

War never really ends

by Sabine Eiche

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When, if ever, is a war really over? Is it over when those who lived through it are no longer alive and their memories have died with them? The end of the Second World War was declared in 1945, but more than two decades later recollections of the war still tormented my mother. And a few years ago, towards the end of his life, my father finally told me about some of his war experiences. Those wartime memories did not die with my parents. They have imprinted themselves on my mind. So for me, WWII isn't really over, even though I, as one of the baby boomers, didn't experience it first-hand.

What is war, anyway? In school we learned war was a period of armed conflict, with battles marking its key moments. Battle came into English via the late Latin "battualia" (military or gladiatorial exercises) from the Latin "battuere," to beat. "Battuere" also gave us battalion, batter, battery and combat.

The word war, however, doesn't derive from the Latin word, which is "bellum." In English, "bellum" is at the root of words such as belligerent, meaning hostile, and bellicose, signifying aggressive. Another English word linked to "bellum" is rebel (related are rebellion, revolution), from the Latin "rebellis," referring to someone who, after being defeated, declares war anew.

Interestingly, not even the Romance languages Spanish and Italian based their words for war on the Latin "bellum," choosing instead the same source as English. The word war comes from the late Old English (12th century) "werre," based on the Old French "guerre," meaning dispute, fight. It's related to the Old High German (8th-11th

centuries) “werran,” the word for confusion, strife, which is also the source of the modern German “verwirren,” to confuse.

Before the 12th century, Old English referred to war with the Germanic term “winnan,” which signified struggle, strife, exertion. At the same time “winnan” meant to acquire, take possession of – it’s the source of the modern English win. The modern German word for war is “Krieg” from the Middle High German (11th-14th centuries) “krieeg,” meaning exertion, the endeavour to obtain something, and eventually opposition, combat. “Krieg” is also the basis of the German “kriegen.” In Middle High German “kriegen” meant to exert oneself, to struggle, and later to acquire, obtain, which is its significance in modern German. Thus, over time, the idea of war was shaped by the concepts of exertion, strife, struggle, acquisition, but also confusion, discord. It was a fundamental part of the human condition, eternalised in personal names like Hildegard, a combination of the Old High German “hild” (battle) and “gard” (protect).

Textbooks chop up history into manageable bits, making wars appear to be neatly demarcated episodes. But my sense is that war – the exertion, struggle, possessiveness, confusion of humanity – courses through history like an irregular tide, sometimes barely perceptible, other times surging with destructive force.

“Only the dead have seen the end of war,” wrote the philosopher George Santayana in his *Soliloquies*, 1922. We, the living, have the memories.