

Why did the poppy war commemoration at the Tower of London become a mass event?

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An estimated 5 million people visited the ceramic poppy installation, *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, during the four months it was at the Tower of London.

The last of 888,246 poppies, commemorating British and Commonwealth casualties in World War I, was planted in the castle moat on November 11, Armistice Day. The artwork was created by Paul Cummins, in association with Royal Shakespeare Company theatrical designer, Tom Piper.

Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red will be remembered as one of the iconic images of the 100th anniversary of World War I. Cummins says the inspiration for his artwork came after, “I read through wills of First World War soldiers and came across one man who said everyone he knew had been killed. He wrote of blood swept lands and seas of red, where angels dare to tread.”

The Tower when this reporter saw it was surrounded by a red sea, shimmering in the early morning light. A fountain of poppies tumbled out of the window of one of the fortress’s towers, the Weeping Window, bringing to mind William Blake’s words “And the hapless Soldiers sigh. Runs in blood down Palace walls”. It appears even more bloodlike when floodlit at night.

Certain responses to the installation were telling. *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones denounced the installation as “trite and inward-looking”, a war memorial worthy of the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and commented that the crowds flocking to see it were seduced by a “fake nobility”. He declared that an “adequate work of art about the war” should have presented the “barbed wire and bones” evident in the works of artists such as Otto Dix and George Grosz.

There is a valid point to be made on this score. The

cartoons, drawings and paintings of Dix and Grosz, informed by a mass socialist culture that spanned decades and reached its fullest expression in the October Revolution of 1917, remain powerful anti-war statements. They reflected a broad-based opposition to the bloody madhouse of World War I and its aftermath, but were influenced by a climate in which there was popular opposition to capitalism and a striving for an alternative in socialism.

And today... we have to suffer official embedded war artists churning out anodyne images and the likes of US filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow treating CIA torture with approval.

Anyone seeking to make an artistic comment about war must cut through the various strands of intellectually toxic postmodernism, which reject art as a means of understanding and changing the world, and find their way to a real understanding of history and contemporary reality.

However, the question remains, is Jones’ reading of the public reaction to *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* correct? I would argue that it is not and that this is important, socially and politically.

In his comment, Jones spoke of accidentally being swept into a “tide of humanity” during his visit to the memorial. He followed that with derisory references to “the real thing—popular art”. “The gentle jostling and sense of fun made it hard, when I visited, to see this as a profoundly moving work about the first world war”, he wrote.

“It is deeply disturbing that a hundred years on from 1914, we can only mark this terrible war as a national tragedy... we should not be remembering only our own. It’s the inward-looking mood that lets UKIP thrive.”

Jones was inevitably attacked from the right for his “sneering” criticism, prompting a self-defence in which

he insisted, “The installation at the Tower is abstract, and tells nothing about that history. It is instead a representation of grief as such—a second-hand evocation of feelings about the dead”, before stressing that, because only British and Commonwealth dead are depicted, “If we can only picture the Great War as a British tragedy we have not learned very much about it.”

Of course, the poppy is the official symbol of the war dead and a simple, abstract image that allows for people to project a multitude of conceptions onto it. No one can deny therefore that there were those who saw the installation in the narrowly defined terms proposed by Jones. However, every available account of the public response, including the replies to Jones’ own articles, suggests this was by no means a majority view.

The overwhelming sentiment expressed was far removed from the national-chauvinism UKIP seeks to cultivate. Indeed, the party’s leader Nigel Farage responded to the installation by calling the Armistice the biggest mistake of World War I and declaring that Britain should have continued the war for another six weeks to achieve an unconditional German surrender, even at the cost of another 100,000 casualties.

Cummins, whatever his limitations, succeeded in turning an elemental idea into something hugely effective because it tapped into deep, albeit inchoate, anti-war sentiment.

Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red, with its depiction of a massive loss of life, chimes with the views of millions as to the horror and senseless waste of the First World War—a sentiment entirely at odds with the efforts of Britain’s ruling elite to recast the slaughter as a heroic endeavour, worthy of celebration. The simplicity of the installation and its magnitude poignantly represent the blood-filled trenches of Europe and the carnage further afield in the Middle East, Africa and the Pacific.

Moreover, attitudes to the First World War are undoubtedly informed by contemporary hostility to the predatory wars waged by the great powers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. The ruling elite know this very well. In 2012 a study by a Ministry of Defence think tank, the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), lamented the lack of public support for military interventions, which had meant that “the need to run military risks has become more

difficult”.

“Neither the action in Iraq nor the operations in Afghanistan have enjoyed public support and we are in danger of learning a false lesson from the experience of the last 10 years”, it warned. The DCDC urged greater efforts to mould public opinion to accept further and bloodier military conflicts. It recommended combining the efforts of the media to this end with a state war propaganda agency promulgating measures to “reduce public sensitivity to the penalties inherent in military operations”!

The defeat of the war resolution on Syria in 2013 in the House of Commons only added to these concerns—one of the very reasons why the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government and Labour opposition set about their ongoing efforts to recast World War I as a just and noble cause. Prime Minister David Cameron called for the 2014 centenary to be turned into a “commemoration like the [Queen’s] Diamond Jubilee” and then Education Secretary Michael Gove railed against the “false depiction” of the war by “left-wing” artists and intellectuals.

However, the reaction to *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* shows that, for most, the poppy continues to conjure up images of the killing fields of Europe 100 years ago—and embodies the desire that such a calamity should never be repeated. Indeed, having realised the numbers it was drawing, the ruling elite competed to try and turn the commemoration into an unambiguous paean to militarism and patriotism. A proposal to have Cameron and his wife plant the last poppy was abandoned as too obvious politically and so it was left to a 13-year-old army cadet—the new generation to be used as cannon fodder.



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