

A field of red poppies with several white poppies in the foreground. The white poppies are the central focus, with one large one on the right and two others in the middle-left. The background is a dense field of red poppies, slightly out of focus.

White Poppy Remembrance Pack: A learning resource for educators and young people

a resource from
Peace Pledge Union & ForcesWatch

The Peace Pledge Union is the oldest secular pacifist organisation in Britain. Since 1934 it has been campaigning for a warless world, from anti bombing campaigns during WW2 to protesting at the remote controlled military drone assassinations of today.

ForcesWatch scrutinises the ethics of armed forces recruitment practices and challenges efforts to embed militarist values in civilian society. They are part of the Rethinking Security Group.

We're delighted that you are using this White Poppy Remembrance Pack from ForcesWatch and Peace Pledge Union, which aims to explore our ethical concerns around Remembrance with educators and young people.

We want to share with educators and young people our views on how best to approach Remembrance Day in a way that encourages critical thinking, and gives space for marginalised perspectives on war and peace.

This pack contains some background information on the white poppy and what it means to those who wear it today. It also includes a ForcesWatch resource for educators entitled Rethinking Remembrance, which explores in depth how remembrance can be used to encourage critical thinking and foster a culture of peace, rather than sanitising, simplifying or even glorifying war. This Rethinking Remembrance resource includes information about some of the amazing organisations working to support peacebuilding and nonviolent means of transforming conflict around the world.

We want to promote an approach to Remembrance that focuses on remembering all victims of war with a view to creating a more peaceful world, and avoids language which may be seen to promote militarism. Hopefully this is just the start of a wider conversation in schools and colleges about how war, militarism, security and peace are explored.

It is our view that we have much to learn from young people and educators themselves on war, militarism, security and peace. We would like to hear your views on how Remembrance is approached in your educational environments, how war, security and peace are approached, and what could be done differently or better. We would like to hear your thoughts on the White Poppy as a symbol of remembrance for peace that resists militarism, and other perspectives or comments you have on these areas.

We are available to you if you have any questions, feedback or comments, or would like any further resources.

Get in touch with us at: education@forceswatch.net (Rhianna Louise, ForcesWatch) sophie@ppu.org.uk (Sophie Morrison, Peace Pledge Union) or share your thoughts on Twitter with @PPUToday @ForcesWatch and #WhitePoppy

With warm wishes and in peace,
Sophie and Rhianna

Rethinking Remembrance Day in Schools

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

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

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 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

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/

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'.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
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.

Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen, 1917-18

On the following pages you will find a leaflet about the white poppy which can be copied and distributed within your school, or used for discussion in the classroom. There are also some white poppy FAQs.

THINKING ABOUT PEACE

The Peace Pledge Union has been distributing white poppies at Remembrance time since the 1930s. There are three elements to the meaning of white poppies. They represent:

- remembrance for all victims of war
- a challenge to attempts to glamorise or celebrate war
- a commitment to peace

The white poppy began as an expression of concern that there would be another war following 'the war to end all wars'. This message of the white poppy continues to apply today.

The white poppy aims to foster an understanding that there are alternatives to armed force, and rallies support for resistance to the growing militarisation of society. We are committed to working for a world where conflicts are resolved without violence and with justice.

THINKING ABOUT WAR

Remembrance Day began after World War One. Some people wear a white poppy around Remembrance time to emphasise that they are thinking of all the people of all nationalities who died in that war and in wars since, and the people who are dying from war in the world today.

We believe Remembrance events sometimes don't go far enough to condemn the wars that continue to kill so many people. We should learn from the mistakes of the past and not propagate further destruction of human life. Humans have the right to live with dignity and security. All human life is of equal worth, and it is not acceptable that human lives become cheap in desperate situations.

find out more at www.ppu.org.uk

Frequently asked questions about the white poppy

A number of questions about White Poppies come up again and again. Here are our answers.

What do white poppies represent?

There are three elements to the meaning of white poppies: they represent remembrance for all victims of war, a commitment to peace and a challenge to attempts to glamorise or celebrate war.

Where can I buy a white poppy?

You can buy them from us online. There are also a number of shops, faith groups and other outlets that sell white poppies. If you would like to sell them in your area, we would be pleased to hear from you. You can reach us at mail@ppu.org.uk.

How many white poppies are sold each year?

The number of White Poppies sold each year varies and has risen steadily in recent years.

For each of the last four years (2014-17), we have distributed around 100,000 poppies per year via individuals as well as shops, schools, colleges, faith groups, local authorities and museums. These figures are higher than, but we are of course concerned with the message behind the white poppy and not only the sales figures.

We receive orders for white poppies from around the world. Outside of the UK, white poppies are sold most commonly in Canada, New Zealand and Belgium.

Who makes the white poppies?

The white poppy was first produced in 1933 by the Co-operative Women's Guild, who were worried by the growing militarisation of Remembrance events and the detachment between the red poppy and the need to work for peace. Today, white poppies are distributed by the Peace Pledge Union (PPU).

Where does the money go?

White poppies are more about the message of peace and remembrance than about raising funds. We distribute white poppies to promote remembrance for all victims of war and to challenge the view that war and preparations for war are necessary or inevitable.

At a local level, peace groups, shops and other outlets that sell white poppies may choose to donate money raised to a charity or campaign supporting victims of war. This is not controlled centrally and a number of charities benefit.

At a national level, money raised over and above the cost of producing, publicising and distributing the poppies goes to fund our education and campaigning work, thus promoting nonviolent approaches to conflict and challenging militarism. Such work regrettably does not attract much funding and so we rely heavily on the generosity of people like you.

Some argue that if you buy a white poppy you are taking away money that would go to support wounded veterans if you bought a red poppy instead. This is not accurate. There is nothing to stop someone wearing a white poppy while also donating to a charity to help those wounded in war. We want to see decent support for people affected by war. We believe, however, that such people should be able to turn to a well-funded welfare state rather than having to rely on charity. The UK government has been slashing the welfare state in recent years while maintaining one of the highest military budgets in the world.

Is the white poppy a political symbol?

Both the white poppy and the red poppy represent distinct values and perspectives. In this sense, they are both political symbols. It is sometimes inaccurately stated that the white poppy is “political” and the red poppy is not. In reality, they are as political as each other. The debate should not be about whether a symbol is political (everything is political) but about the values it represents.

People who wear white poppies hold a variety of views and opinions and disagree with each other on many subjects. What they share is a desire to remember all the victims of war, to challenge militarism and to stand up for peace.

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.

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 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.

“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

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.

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.

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

Organisations offering materials for use in schools for peace and about peace can be found through the Peace Education Network (peace-education.org.uk). For education resources on conflict resolution, see: peacejam.org.uk/education & peacemakers.org.uk

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

Background reading: **Spectacle, Reality, Resistance: Confronting a culture of militarism**. A book by David Gee, published by ForcesWatch, 2014
www.forceswatch.net/content/spectacle-reality-resistance