



OF POPPIES & THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF REMEMBRANCE

ECPA Winter Briefing
22nd November 2010

It is raining. There is no bugler. The names of the fallen of two world wars are read out by the Anglican woman Priest in Charge. The Roman Catholic Church has re-timed its service so that the whole village can attend. The main road is closed for the two minute silence. These are Burke's "small battalions" acting out a ceremony that has remained unchanged since 1919, but whose details reveal exactly how much has changed in the last generation of Englishmen. Ten days before the local Church of England had held its first service on All Souls Day. A commercialised Halloween has come to replace the Bonfire Night burning of Guy Fawkes the Catholic conspirator of the Gunpowder Plot. As if to echo the mood, the BBC shows a long documentary re-evaluating Elgar and comparing him to Mahler. Rather than the imperial martinet of the Pomp and Circumstance marches, he is revealed as a passionate and tortured Catholic intellectual, who found ways of giving expression to an Englishness that endures. The sermon contains praise for David Cameron's Big Society, if only in contrast to Margaret Thatcher's assertion that there is "no such thing as society". It also contains the gardening insight that poppies grow best on disturbed land. The villagers leave their poppies on the War Memorial and walk home through the rain.

What can poppies teach us about European public affairs in the twenty first century? I have for some years felt ill at ease wearing my poppy in the European Institutions in the week before Remembrance Day, 11th November. This year British MEPs seemed to be wearing their poppies as a badge of difference rather than of remembrance. UK Independence Party members seemed to have found a supply of bigger than normal poppies. I much prefer the discreet lapel badge worn by Jim Nicholson the Ulster Unionist Member for Northern Ireland. Perhaps it is time for English super-patriots to follow the lead of the Ulster Unionists? I realise that I have been here before. In a November in the early 1970s the Young European Federalists held a committee meeting in Luxembourg on Remembrance Sunday. I and other British colleagues suggested that we should recognise that Europe's civil wars in the first part of the twentieth century were the wellspring of European unity. We proposed therefore that the eleventh day of the eleventh month should be a holiday for all Europeans. Jo Leinen, then leader of the German Young Federalists and now President of the European Parliament Environment Committee, smilingly pointed out that 11/11 was the start of Carnival in Cologne. We abandoned the idea and withdrew to contemplate our strange Britishness during a two minute silence looking out over the ravine.

So where do poppies come from in this context? They grew in huge numbers on the disturbed ground of First World War battlefields. They came to be seen as representing the blood of the fallen. In May 1915 a Canadian surgeon, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae wrote the poem "In Flanders fields". To this day remembrance and poppies are a big event in the Canadian calendar. John McCrae was born in Guelph in Ontario. In October I spoke on the handsome campus of the University of Guelph. I was struck by the paucity of our collective memory that has managed to forget how many service men from the British Empire died in the mud of Flanders. That failure of empathy continues to this day. Canadian losses in Afghanistan are 152 on a population of 33 million. By comparison the British have lost 322 on a population of 61 million. However the BBC makes no reference to Canadian losses. Indeed the British media have reinforced the maudlin concentration on the grief of individual families. I find it faintly unpleasant that business in the House of Commons should have to stop for the reading of the latest death toll. This is "Princess Diana" politics culminating in ill spelt handwritten letters from Gordon Brown. Traditionally we celebrated our victories and set aside certain days to remember the fallen. Lest we forget ...

Such forgetfulness can only lead to trouble as when members of the UK Government, led by the Prime Minister, insist on wearing their poppies in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, provoking the entirely justifiable Chinese observation that it was tactless for the British, who had started the Opium Wars, to insist on wearing opium poppies in today's China. No doubt similar thoughts may have crossed the minds of our gallant Afghan allies as British and Canadian forces proudly displayed their poppies in November. The key to peace in Afghanistan lies through dealing honestly with the heroin trade that finances the Taliban and all the other war lords. Instead of sourcing the West's need for the medical derivatives of opium from ring-fenced plantations on Tasmania, could we not buy up all the poppies in Afghanistan?

