

# WWI, Britain - Remembrance Day: a travesty of the truth

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**Marxist historian Neil Faulkner takes a critical look at the official commemorations.**

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The Luton municipal elite planned to celebrate 'Peace Day' on 19 July 1919 with an exclusive banquet in the Town Hall. Local veterans of the trenches, many of them now unemployed, were not invited.

The ex-soldiers marched on the Town Hall, set it on fire, and then formed a cordon around it to prevent the fire brigade extinguishing the flames while they sang *We'll Keep the Home Fires Burning*.

Britain was gripped by class war in 1919. The mass struggles of that year reached their peak in Glasgow. As early as January, just three months after the Armistice, a general strike in the city had culminated in a pitched battle between tens of thousands of strikers and the police in George Square. The Government placed the city under martial law. A hundred lorry-loads of troops were dispatched. Six tanks patrolled the streets. Machine-guns were set up in the city centre.

Britain, like much of Europe, was close to revolution in 1919. European society had been torn apart by an industrialised war fought for empire and profit that had killed 15 million and left twice that number permanently maimed in mind or body. The war had been ended by revolution, first in Russia, then in Germany – a revolution of workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors that swelled into a global conflagration that came close to bringing down the capitalist system.

The official Remembrance Day celebrations were introduced as part of an embattled ruling class's pushback. The first was held in 1919, and they have been held ever since. The ritual was augmented by the cult of the poppy in 1921 – an effective device for generalising the deeply reactionary politics of Remembrance Day across the whole of society.

For deeply reactionary it is. Controlled and choreographed by the ruling class, it is a contradictory melange of sickly-sweet sentimentalism about 'sacrifice' and nationalist-militarist notions of 'glory'. Banished from view is the hidden history of mutinies, strikes, riots, and insurrections that ended the slaughter and, however briefly, held out the vision of a world without war. Banished, too, is the stark and simple truth that millions of workers and peasants in uniform had been sent to kill one another in the interests of rival groups of bankers, industrialists, and generals. And banished, of course, is the fact that each belligerent was a colonial power, holding tens of millions of black and brown people in subjugation under the cosh and the gun; and also that the millions who fought in the trenches returned home to the same sweatshops, slums, and dole queues as before.

## **The advent of modernity**

*La Belle Époque* ('the Beautiful Age') between 1871 and 1914 was the Indian summer of 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois civilisation. Despite the new forces of science, machines, and industry, despite myriad social discontents and new movements for national independence, social reform, and women's rights, an essentially conservative social order, topped by an antiquated political system, endured. Royal autocrats, landowning aristocrats, industrial oligarchs, the solid middle class, all felt secure in possession of privilege, property, and power. The First World War blew this world apart.

It had its origin in the huge expansion of global industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the intensified competition for raw materials, markets, and colonies to which this gave rise. This in turn fed an escalating arms race, a division of Europe into military blocs, a working-out of war plans, a growing mood of jingoism and militarism.

Even so, when the explosion came, it took almost everyone by surprise. Few great statesmen actually courted war (though some did); most feared the terrible risks involved, the leap into the dark. But they discovered that they were no longer in control, that the July crisis of 1914 unfolded according to its own logic of railway timetables, mobilisation schedules, and war plans years in the making.

Still, the expectation was that it would be a short war of manoeuvre, like the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 (over in a few weeks) or the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (over in a few months). None of the war plans was defensive: all were conceived by the prophets of the offensive and assumed sweeping advances through enemy territory. Many of the soldiers looked Napoleonic – massed formations of cavalry, bright-coloured uniforms, flags and bugles, lances and swords.

Everywhere, drab and discontented lives were suddenly transformed by a cause, an adventure, a great historical drama, and millions willingly answered the call to arms, the siren call of fatherland and flag, of manliness and military glory. 'Now, God be thanked who has matched us with his hour, and caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping!' wrote Rupert Brooke. 'With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power, to turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping, glad from a world grown old and cold and weary ...'

This mood lasted until the end of summer and into early autumn. But by October or November, all the war plans were as dust, reduced to naught as mass conscript armies of millions, armed with steel cannon and machine-guns, invulnerable in improvised fortresses of earth, wood, and wire, blocked every offensive move. 'The war has got stuck into a gigantic siege on both sides,' wrote Captain Rudolf Binding. 'The whole front is one endless fortified trench.'

Nothing like it had ever been known before. There had been trenches around Sevastopol in 1855, Petersburg in 1865, and Port Arthur in 1904. But now the trenches stretched across a continent, 450 miles of them on the Western Front alone, hundreds of miles more where Russian faced German and Austrian, where Serb faced Austrian; and soon there would be many more as Italians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, Turks, and others were sucked into the vortex of violence.

## **Industrialised attrition**

It was a deadlocked war of attrition. Trenches, concrete bunkers, and deep dugouts sheltered the defenders from hostile fire. Thickets of barbed-wire covered the approaches. Massed firepower raked no-man's-land with storms of steel. Attackers who managed somehow to get forwards would

be absorbed into earthwork labyrinths that would soon be several miles deep. Here, their communications broken, their supplies running out, their fire support and back-up unable to get forwards, they would be cut off and destroyed as enemy reserves flooded towards the breach.

Generals demanded more guns, more shells, more men, more of everything to smash through the enemy's defensive crust, to break through into the open country beyond and restore the war of movement. So the scale of each offensive escalated, until, by 1916 and 1917, battles like Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele lasted for months and consumed a million or more men.

How could the madness of modern industrialised slaughter – where the products of human ingenuity, skill, and labour were transformed into a vast mechanism of death and destruction – how could this madness be ended?

The answer was given not by the rulers of the world, by the lords of capital and the conservative, liberal, and social-democratic politicians who did their bidding, but by an elemental revolt of the common people, who found their leadership among the persecuted radicals of the revolutionary underground.

Socialists do not wear poppies or support Remembrance Day ceremonies with good reason: they are tainted beyond recovery by the lies, coverups, and warmongering of a murderous ruling class. Instead, we celebrate the struggle from below against exploitation, oppression, and war.

**Neil Faulkner**

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**P.S.**

- Anti\*capitalist Resistance. 11 Nov 2021:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/remembrance-day-a-travesty-of-the-truth/>

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