

PEACE PLEDGE UNION'S

WHITE POPPIES IN CONTEXT

10 million dead, 21 million injured, countless millions bereaved

Widespread interest in promoting peace developed in the late 19th century, prompted by a bitter struggle for colonies among major powers and a burgeoning arms race that came close to major war. Two major disarmament conferences were called but both failed to find agreement among the 49 nations. The arms race grew, as did anxiety resulting from complex alliances formed to shore up perceived vulnerabilities.



Many peace and civil society organisations in Britain, America and continental Europe campaigned for diplomacy to prevent what became WW1. The French politician Jean Jaures, for example, tried to organise a general strike in France and Germany to force the governments to talk to each other. Old enmities from the Franco Prussian war made this impossible. So strong was the feeling in France that Jaures was assassinated wanting to prevent war. Wars have deep roots and long prehistories.



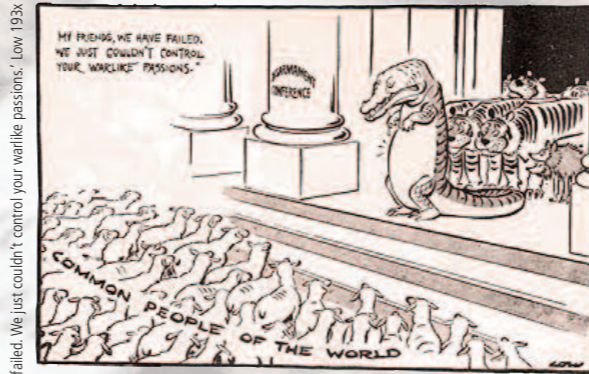
Anxiety about security of its colonies after the disastrous performance during the Boer wars caused Britain to ally itself with France and Russia. The boundaries of this 'Triple Alliance' formed the battle lines of the First World War. Wars have deep roots and long prehistories.



WAR TO END ALL WARS

The desire for 'peace' and for 'no more wars' was strong across all classes after WW1. Unresolved problems, however, and new ones created by the 'peace' treaties and intransigence of the political class made steps towards common security and arms reduction problematic

The League of Nations emerged from the 1919 Peace Treaty; promoted by the US President Woodrow Wilson but rebuffed by Congress its aim was to defuse conflicts before they became violent. The absence of one major world power and no means to enforce its decisions ensured that the hopes vested in this institution could never be fulfilled.



'My friends we have failed. We just couldn't control your warlike passions.' Low 193x

WORLD DISARMAMENT CONFERENCE

In the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations all major powers except the United States committed themselves to disarmament. During the 1920s peace and other civil groups campaigned for disarmament; eventually a World Disarmament Conference was initiated by the League of Nations in 1932. It sat for several years to no effect.

ARMISTICE CEREMONIES

Armistice ceremonies in the years immediately after the end of the war were important events for the bereaved, especially mothers and wives of dead soldiers who lay buried on the continent and whose graves were out of reach for most people.



Armistice Day at the cenotaph in Whitehall. Not a politically loaded red poppy in sight.

By the late 20s the numbers attending Armistice ceremonies dwindled as people got on with their lives and the ceremonies became increasingly dominated by the military, who celebrated their survival and achievements, in the war. Justification of war became the dominant sub text of the ceremonies.

In Britain the celebratory Victory balls and the gradual 'takeover' by the military of the armistice ceremony against a background of tensions on continental Europe led many to believe that lessons to prevent war had not been learned. Dick Sheppard, who later founded the Peace Pledge Union, was at the forefront of protests against such celebrations.

NO MORE WAR MOVEMENT

When the government introduced compulsory conscription in 1916 thousands of men refused, believing that killing strangers was not a proper activity for human beings, many more refused to be conscripted during World War Two. The NMWM was formed by conscientious objectors to promote ideas that would reduce tensions between nations. In 1922 they proposed that the centre of the red poppy should say 'peace', failing that they thought there should be white poppies.

Today military men and women from Britain willingly invade countries where they cause death and misery for which, in the recent budget, they get a substantial increase in their pay.



COOPERATIVE WOMEN'S GUILD

The failures of politicians to fulfil their promises to provide greater security was exemplified by the League's powerlessness and the failure of the Disarmament Conference to reduce the world's arsenals by one bullet. On Armistice Day 1932 the Prime Minister in his 'A Fear for the Future' speech in parliament announced that there is no defence against bombers the production of which no country wanted to abandon.

The growing military dominance of Armistice Day, its intimate association with the red poppy and its irrevocable 'support' for armed might in the tense climate of the time gave rise to the white poppy as a symbol of hope and challenges to this warlike world view.

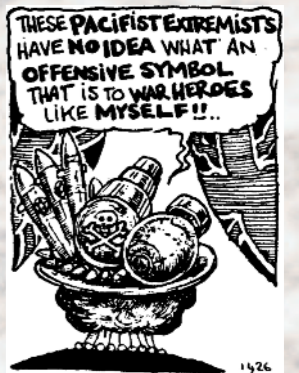
PEACE PLEDGE UNION & CWG



1938 Procession to join a major national PPU/CWG rally in Westminster following the first major alternative Armistice ceremony led by PPU president George Lansbury and a wreath of white poppies.



Furious opposition by Prime Minister Thatcher and much of the national and local press erupted in advance of Remembrance Day 1986 when the Peace Pledge Union planned to lay a wreath of white poppies at the cenotaph in Whitehall. Steve Bell commented on the occasion in a series of cartoons.



Today much of the hostility towards white poppies evident in the 80s when the British Legion refused to appear in the media with a PPU representative has gone. It has been replaced with the view that the red poppy stands for peace as much as the white. This begs the question of what peace is and how best to achieve it. Today by honouring the men and women who went to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan one is surely buying into a war-accepting belief system which is precisely what the white poppy rejects. White poppies have now spread to Canada and New Zealand.

PPIU procession to lay wreath of white poppies at the Cenotaph



White poppies for peace are available from the Peace Pledge Union. Copies of this poster can be downloaded at www.ppp.org.uk/download. More detailed information relating to this poster will be available in the near future. If you would like to help develop this project contact us at mail@ppu.org.uk