

## ASSEMBLY

# WHAT DOES REMEMBRANCE DAY MEAN?

### Aim

This leaflet sets out some thoughts, ideas, facts and questions that may enable reflection and help people arrive at a judgment as to what, how and why we should be remembering armed conflicts.

It is right at this time of commemoration of the start of WW1, to consider the meaning of often taken for granted rituals, events and sentiments that go to make up Remembrance Day.

### Programme

Pupils will act as leaders and readers to come forward and deliver their answers to the questions below on which a particular class, year or other group of people have worked. Please note teachers will wish to adjust the questions according to the language level of the learners involved.

It may not be possible to reach consensus in the answers; teachers may want to enable more than one view to be expressed.

### Background

For nearly 100 years, with only a break between 1939 and 1945, on the morning of a day each November people have gathered at the Cenotaph in London and at war memorials around the country to lay wreaths of red poppies and stand silent for two minutes.

The cenotaph, the red poppy, the tomb of the unknown warrior, the Field of Remembrance, and the thousands of town, parish and village memorials, together with the ritual language, religious worship and associated ceremony used throughout Britain only came into being shortly after the end of the First World War.

## THE QUESTIONS

World War 1 was frequently described as being about brave British soldiers fighting a “War to end all Wars” in order to once and for all destroy militarism.

*What do you think those soldiers who died during WW1 would make of this statement today?*

Remembrance Day promotes an idea that people fought and died for a higher purpose and that their sacrifice served a noble cause.

*What does the idea of doing your patriotic duty and fighting for King/Queen and country mean to us today?*

At the heart of Remembrance Day is a view of war that promotes an idea that ‘sacrifice’ was not in vain.

*Do you agree with a view that dying in the act of killing others is OK?*

A message of Remembrance Day is the nobility of sacrifice of the Glorious Dead. Previously anyone criticizing the war and pointing to the futility of sending men into the face of machine gun fire would be accused of heartlessness and lack of patriotism.

Criticism of Remembrance Day is often seen as showing a lack of respect for the dead.

*Is it OK to criticize Remembrance Day? Why might people be critical of Remembrance Day?*

Interpreting mass slaughter as a sacrifice implied that there had been a purpose to World War 1 although by the mid 1930s the idea of the ‘war to end war’ had become implausible. Later the idea of sacrifice became a demand that new generations live up to the high ideals for which it was claimed that a million men had been sacrificed.

*As a member of a new generation how do you feel about this?*

Unlike the majority of soldiers in WW1 and 2 who were conscripted, today’s British military personnel join the armed forces voluntarily. They are paid to do a job – a job that is ultimately about killing.

*What’s your feeling about how those who go out to kill and get killed are acknowledged?*

Today, if all the 20th century war dead were to walk four abreast past the Cenotaph it would take forty-six years before the last one arrived in Whitehall.

*Most people find nothing strange about honoring men who killed others in large numbers, what's your view?*

Some people believe that Remembrance Day is an event that glorifies those in the armed services who died.

*What else could be the focus of remembrance of armed conflicts?*

Some people, as an alternative and anti-war symbol to the red poppy, wear the white poppy in November?

*What do you think about people who wear white poppies? Would you wear one?*

## **Additional Resources**

There is a wealth of information and materials on the PPU website ([www.ppu.org.uk](http://www.ppu.org.uk)) that will help pupils research these questions.

Within the Learn Peace area <http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/index.html> there is a section on study resources with links to:

Remembrance <http://www.ppu.org.uk/remembrance/index.html>

White poppies for peace [http://www.ppu.org.uk/whitepoppy/white\\_briefing.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/whitepoppy/white_briefing.html)

Against war [http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/learnstudy/war\\_against.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/learnstudy/war_against.html)

Conflict [http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/conflict/st\\_conflict.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/conflict/st_conflict.html)

See also Memorials for peace and War <http://www.ppu.org.uk/memorials/index.html> which will also help to inform pupils understanding of remembrance.

There is also direct link to Conscientious Objection <http://www.ppu.org.uk/cosnew/cos01.html> on the home page which provides a detailed story of World War objection in Britain. A little known story that may provide a different perspective on WW1 from the one pupils consistently receive.

The poem below by Siegfried Sassoon is a passionate and angry denunciation of the way in which the war dead are remembered. He derides the idea that even the grandest memorials in any way recompense 'the poor bloody infantry' for providing cannon fodder - and particularly these men, listed as 'missing, presumed dead', whose 'intolerably nameless' bones are still being turned up by farmers' ploughs in Flanders today.

Having a member of staff or pupil reading out this poem may be considered a suitable way of finishing this assembly.

### **On Passing the New Menin Gate, by Siegfried Sassoon**

Who will remember, passing through this Gate  
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?  
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,  
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?  
Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.  
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;  
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,  
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride  
'Their name liveth for evermore' the Gateway claims.  
Was ever an immolation so belied  
As these intolerably nameless names?  
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime  
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

## History

The Menin Gate war memorial at Ypres was built and opened in 1927. It commemorates the British soldiers whose bodies were never found. On its huge panels are carved 54,896 names of men with no known grave who died in this area between 1914 and August 1917. The designer thought there would be plenty of room for all the names, but there was not: a further 34,984 names of missing soldiers (from August 1917 to the end of the war) are carved on panels at Tyne Cot cemetery not far away. The Menin Gate is an integral part of Ypres and the Menin Road, along which people and traffic pass daily, runs through it.

Every night of the year, at 8.00, the road is closed while 'The Last Post', the traditional bugle call marking the end of the day for soldiers in action, is played.

At the opening ceremony in 1927, these words were spoken: 'It was resolved that here at Ypres, where so many of the missing are known to have fallen, there should be erected a memorial worthy of them which should give expression to the nation's gratitude for their sacrifice and their sympathy with those who mourned them. A memorial has been erected which, in its simple grandeur, fulfils this object, and now it can be said of each one in whose honour we are assembled here today: "He is not missing; he is here!"'

The Menin Gate is one of the most-visited monuments on the increasingly well-trodden war memorial tourist trail.