



A poppy is cheap; remembrance and solidarity are not

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The wreaths now lie silently by war memorials across the country. The crowds have walked away and most will not return for at least another year. Then, as tradition demands, poppies will once again take pride of place on many lapels. And once again, the right-wing press and inconsequential politicians will manufacture an idiotic controversy. Some celebrity will fall foul of the conformist norm impelling public figures to wear a poppy, irrespective of their views on war, veterans or the armed forces. Like Sienna Miller last week, lambasted for taking her poppy off seconds before going on air, another artist, journalist, broadcasters (delete as appropriate) will stand accused of ignoring the war dead, of insulting veterans and of betraying serving personnel. What on earth does a poppy tell you about Sienna Miller's politics?

Earlier in the week, David Cameron's communications team had been ridiculed for photoshopping a poppy on the Prime Minister's Facebook page. Shouldn't they be more concerned about the impact of this Government's policies on veterans and their families?

And then of course, sadly and predictably enough, reporters and lazy commentators then spent the best part of 48 hours trying to establish if Jeremy Corbyn had bowed enough, too much, or not at all before the Cenotaph on Sunday. In the meantime, none will have taken the opportunity to reflect 'to help us all reflect' on the past, present and future significance of war remembrance. Whatever the Sun, the Daily Mail, the Telegraph and Sir Gerald Howarth MP may claim, they all conspired to turn Remembrance Sunday into a sorry farce.

I don't wear a poppy. I respect those who do and I know and appreciate the essential work that charities like the British Legion do all year around. Now of course, I am a left-wing academic and not even British; "typical EU migrant scum spitting on the graves of Britain's squaddies" would no doubt erupt the Daily Express.

I am a professional historian and I have devoted almost 20 years of my life to study and understand the First World War. The 'seminal catastrophe' (G. Kennan) that ushered in the twentieth century and its woeful litany of wars, genocides, population displacements and destructions. So I will take no lesson in remembrance from right-wing chauvinists and semi-literate hacks who fake outrage every November. I think and I write about war every day. I teach its history to undergraduates and discuss its legacy with a dozens if not hundreds of people every year. In our classrooms, lecture theatres, and museums; on social media, on TV and radio, historians like me, along with teachers and curators spend a tremendous amount of time and energy helping our fellow citizens understand what war is; why and how it is fought; why military conflicts matter.

What would a poppy tell you that my work does not?

In the meantime, the unbearable imposition of patriotic conformity on all and sundry prevents us from addressing the critical questions that war remembrance raises. What does it mean to wage war? What does it mean for veterans, their families and for us, their fellow citizens? It is of course essential to affirm our respect and gratitude, but it isn't enough. For do we truly realize what we ask of them when we send them on the field of battle? We obviously understand that we demand they put their lives and limbs at risk. But do we understand or even recognize that we also ask them to kill on our behalf; to violate what fortunately remains a taboo for most of us: the taking of human life.

The war dead, like veterans, are not simply victims of war. They are agents of warfare and perpetrators of violence. Highly-trained professionals today like volunteers and conscripts yesterday, soldiers kill and destroy on our behalf. So what if we just shut up about poppies for a minute and pause to consider the political and ethical implications of war?

Whether you believe that war is a legitimate instrument of policy or a criminal aberration does not matter. For we all share an overwhelming and rather shameful reluctance to confront the realities of war. Handing out white feathers or shouting 'not in my name' does not really cut it in my view. These are rather easy positions to take and defend. But politics and indeed war are a much messier business. I don't have any easy answer to offer and I struggle with these questions as much as anybody else. There is only so much that history can do for you.

For this is not only about ethics but about politics, in the full, grand sense of the term.

Thanks to the poppy, the British Legion will raise millions of pounds in support of veterans and their families. There is no doubt that their contribution is important; that the Legion's workers and volunteers should be commended, as should indeed those who wear the poppy as a token of their financial commitment to the organization and its mission.

But shouldn't we ask ourselves why charity remains, in 2015, a critical necessity? If the country is grateful to veterans and their family, shouldn't they be fully supported by the nation they fought to protect? Why don't we demand the Government translate its public commitment into actual and sustained solidarity? Why don't the Sun, the Mail and the Express demand that taxes be raised so that the needs of veterans be met in full? Why should they have to rely on charity? Why don't you guys put your money where your poppy is?

We know that the armed forces predominantly recruit among the working and lower-middle classes, from the very communities that the regressive policies of George Osborne and David Cameron have consistently undermined for over 5 years. We know that many returning veterans struggle to find employment; that many suffer from alcohol and drug abuse; that a significant number will be sleeping rough in the streets of Britain tonight. There is no quick and easy fix to the multitude of psychological, medical, and social problems that many veterans and their families still face today. Charity helps, but it is not enough. The state and the taxpayer must take their responsibility. It is all well and good to ask Premier League millionaires to wear a poppy every November. But why don't we expect them or indeed other wealthy professionals and rentiers to pay more taxes to fund the national health service and colleges, job centers and universities?

There is more to remembrance than a poppy and we certainly owe more to veterans than occasional charity.

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