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Armistice Day: The Forgotten Fields of Flanders

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In Flanders fields, the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place; and in the sky

The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below

We are the Dead.....

-- John McCrae, 1915

At eleven in the morning on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the guns on the Western Front fell silent, as an armistice between the allied powers and Germany took effect.

Millions of soldiers died in the horrific combat of World War I, including 1.3 million French; 1 million British; 2 million German; and 100,000 Americans.

In the nations allied against Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, November 11th--Armistice Day--became a national holiday to commemorate the war dead. The symbol of martial sacrifice was the poppy, which after bombardments had torn up the earth, bloomed in red profusion in the no man's land between the trenches.

The flower became an icon of remembrance due, importantly, to John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* which was written after the second battle of Ypres in 1915 and became one of the most famous poems of World War I. (McCrae, a Canadian doctor, commanded a field hospital until his death from pneumonia in January, 1918.)

After the war, paper poppies were sold on street corners in Britain, France, Italy, and America to aid veterans. People wore them for as much as week before Armistice Day itself.

Yet, Flanders fields, the armistice that ended "the war to end all wars" and the Great War itself are largely forgotten in America today. I was reminded of this vividly when I was at a meeting in Europe last weekend, and participants from Britain had poppies pinned to their lapels, 92 years after war's end. But not a poppy was to be seen at a meeting I attended in Washington this week of people from government, business and academia. And, for a reason: poppies have not been sold on the streets in the United States for years.

After World War II, Armistice Day became Veterans Day to honor the dead from another tumultuous conflict. But many people were still of an age when World War I was a living memory (I remember my mother buying a poppy for me on a cold afternoon in downtown Chicago when I was child in the early '50s). Then, over time, Memorial Day, which had its origins in the American Civil War, became the main national holiday commemorating all our fallen soldiers.

Today, Veterans Day is an excuse for merchants to hawk their wares. "Veterans Day Sale, 25% to 50% Off Storewide" shouted the Macy's full-page ad in *The New York Times*. Somehow, I doubt that at 11 a.m. the store will ask shoppers to observe a two minute moment of silence in honor of the war dead (as is the tradition in other nations). Although Veteran's Day is a holiday for federal workers, stock markets are open and most businesses do not give their employees the day off.

Of course, for students of history, World War I is a momentous event which echoed down the 20th century. The cataclysmic conflict led to the collapse of four empires (German, Austria-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman) and weakened a fifth (British). The Versailles Treaty redrew the map of Europe and the Middle East and helped sow the seeds of the Second World War. The legacy of the Great War is still felt in contemporary conflicts (for example, in Iraq, which became the British mandate of Mesopotamia after World War I and the end of Ottoman rule).

Yet, for Americans today, it is the poppy fields of Afghanistan, not of Flanders, which are front of mind---fields that supply vast quantities of opium to the world, feed pervasive Afghan corruption and help finance the Taliban.

The days of venerating the poppy as a symbol of remembrance are long past. On November 11, most Americans will go about their business dead to the memory of the day the guns were silenced in Europe and a new and terrifying epoch of conflict was born.

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