

Key question: How has the First World War been memorialised?

Teaching aims and learning objectives

- Consider the immediate response in Britain to 'Armistice Day', initial approaches to memorialisation and how this developed into the permanent structure of the Cenotaph.
- Compare the British approach to other nations in the First World War to consider what influences approaches to memorialisation.
- Interrogate memorials as interpretations and understand that they are designed to represent national narratives about war and remembrance.

Rationale

War memorials are part of our everyday landscape, and many students will walk past their local war memorial without ever considering its significance and meaning. George Mosse states that 'war memorials and military cemeteries became shrines of national worship (Mosse, 1979)' and are reflective of the times in which they were built, so they reflect the collective memories and understandings of the people who built them. War memorials therefore serve as excellent contemporary sources because they tell us about the values, practices, ideas and attitudes regarding war, bravery and death that featured at the time at which they were constructed. Students interrogate memorials as historical sources: decoding the iconography and considering the location and the overall message, students can begin to see memorials as constructs designed to convey a particular narrative about war. In this way, they can start to see the role that the First World War has played in shaping national identity.

Starter

Examine Lutyen's early design sketches of the Cenotaph. Through questioning, encourage students to consider what the image shows and help them to come up with questions that will further an enquiry. Reveal that it is the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, and that it was originally designed to be a temporary structure. Its enormous popularity with the British public convinced the government to create a permanent structure. Crowds visiting the memorial are shown on Slide 6. Encourage students to consider what this means about the remembrance of the First World War in Britain – top-down or bottom-up?

Main

Explain what war memorials are, along with the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Introduce students to the idea of iconography and how particular features have a specific meaning. Apply this to the example memorial from Ashton-under-Lyne.

Then introduce the Cenotaph resource and use this to model how students should interrogate the other memorials. As a class or in small groups, discuss and then feed back on what has influenced the British approach to memorialisation, and examine the specific features of the Cenotaph. Conclude by examining the change to remembrance in the 1920s. Students can record their ideas on sticky notes and use this to create a whole-class mind-map.

Reflection

Depending on the lesson time available, reflecting on what the Cenotaph tells us about British remembrance, memorialisation and wider questions of national identity would be an appropriate place to stop. Use the reflection questions to help students to answer the bigger questions.

Starter

Begin with the back-to-back drawing task. Give one of each pair an image of a memorial for them to describe to the student sat behind them. This will help students to focus in on the particular detail of the memorial.

Main

Recap learning from the previous lesson on the Cenotaph: memorialisation, remembrance and wider questions of national identity. The process that students worked through on the Cenotaph resource should serve as a model to enable them to interrogate a further example independently in small groups.

Assign each group a memorial to examine. They need to complete the evidence collection grid for their given memorial. Using the information in the resource pack and the iconography list, students should be able to start drawing conclusions about the meaning of their given memorial.

At this point, feed back as a whole class on each memorial; the map could be used at this point for students to record feedback. This will give students the opportunity to develop their ideas and correct any misconceptions. Having done this, each group can complete a summary card for their memorial.

If time allows, show students the Ring of Remembrance created for the centenary at Notre Dame de Lorette. Discuss what approach this shows to modern memorialisation and how this fits into the political narrative – as Britain votes to leave the EU, France and Germany focus on internationalism and cooperation in centenary commemorations.

Reflection

Use the reflection questions to form a discussion around what we can learn from memorials to answer wider questions about memorialisation, remembrance and national identity. This can be used to create an exit ticket at the end of the lesson.

References

Mosse, G. (1979). National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14-16.