

Rethinking Remembrance Day in Schools

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explore ways in which teaching remembrance in schools can be used as a way of encouraging critical thinking about what and how we remember, and how this can be used to foster a culture of peace.



We discuss the importance of encouraging emotional engagement in the consequences of war and of avoiding euphemistic language that overly sanitises and simplifies its causes and consequences. We look at educational opportunities in exploring the meaning of the white poppy as an alternative to the red poppy and alternatives to violent responses to conflict.

We include some ideas for how to teach remembrance and provide links to education resources and background reading for use around remembrance and wider education for and about peace.

Introduction

Does your school encourage pupils to remember the war dead on all sides and explore the causes and consequences of war?

Is your school teaching children to learn from history, so that we don't keep on repeating the same mistakes of the past?

Remembrance Day is an occasion to encourage thought and impart knowledge on all wars, including the First World War where it has its origins. Some pupils may be unaware of the steps that preceded this war, or its realities. In *Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914*, Christopher Clark, Professor of European History at Cambridge, describes the complex series of international crises that were woven into narratives that led decision makers across Europe 'sleepily' into a calamitous war. A war that mobilised 65 million troops, claimed three empires, 20 million military and civilian deaths, and 21 million wounded. That first global war birthed the horrors of the next, and 20th and 21st century catastrophes. Historian Friz Stern writes that the First World War was "the first calamity of the twentieth century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang."

Yet the most widespread remembrance narrative to which pupils are exposed is that Britain had a noble purpose in fighting: to 'secure and protect our freedom'.¹ The death, injury and psychological trauma en-masse, we are told, was a necessary 'sacrifice'; the Cenotaph tells us that the dead are 'glorious.' Ironically, these are the same words that convinced boys and men in the First World War to rush to a reality they could not understand, to the squalor of the trenches and the horror of witnessing the terrible deaths of their friends and fellow humans. As we encourage pupils to remember them, perhaps it is appropriate to examine, critique, and rethink this narrative.

Exploring remembrance in schools is an opportunity to encourage critical thinking about the causes and consequences of war and to understand that this essential critique in no way dishonours or disrespects those who have died as a result of warfare. Here are some suggestions on how to approach, and perhaps to rethink, Remembrance Day in schools.

¹ www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/how-we-remember/remembrance-sunday

Encourage emotional engagement in the consequences of war

Children in our society are exposed to violence and warfare in popular culture. This fantasy violence can serve to disengage minds from critical thought and emotional responses to violence, and paints a highly unrealistic and misleading picture of war. As David Gee writes, “the scintillating brutality of screen violence remains remarkably anaemic. In the videogame ‘*Call of Duty*’, which affects to recreate military scenarios realistically, enemy combatants fall over gracefully when shot, mutter an effete *ergh!* and fade from the screen as if they were never there. Nowhere but in real life do the dying weep, scream, plead for mercy, and thrash about in a slick of their own blood.”

Given the sanitisation of violence and warfare in the public imaginary, schools can play an important role in reminding children of the cruel realities of violence and warfare, and of their shared humanity with political ‘enemies’. Remembrance Day is an opportunity for schools to encourage emotional engagement - empathy, horror, grief and moral awakening in the face of violence and warfare - in their pupils.

Ways for pupils to exercise emotional engagement might include:

1. Creative writing exercises based around the victims or survivors of the Dresden bombings along with the Blitz or the bombing of Coventry.
2. Art work visualising trench warfare or no man’s land.
3. Exploring reportage from areas of conflict today, especially those involving young people - for example, children in Aleppo and refugees fleeing war zones.
4. Groups undertake research for presentations on the health impacts of armed conflict:
 - a. Health effects of serving in the British army during WW1
 - b. The impact of war on health in Iraq
 - c. The impact of war on health in Yemen
 - d. The impact of WW2 on health in Germany and in Britain
 - e. Health effects of an armed forces career today
5. All pupils have a card with a picture and short biography for someone of their age who died during any of the violent conflicts of the last century or the current century. Pupils are asked to consider that person, to think about them and what they were like, and to keep their memory with them. A selection of pupils stand up in assembly or class, and share reflections about or from their person.

“The young should be reminded that even if war is necessary, and however morally justifiable it might be to take a life, even the death of one individual through violent action is never less than horrific. Faced with the merest possibility that some conflicts might not be necessary, and considering the persuasive power of contemporary rhetorics such as the heroism of our armed serviceman, our heritage of British values, or the need to promote liberal democracy worldwide, the duty of educators to provide their students with the emotional resources to resist these rhetorics in appropriate circumstances seems compelling.” *David Aldridge, ‘How ought war to be remembered in schools?’, 2014*

Avoid euphemistic language such as ‘fallen’, ‘heroes’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘glorious dead’ and ‘died for our freedom.’

These terms are euphemistic in that they hide the reality of warfare. They can also be misleading as they make generalised and often erroneous assumptions about why the country and individuals in the armed forces were involved in conflict.

Moving away from terms with polarising and sanitising connotations enables pupils to focus on the loss of life on all sides in all conflicts. If the dead on one side are described as ‘glorious’ it is harder to see the tragedy of all the deaths on every side. Pupils should be encouraged to appreciate the moral complexity surrounding war, and to think openly about today’s wars as well as those of the past.

