The annual ritual of Remembrance Day has been observed in the UK for almost a century. At 11 a.m. on 11 November (the eleventh month), signifying the time and date when the First World War ended in 1918, many British people stop what they are doing and observe two minutes’ silence to show their respect for those killed in wars. Perhaps you did the same this year?

A collective memory of this kind can be a strong unifying force, even in increasingly complex societies. It is common at sporting events for an organised period of silent reflection to precede a game, during which the crowd is expected to remember the dead. This is what happened at Wembley stadium on 17 November, when a minute’s silence was held before a football match between England and France in memory of those killed recently in Paris.

‘Civil religion’

Such moments of memorialising perform the important function of binding societies. This is a demonstration of what sociologist Robert Bellah (1967) called ‘civil religion’: the implicit values of a nation expressed through public rituals and symbols.

Max Weber (1978) understood the emotional potential of warfare and its aftermath as a unifying force for national identity and citizenship. He defined the nation as a social grouping which unifies around
‘memories of a common political destiny’ often shaped by war. Remembrance Day services in Britain are both religious and multicultural, and they represent an intense form of collective public expression in a society in which such emotions are usually kept private.

Reporting military deaths

The British sociologist Anthony King (2010) argues that the way we commemorate today’s war dead is different from the formal War Office lists of the past. Today, the deaths of individual British soldiers are quickly reported, often with a photograph and biography of the deceased. Such reporting can include comments from family and commanding officers about the character and personality of the person involved.

Part of this process of individualisation of remembering requires that service to the nation is downplayed. Instead, the military as a vocation or even an ‘adventure’ becomes an aspect of obituaries, in accordance with the character of those involved. The British media increasingly focus on the ‘human interest’ dimensions of war loss, so the private lives of soldiers and their loved ones are also routine features.

Personalising loss

This new way of remembering, King observes, ensures that death in war is never pointless. Instead, ‘soldiers have become experts valued for the individual skills which they brought willingly to their chosen profession.’ He also argues that such changes in how we remember the war dead as ‘personalities’ may signal the reduced power of the state over its citizens. What was previously national sacrifice has now become more of a private, family loss.

Finally, however, King also points out that personalising loss in this way means that the collective mission of the nation is also strengthened, because we identify such deaths in both personal and domestic terms. This more personal emphasis in today’s acts of remembrance also conveys a powerful national message: wars are always fought to defend values, not simply to gain resources or win territory.