



Is act of remembrance losing its original 'never again' sentiment?

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At 11 am today, on the 11th day of this, the 11th month, much of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and beyond, will fall silent in a two-minute moment of reflection. But reflecting on what? This year, for some, it may be the mathematical singularity of the repeating numerals. Officially, however, it is to recall the recognised end of the First World War, a bloody and violent global conflict that began in August 1914 and raged for four-and-a-half years, resulting in the deaths of over 9 million people. Hostilities formally ended at 'the eleventh hour' on 11th November 1918 when Germany signed the Armistice. Twelve months later, the day was specifically dedicated by the British monarch, King George V, as a day of remembrance.

For many, this Christian and militarised ceremony is an opportunity to remember those conflicts in which the British Armed Forces are currently engaged. As of 2010, almost 9,500 British soldiers were still serving in Afghanistan. Thirty-seven have been killed so far this year. For their families, the tragedy of modern warfare is a daily experience and Remembrance Day takes on a specific meaning many of us will, hopefully, never have to understand. Yet even for those not directly affected by current conflict, Afghanistan is the most prominent war in remembrance ceremonies. This is hardly surprising; according to Irish historian Roy Foster, commemoration for the purposes of present politics is 'nothing new'. But this type of war reflection is limited, one-sided and reinforces the view that war is normal and acceptable. In the ceremonies today and on Sunday, there is little space for pacifists or non-Christians, no roll-call of Afghani dead, and limited historical connection between the origins of Remembrance Day in the aftermath of the First World War 'that it should never happen again' and the bitter irony that Britain remains at war almost 100 years later.

Of greater concern is disengagement with the day itself. This not only refers to the thuggish acts of a minority of copper and bronze thieves and other desecrators of war memorials. I am referring to Remembrance Day as an automated social convention. That people remember on November 11 because that is what they are supposed to do; there is very little active engagement and thought behind the process. This is difficult to measure precisely, but town centre CCTV may show how many people observe the two-minute silence. A more quantifiable measure is the sale of poppies, which raised 36million for the Royal British Legion in 2010. Yet, its meaning is diluted; do people wear a red poppy because they understand its origins and significance? Or because they feel they should, and will stand out if they abstain? The poppy is increasingly seen as a fashion accessory 'with a heart', personified last year when X-Factor judges were adorned with Swarovski crystal-encrusted poppies.

As the centenary of the First World War approaches, concerns are being raised in certain quarters about Britain's plans for commemoration. On October 30, The Daily Telegraph reported, in horror, that France is set to 'eclipse'

Britain's First World War centenary plans by opening a state-of-the-art museum three years early, on Remembrance Sunday 2011. Britain, meanwhile, has so far announced no plans for its own commemorations starting in 2014 ' prompting demands for a game of rapid catch-up. With no remaining 'Tommies' of the First World War and a declining number of Second World War survivors, a gulf has appeared between the present and the past.

But the approaching centenary could offer a unique opportunity. People from a variety of backgrounds ' not only politicians and military elites, but community groups, schools, curators, journalists, activists, artists, poets, historians, and many others ' are already actively thinking about the purpose and meaning of commemoration between 2014 and 2018. My own involvement in this process has underlined the sense that commemoration has a multiple and varied role to play. Whilst it cannot be prescriptive, it does need to be grounded in the essence of its origins: acknowledging the sacrifice made in the 'War to End All Wars'. It is not a moment to glorify war, celebrate heroes, fund-raise for their care (as necessary as that may be), or wear the latest fashion accessory. It should, instead, consider how, as a community of human-beings, we can strive towards a more peaceful world where war and violence has no place. It also needs to be an inclusive and diverse space where all those lost from around the world, combatants and civilians ' including those who fought on the 'other' side ' can be remembered together. That, in my opinion, is the only appropriate and respectful way to commemorate the price paid by the men and women of 1914-1918.

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