Use of this euphemistic language leaves little space for criticism of the legitimacy of any of the remembered wars. Paradoxically, for

“The alchemy of words such as ‘hero’ and ‘the fallen’ transmutes our way of thinking about how soldiers do actually die, and why they die, and turns a possible revulsion and rejection of warfare into its mirror opposite: into a business that needs to be supported and glorified.” *Rod Tweedy in ‘My name is Legion: The British Legion and the Control of Remembrance’, Veterans for Peace UK, 2015*

many people Remembrance Day is associated with the feeling of 'never again' that developed after the First World War. Many had gone to fight thinking that it was 'glorious' and that they were fighting for 'our freedom', but then as the reality of the trenches and the attrition battles sunk in, these words no longer seemed appropriate. Soldier and poet Wilfred Owen, before he later died himself, said that people were sent to war to 'die as cattle' Moreover, history shows us that in fact this war created the conditions for further wars and tragedies.

Explore the meaning of the white poppy as an alternative to the red poppy

Red poppies became attached to Remembrance Day after a professor in the United States read a poem by Canadian physician Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, and swore to wear a poppy on every anniversary of the war. The red poppy is seen as some people as problematic, partly because of the poem that inspired the poppy symbol, 'In Flanders Fields.' Owing to its call to arms in the final stanza ('take up our quarrel with the foe, to you from failing hands we throw the torch; be yours to hold it high. If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders fields'), the poem - at a time when the Allies were actually considering a German offer to begin peace negotiations - was used to encourage a continuation of the war, and for military recruitment drives.²

"The use of the word 'hero' glorifies war and glosses over the ugly reality. War is nothing like a John Wayne movie. There is nothing heroic about being blown up in a vehicle, there is nothing heroic about being shot in an ambush and there is nothing heroic about the deaths of countless civilians."

Ben Griffin, former SAS soldier and founder of Veterans for Peace UK

Another issue some have with the use of the red poppy on Remembrance Day is that the poppy franchise is owned by the British Legion. Arms companies that provide weaponry to some of the world's most brutal regimes - such as Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems - have close relationships with the British Legion and have used the poppy appeal to promote themselves. Arms companies also fuelled the First World War by selling weapons to any and all sides.³

The white poppy is a symbol for peace without violence, and remembrance of all the victims of all wars. The idea for a white poppy as an alternative to the red 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. Fuelled by a concern that another war might happen, 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, and was joined by the Peace Pledge Union the following year. Ever since, the Peace Pledge Union has championed the white poppy as a symbol that denounces war and seeks peace.⁴

The message of the white poppy is in keeping with a different kind of poetry to 'In Flanders Field'. As the First World War progressed and its brutal and senseless reality sank in, the poems that emerged from the battlefields and trenches painted a very different story to the earlier war poetry that sanctified and promoted war. These poems, such as *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen, are far from a call to arms. The poem exposes, with the reality of young deaths at the front, 'the old lie' - that 'it is sweet and right to die for your country'.

...

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et Decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

From *Dulce et Decorum Est*
by Wilfred Owen, 1917-18

See www.ppu.org.uk/whitepoppy for education resources about the white poppy.

See www.warpoetry.co.uk for poetry from the First World War and contemporary conflicts.

² www.warmuseum.ca/blog/in-flanders-fields-canadian-soldiers-in-belgium

³ armingallsides.on-the-record.org.uk

⁴ www.ppu.org.uk/whitepoppy/

Inform about the alternatives to violent responses to conflict

When remembering the horrors of war and hoping for an end to all war, it is important for young people to explore alternatives to violence as a means of resolving conflict, and nonviolent ways to approach security. Information about nonviolent conflict transformation, peacebuilding and diplomacy is not widely accessible in schools, while military approaches are seen as normal. Remembrance Day presents an opportunity for educators to share knowledge on how to build long-term security and peace with their pupils.

Encouraging debate on security is one helpful way to begin. For example, some believe that we need to maintain a strong military capability to keep us safe and defend national interests. However, others maintain that this belief promotes an atmosphere of insecurity, and leaves us blinkered to the biggest contemporary threats to human security, such as climate change and resource shortages. Investing heavily in the military prevents us from investing in nonviolent and long-term solutions to conflict. It also feeds into the international arms trade which increases global and national insecurity.

Read more about alternative approaches to security in the *Rethinking Security* report:
rethinkingsecurity.org.uk

Check out Peace Jam: peacejam.org.uk/education and Peacemakers: peacemakers.org.uk for education resources on conflict resolution.

There is a lack of awareness and funding for non-militarised solutions to conflict, despite the many academics, experts and organisations working to support and learn from local initiatives to transform conflict through nonviolent methods. Peacebuilding organisations supporting local initiatives for peace overseas include Peace Direct, Saferworld and International Alert; organisations that aim to foster peaceful approaches among young people in the UK include Peace Jam and Peacemakers. It would be highly educational for representatives from these organisations to be invited into schools, or for pupils to be encouraged to research and learn about their work for peace.

Organisations offering materials for use in schools *for* peace and *about* peace can be found through the **Peace Education Network**. See peace-education.org.uk

Resources for Remembrance Day

Remembering for Peace assembly which is part of the *Teach Peace* pack (available in English and Welsh):
peace-education.org.uk/teach-peace

Resources on the First World War and remembrance from Pax Christi: paxchristi.org.uk/peace-education and the Quakers: www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/peace/peace-education

A selection of other education resources can be found at: forceswatch.net/resources/education-materials

Teaching Controversial Issues

Resources are available from The Citizenship Foundation: www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk and Peacemakers: bit.ly/controversial_issues

Background reading

Reimagining Remembrance

A report by Katie Guthrie, published by Ekklesia, 2009, www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/22246

How Ought War to be Remembered in Schools

A paper by David Aldridge, published by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2014
bit.ly/how_ought_war_be_remembered

Spectacle, Reality, Resistance: Confronting a culture of militarism

A book by David Gee, published by ForcesWatch, 2014
www.forceswatch.net/content/spectacle-reality-resistance

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www.forceswatch.net