

## CROWD-SHARING COMMEMORATION

Defining Moments Canada's Innovative Exploration of the Spanish Flu's Social Impact

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### Introduction

The fact that Oslo Metropolitan University hosts this Congress gave us the opportunity to reflect on the particular significance of discussing the social impacts of the Flu in Oslo. In the first place, the extraordinary abundance of public art and monuments celebrating artistic and historical figures in the city can be a starting point for our discussion on what a society decides to commemorate. In view of what Oslo has to offer, one cannot help but think that the Canadian memorial landscape is more a celebration of our political figures than a reflection of our culture. As the home of Edvard Munch, one of Norway's most celebrated artists, the choice of Oslo is also an ideal place for *Defining Moments Canada* to present its innovative project to commemorate the Spanish Flu. Just as Munch who used painting to narrate his experience of the epidemic in 1919, *Defining Moments Canada* is encouraging educators, students and the public to discover our website in order to tell their own stories of the Spanish Flu.

### The Politics of Commemoration in Canada

#### The Memorial Landscape as Battlefield: The Limits of State Commemoration

In the recent years, Canada went through a significant number of official commemorations. From the 2012 rebranding of the War of 1812 as "Canada's War of Independence" to the four-year-long celebration and remembrance of the Dominion's participation in the First World War, we saw how state commemoration can create opportunities for festivities, but also for critics. In such a multicultural and politically distinct country as Canada, state commemoration is subject to become a place for the expression of polarized political views and historical narrative. This multifaceted reality also complicates the commemoration of problematic aspects of Canada's past such as the 1869 Red River Resistance or the 1919 Winnipeg General strike. Some recent events and controversies over monuments and controversial names or political figures such as Hector Louis Langevin or John A. Macdonald also revealed how the memorial landscape can become a battlefield. In the lights of all these controversies and of the tensions that arise over monuments and the politics of commemoration in various places over the world, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish Flu epidemic offers the opportunity to do things differently and to reinvent the model of historical commemoration with the tools of the day.

### Defining Moments Canada's Project

In the last decade, the 2009 H1N1 crisis and the emerging field of public health history significantly contributed to reviving the memory of the all-but-forgotten Spanish Flu Pandemic. While the media typically addressed this tragic episode as a point of reference in the broader context of worldwide pandemics, academics and

experts scrutinized the local and global histories of the Spanish Flu more than ever. Scholarship issued from this historiographical revival reflected the fundamental social and cultural impacts of the 1918-1919 Pandemic on Canadian society and communities: the creation of a federal department of health, major progress in sanitation and hygiene, the effect of gender, race and class on diseases and mortality, and the recognition of disease as a community problem, not an individual one. A century later, *Defining Moments Canada* aims to reinvigorate this watershed of social change by encouraging a ‘crowd-sharing’ commemoration of the Pandemic. This unique project engages Canadians in discovering, exploring, researching, and sharing their stories of the Spanish Flu Pandemic, and how it impacted their families and communities. The website encourages the exploration of this history through a series of themes, micro-histories, teaching tools, videos, as well as textual and photographic archives. The platform has been designed to be a meeting place for students, educators, heritage organizations, and history enthusiasts where they can download templates and tools, and exchange ideas. In creating these personal stories, participants will be contributing to the creation of a historical mosaic of the Pandemic: an innovative commemoration for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Linking Commemoration, Education, and Public History

*Defining Moments Canada*’s project is focused on promoting public history, education and commemoration initiatives among three main groups: educators and high schools, universities and communities, and cultural institutions and the public. With the resources and tools available on [DefiningMomentsCanada.ca](http://DefiningMomentsCanada.ca), educators are encouraged to include various aspects of the shared Canadian history of the Spanish Flu in their teaching. The graphic novel [Beyond the Battlefield, The Greatest Pandemic in Commemorating the Spanish Flu](#) created by students in Markville (Ontario) is an excellent example of the multidisciplinary uses of history and storytelling in education. On the other end of the spectrum, the project in public history and archaeology at the [Spanish Flu Camp of Sainte-Irène](#) (Quebec) supervised by the University of Québec in Rimouski (UQAR) is a shining example of projects supported by *Defining Moments Canada* which involves undergrad students, professors, and members of the local communities. Finally, the bilingual travelling exhibition prepared by *Defining Moments Canada* for display in various cultural institutions in Canada contributes to educating the public on the social impacts that the Spanish had on Canada a hundred years ago. Working simultaneously with educators, universities, cultural institutions and the interested public, *Defining Moments Canada* at the forefront of an innovative approach to redefine commemoration and to mobilize Canadians to take pride in their personal history and the history of their communities through a new narrative born out crowd shared research and dialogue.

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