distance and feel part of this history is essential if the process is to be inclusive.

The potential of digital commemoration strategies to enhance the work of commemorative organisations also offers further opportunities for transnational collaboration between organisations. Through collaborative projects, their global reach may be extended and the historical narratives they seek to share can be protected. This will help to ensure the long-term relevance of these organisations, placing narratives of commemoration, reconciliation and peace at the forefront of their initiatives.

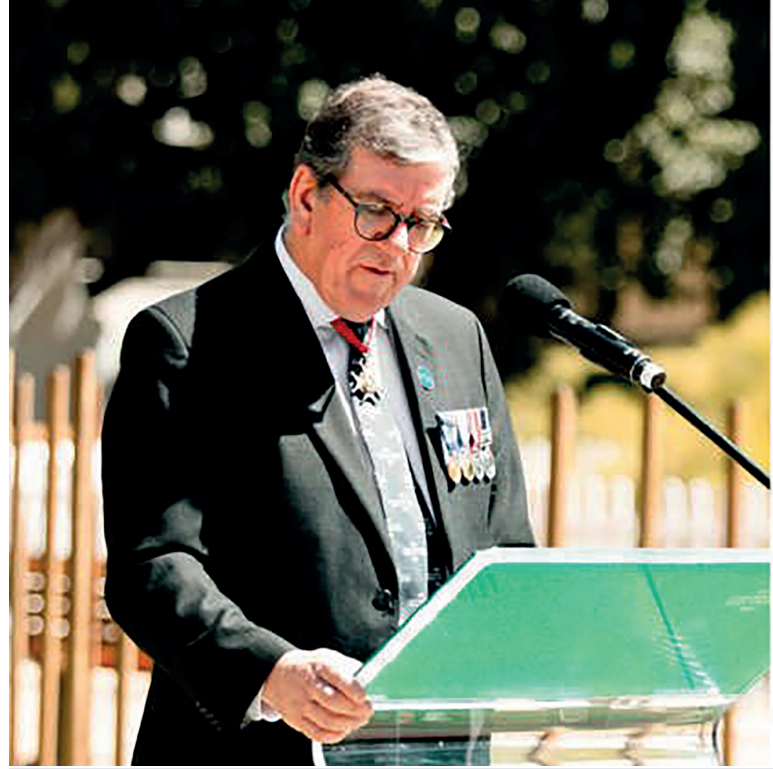




## CONCLUSION

This second conference marked the continuation of a conversation about the future of remembrance and commemoration. The core themes recorded in this report still speak to those of the first conference by encouraging collaboration between commemorative and heritage organisations to ensure their long-term relevance, but they also go beyond this in exploring how that might be achieved. It focused on the ways in which remembrance and commemoration might be utilised to provide opportunities for states and peoples to interact.

What is clear from these discussions is that commemorative and heritage organisations and the sites they maintain are in many ways uniquely placed to provide space for shared contemplation and reflection. Through collaboration and respectful engagement, they can help to propagate a more inclusive narrative of commemoration, providing opportunities to advocate for peace and reconciliation. As diplomacy is often portrayed as the alternative to conflict, it is entirely fitting that conversations like these should take place in the presence of the war dead.



Finally, these organisations can play a pivotal role in providing neutral and inclusive spaces in which they can connect communities to the people and histories they preserve. While this is relevant to all those touched by war, it is particularly important for those whose stories have been historically marginalised or downplayed. In this way, sites will not only look to the past in solemn remembrance, but also to a future in which respectful commemoration builds stable and productive relationships between states and peoples.



## MORE INFORMATION

## COMMEMORATION AND DIPLOMACY

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