



Poppies and the politics of remembrance.

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With the 100th anniversary of the war drawing ever closer now and having entered November I wanted to use this post to discuss the modern memorial process of the war.

To be clear from the start this isn't intended to be a discussion about whether people should or should not wear poppies. I have never had a problem with anyone who does or does not choose to wear a Poppy. Rather it is about some of the issues and arguments that have arisen around it in recent years and also about how the actual remembrance process has changed dramatically since the end of the war.

The process of remembrance for the war in modern Britain should not be a mystery to anybody by now. The 2 minute silence, the ceremony at the Cenotaph, the wearing of the Poppy, the ceremonies at war memorials and war graves right around the country (and at the CWGC in Europe as well) are very familiar to us.

But it was not always this way. The first commemoration of the Armistice in 1919 was an extremely moving occasion. The silence in London was palpable and broken only by those in the crowd who were crying. During these immediate post-war years the two minute silence was observed on **both** November 11th and on the Remembrance Sunday.

But commemoration of the war during the 1920s wasn't simply marked by solemn public gatherings (and [Dan Todman](#) and Adrian Gregory have both written a great deal on this) to acknowledge a shared grief. There were also parties known generally as 'Armistice Balls' where veterans and survivors of the war would gather to enjoy themselves. Having survived the war many wanted to celebrate their continued life. These parties were known for often getting fairly raucous at times.

Which is where the dissenting voices come in. Because these parties did not generally survive until the end of the 1920s. This was in no small part due to pressure from the press, particularly the Daily Mail. Their argument was two-fold and fell on issues of good taste and economic frivolity; essentially that by behaving in such a celebratory (and drunken) manner the soldiers and revellers were disrespecting the memories of those who had died and those members of the public who had lost loved ones, and that having such extravagant parties during an economic crisis was in bad taste in general. Further pressure was put on venues not to accept bookings for Armistice Balls.

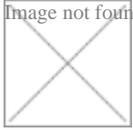
The Daily Express on the other hand defended the rights of veterans to mark the armistice day celebrations in whichever manner they saw fit. Having risked their lives for the country it was seen as being in its own poor taste to then mandate how they could celebrate the end of the war.

I highlight these two arguments to show how even in the 1920s there were keen differences regarding the

remembrance process. By the end of the 1920s the Armistice Balls had essentially vanished and was replaced with the more solemn approach to remembrance that we recognise now.

And as in the 1920s, today there are ongoing disputes and disagreements about the process and nature of respectful remembrance.

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'Poppy Fascism' is a term coined by the television newsreader Jon Snow. I understand the notion behind the phrase even if I'm not a big fan of its wording. Snow's point has always been that he is happy to wear a poppy on 11 November but should not feel compelled to wear one days or weeks in advance of this day because of pressure from either the press or anyone else.

And this sort of pressure in regards to wearing a Poppy has become steadily more prevalent over the recent years. The date of when people 'should' begin wearing a Poppy has always been difficult to ascertain although my understanding of it has always been from 2nd November (All Soul's Day) until the Remembrance Sunday itself. However it is not unusual now to see television presenters wearing them towards the end of October.

The question is; why? If it is a personal choice then that is fine, but often it seems as though a switch has been flicked and everyone who appears before a TV camera has to be wearing a poppy almost as an accessory. This is not helped by campaigns at times to 'name and shame' those who are seen on television not wearing a Poppy. There have been articles written in newspapers in recent years explaining why the wearing of the Poppy should be mandatory.

This culminated in the English Football Association nearly reaching meltdown last year over whether FIFA would allow them to wear a Poppy symbol on their shirt in a match against Spain (despite the fact that in nine previous Novembers England had played international games and no such campaign had taken place or been deemed necessary).

Why has Poppy wearing become so heavily politicised? The act of actually wearing a Poppy does not in and of itself show any greater level of sympathy or respect towards those who have lost their lives through war than not wearing one. It simply shows that you have purchased one and happen to be wearing it. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have spent more time thinking about the wars than anybody else. It is just a visible symbol of remembrance. Which is fine.

I have bought and worn Poppies in the past and generally make a decision each year as to whether I will wear one. Some years I do and some years I don't. Admittedly I'm in a curious position in that I spent most of everyday in some way reading/writing about the war so it is unlikely that I will forget about it. I also know of people who donate to the Royal British Legion during November but don't then wear a Poppy. But surely it should be a choice?

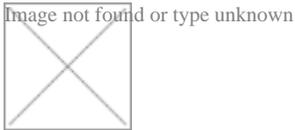
It is often said, and in the case of a great many soldiers it is true, that the soldiers of the two world wars went to fight to preserve the freedoms they have at home and to guarantee them for the next generations. If this is taken to be the truth then that freedom must also extend to those who do not, for whatever reason, wish to wear the Poppy.

I've always thought that the eventual collapse of the Armistice Balls is one of the saddest little moments in the post-war world of veterans. To effectively be bullied out of celebrating their own lives by those who thought

they knew best how to commemorate the war. There is nothing wrong with taking a solemn and dignified approach to the war but it should not constrict you from having any alternative feelings at all.

Now whilst the veterans of the First World War are gone, if we are their legacy then part of that must be the power to choose how to remember them. Nobody should feel bullied or ostracised over wearing a Poppy or taking part in the accepted method of remembrance.

Because when that happens I start to see the image of the Poppy fading away only to be replaced by a White Feather given to those not deemed patriotic enough to support their country. To my mind that is a far worse betrayal of the lives and sacrifices made by those during the wars. And those who seek to enforce the wearing of Poppies or the formalisation of acceptable memorialisation should think about exactly what it is they're playing with and just how dangerous and disastrous a path it can lead down. That's how you remember the sacrifices of people in the First World War.



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