

REMEMBRANCE DAY

Peace Pledge Union 1 Peace Passage London N7 0BT

PPU ACTION FOR PEACE
www.ppu.org.uk

WHAT'S AT STAKE The national commemoration and two-minutes silence for the military dead of two world wars takes place on the nearest Sunday to November 11, the date of the original Armistice Day. The PPU attitude to the official ceremony, symbolised since 1921 by the red poppy, is that it has become a ritual, which serves to reinforce and perpetuate the view that war is acceptable and 'natural', however regrettable it may be; it gives comfort to veterans and arms merchants, to the bereaved families as well as politicians who start wars. More crucially it does disservice to all who wish for, and work for peace, and know that there are less brutal ways of managing conflict on an overcrowded planet.

IN THE BEGINNING

This critical view of the British Legion designed Remembrance ceremonies is deeply rooted in the history of the Peace Pledge Union. The PPU's original pledge - I renounce war and will never support or sanction another - was taken from an Armistice Day sermon given in 1933 in New York by Harry Fosdick, called **The Unknown Soldier**. Harry Fosdick had been an army chaplain and had supported America's entry into the 1914-18 war; his sermon was an apology to the men who had been sent to their deaths in World War One: *'If I blame anybody...it is men like myself who ought to have known better. We went out to the army and explained to these valiant men what a resplendent future they were preparing for their children by their heroic sacrifices.'* He went on to *'renounce war because of what it does to our own men' and 'what it compels us to do to our enemies'. 'I renounce war for its consequences, for the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hatred it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in the place of democracy, for the starvation that strikes after it.'*

TALKING AND ACTION

In Britain Canon Dick Sheppard was inspired by the Unknown soldier sermon and in 1934 wrote a letter to a number of newspapers which eventually led to the founding of the Peace Pledge Union. Even before that Dick Sheppard had opposed the official Remembrance ceremonies and the Victory Balls held on November 11 in the 1920s. He succeeded in getting the balls moved to November 12 and he himself arranged the first Service of Remembrance in the Albert Hall on Armistice Day. In 1927 this was taken over by the British Legion in conjunction with the Daily Express, the origins of the present British Legion Festival of Remembrance at the Albert Hall, which is now dominated by the armed services and their relatives. A few years later Dick organised a peace gathering in Trafalgar Square at Remembrance time and similar alternative (non-military) Remembrance ceremonies were held during the 1930s.

By this time public engagement in Armistice Day ceremonies declined, but as the likelihood of another war grew, renewed criticism of what many saw as militaristic values embedded in official Armistice Day celebrations, became more common. It was in this climate that the white poppy emerged as a challenging and insistent symbol for peace without violence.

The idea for a white poppy arose from the concerns of the wives, mothers, sisters and lovers of the men who had died and been injured in World War One. Increasingly aware of the likelihood of another war, they chose this symbol 'as a pledge to Peace that war must not happen again'. In 1933 the Women's Co-operative Guild distributed the first white poppies. The following year the PPU joined with the Guild and later took over the much enlarged distribution as Europe once again headed to war.

The declaration of war in 1939 put a stop to Armistice Day ceremonies. The failure of the First World War to achieve anything of significance was too obvious. Remembering the 'Glorious Dead', who gave their all to save future generations from war, would have sounded false even to regular Armistice Day attenders.

Armistice Day turned into Remembrance Day after World War Two and moved to the Sunday nearest to 11 November. Its original significance – helping millions of bereaved to deal with



the loss – had long ago turned into a sentimental get together. Now the many more millions of war dead gave the renamed Remembrance Day some renewed poignancy, though the fervent hope of 1918 for there to be no more war was absent in the more sceptical and less innocent post 1945 world.

In the years following the Second World War interest in Remembrance Day faded as people got on with their lives, though world affairs cause occasional 'revivals'. In 1961 for example - the year when Britain's first Polaris submarine with its nuclear missiles sailed into Holy Loch, the USSR detonated a 54 megaton hydrogen bomb and Britain secretly gave Israel the means to produce nuclear bombs - Vera Brittain, a long time member of the PPU, called on people to attend an alternative service of Remembrance in Trafalgar Square: she called for an emphasis on reconciliation and dedication to a peaceful future.

PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES

Challenging some long established traditions often sets sections of the press into a frenzy of indignation. Just before remembrance time in the mid-1980s, an MP heard about the white poppy through a chance mention by the Bishop of Salisbury. Irritated by this 'insulting symbol' he asked Margaret Thatcher, at Prime Minister's Question Time what she would do about it. Margaret Thatcher, knowing nothing about the white poppies, instantly condemned them. A new handbook on 'war, peace and remembrance' for schools published by the PPU at the same time was roundly condemned in the media along with the white poppy. The media delighted in setting the PPU up in confrontation with the British Legion. The sales of white poppies soared, the requests from schools for the handbook far exceeded original expectations, and the British Legion refused that year to appear on any Radio and Television programme with the PPU.

By the end of the century in which over 200 million people lost their lives through war and political violence the white poppy had become widely accepted – even featuring in TV soaps. Its 'popularity' rises and falls and tracks British and US military adventures around the world. The 'popularity' of official remembrance ceremonies has grown, in recent years largely due



to the overwhelming efforts of the Royal British Legion for whom it is closely tied up with red poppy fundraising activity and the growing tendency amongst sections of the population which enjoy association with a mythic military past. The London Remembrance ceremony once consisted almost wholly of grieving relatives for whom it was an important event. As wounds healed and people move on their numbers declined, to be gradually replaced by former soldiers who marched proudly past the Cenotaph and radically altered the nature of the ceremony from consolation to implicit justification of war. Today the growing number of civilian institutions who find attraction and advantage in being associated with the military ethos of the ceremony is part of the growing militarisation of British society.

HEART OF THE MATTER

Remembrance Day, once a busy time for the recruiting sergeant, is now an opportunity for senior politicians to show that they care for those they and their predecessors sent to kill and be killed.

With the blessing of the Bishop of London, and to the sound of the military bands, the televised ceremony in Whitehall reaffirms the important, noble and heroic purpose of the military – that is war as a means of social change. As the ranks of veterans march pass the cenotaph and salute the heroic dead they also salute those that did the killing. It is surely strange that most find nothing strange about honouring men who killed others in prodigious numbers. This is not an event about regret for the cruel waste of lives, nor apology for the millions wantonly killed – even less a commitment to put an end to war. The planned development of Britain's next generation of nuclear weapons, now expected to cost in excess of £100 billion is not an indication that conflict prevention and non-violent conflict resolution are anywhere on the government's foreign policy agenda. Remembrance Day is also a time to introduce young people to the heroic deeds of their relatives, and thus perpetuate the belief that war and all that small word embraces, is indeed an inevitable, essential and valuable institution.

Above all it is the centrepiece of a vast fund raising operation for the British Legion, which goes from strength to strength the further removed it is from its original purpose - caring for the hundreds of thousands of disabled and disadvantaged soldiers returning from the battlefield in 1918 - a task the government of the day shied away from.

What you can do

Well, you can wear a white poppy and you can also help to publicise and distribute them in your area. You can, as some people and groups have done, send white poppies to local councillors with a message encouraging them to introduce a genuine peace message into local remembrance ceremonies; you can also send white poppies to your local MP, the Prime Minister or Secretary of State for 'defence'. You could arrange to lay a wreath of white poppies at the local War memorial jointly with other groups and let the local media know what you are doing and why.

Many schools now take the white poppies and use our remembrance related teaching material. You might consider, as some local groups do, distributing these packs to schools in your area. If you are involved with a local school, see if the head will let you sell white poppies in the school (many sell red poppies). Encourage the school to debate the issues involved. An increasing number of churches are also taking up the message of the white poppy.

You might also consider planting a tree for peace and remembrance at Remembrance time (contact PPU for details)

Your support for our work whether as a one-off donation or a regular donor, would also be welcome and of course we would be pleased if you joined us and added your voice to the politics of nonviolence.



Some veterans' children, even grandchildren, are now made to wear dead relatives' medals, and while not enthusiastic about this the military have long ago acquiesced to this macabre practice. To save 'confusion' wearers of dead people's medals must wear them on the right!

www.whitepoppy.org