The wisest and gravest of my Central European friends, Pavel Bratinka the founder of the Civic Democratic Alliance Party (ODA) in Czecho-Slovakia, has long insisted on the importance of remembrance. He believes that an easy sliding away from the truth about the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe could only set up problems for the future. The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz maintained that “the man of the East cannot take Westerners seriously” because they had not experienced the extraordinary mass violence that had been imposed by Hitler and Stalin on Poland, the Baltics and the Ukraine. “Their resultant lack of imagination is appalling”. I was reminded of this by Anne Applebaum’s review of Timothy Snyder’s new book “Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin”. Anne writes “*Historians of the region certainly know that three million Soviet soldiers starved to death in Nazi camps, that most of the Holocaust took place in the East, and that Hitler’s plans for Ukraine were not different from Stalin’s. Snyder’s original contribution is to treat all of these episodes – the Ukrainian famine, the Holocaust, Stalin’s mass executions, the planned starvation of Soviet POWs, post war ethnic cleansing – as different facets of the same phenomenon. Instead of studying Nazi atrocities or Soviet atrocities separately, as many others have done he looks at them together. Yet Snyder does not exactly compare the two systems either. His intention rather, is to show that the two systems committed the same kinds of crimes at the same times and in the same places, that they aided and abetted one another, and above all that their interaction with one another led to more mass killing than either might have carried out alone*”..... “*To look at the history of mid-twentieth-century Europe in this way also has consequences for Westerners. Among other things, Snyder asks his readers to think again about the most famous films and photographs taken at Belsen and Buchenwald by the British and American soldiers who liberated those camps. These pictures, which show starving, emaciated people, walking skeletons in striped uniforms, stacks of corpses piled up like wood, have become the most enduring images of the Holocaust. Yet the people in these photographs were mostly not Jews; they were forced laborers who had been kept alive because the German war machine needed them to produce weapons and uniforms. Only when the German state began to collapse in early 1945 did they begin to starve to death in large numbers* “*Under German rule, the concentration camps and the death factories operated under different principles. A sentence to the concentration camp Belsen was one thing, a transport to the death factory Belzec something else. The first meant hunger and labor, but also the likelihood of survival; the second meant immediate and certain death by asphyxiation. This, ironically is why people remember Belsen and forget Belzec.*”

By adopting the poppies of the First World War to represent what happened in the Second World War, we entrenched a very Western European view of the mid-twentieth century. By concentrating on Franco-German reconciliation and the saga of Alsace-Lorraine, we managed to forget the nightmares of genocidal killing to the East. As Anne Applebaum puts it “we liberated one half of Europe at the cost of enslaving the other half for fifty years. We really did win the war against one genocidal dictator with the help of another”. Then we allowed Russian diplomats after the Second World War to define genocidal in a way that excluded Stalin’s mass murders. I like to think that I understand the impact of memory on modern politics. Yet at the very least I have clearly been culpable of a very Western view of recent European history. Working in the Balkans in the 1990s I could logically argue that the success of the European idea on the Rhine could be extended to the countries of the Danube. Even then however I failed to fully grasp the nightmare of the Bloodlands.

This whole story is a salutary reminder to all of us not to jump to conclusions about the judgment of history. The baby boomer generation look increasingly to have lived in the sunny uplands of an Augustan age, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union as its apogee. Yet it is this generation which has unleashed, from 1970 onwards, the vast majority of the greenhouse gasses which look set to bring the sunlit Age to a close. Viewed from this perspective the great dramas of decolonialisation and American exceptionalism look like mere surface eddies on the river of time. How appropriate therefore that societies capable of thinking in millennia rather than decades, such as India and China, should be emerging from their three hundred year eclipse by the brilliance of European achievement just as the planetary mood darkens once again. Truly the Chinese and Indian attitude to climate change will determine the fate of humanity.

Engraved on many Western European war memorials is the so-called Kohima prayer - “When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today.” Kohima is close to the border between India and Burma and marks the point when the Japanese invasion of India failed. We forget at our peril what a small and mutually dependent planet this has always been.

