

NO SURRENDER TO WAR: WHY THE WHITE POPPY IS NOT A WHITE FLAG

By Sean Howard
Peace Quest Cape Breton Campaign Coordinator

Note: this article was published, under the title *Building 'a Culture of Peace'*, in The Cape Breton Post on Thursday, October 27, 2022

From October 28-November 11, Peace Quest Cape Breton will be running its second white poppies campaign, designed to draw attention to the burning need for peace on an Earth cursed by conventional, and threatened by nuclear, war. Our first campaign, in 2019, was intended to inaugurate an annual tradition – until the pandemic intervened, a “virus,” as UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared in March 2020, graphically illustrating “the folly of war,” the distempered inversion of human priorities placing warfare over welfare, killing over caring.

Guterres’ call for a Global Ceasefire was ignored, and in the second COVID Plague Year – 2021 – war raged in 46 states while global military spending, dominated by the US and NATO, reached a sick new high of \$2.1 trillion, a massive diversion of funds needed to meet the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

White poppies have been distributed in the UK for 89 years, since 1936 by the Peace Pledge Union, but first by the Co-Operative Women’s Guild, composed largely of mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, lovers and friends of men slaughtered or maimed (in body and mind) in the internecine, imperial bloodbath of the ‘Great War’.

Those courageous ‘peacemongers’ objected to the cynical harnessing of the Royal British Legion’s red poppy campaign to the war machine, its one-sided emphasis on the British Empire’s ‘glorious fallen’. After the abysmal failure of the world war ‘to end all war,’ the white poppy was and is intended to remember all victims of war (the overwhelming majority of whom, in the 20th and 21st century, have been civilian) and to declare war beyond the pale of civilized human behavior. As the Peace Pledge Union annually declares: “By encouraging us to tackle the causes of war such as inequality and the arms trade, and to foster nonviolent alternatives, the white poppy helps build a culture of peace.”

At the end of the Cold War, a sustained global commitment to such peacebuilding could quickly have driven military spending down to levels sufficient for self-defence but inadequate for invasion and conquest. Instead of leading the way, however, Europe – misled largely by an expansionist American agenda – soon lost its way, sleepwalking back into the military maze. The utterly predictable results: the recurring nightmare of Russian dictatorship, and a new Cold War now overheating (and threatening daily to go nuclear) in Ukraine.

Yet the appeal of the ‘white poppy’ still holds, for the only forces strong enough to end the carnage in Ukraine – and Yemen, and Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and on and on – are the same non-violent ones that would, given any real chance, have prevented the tinderbox from igniting: diplomacy, détente, disarmament.

Not only does war need to be outlawed: international law, too, is often a victim of war. Both Russia and Ukraine, for example, are illegally forcing hundreds of thousands of men to fight against their will. Ukraine, indeed, has thrown a military dragnet over all men from 18 to 60, and as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) – founded in 1914, as the ‘Great Hate’ in Europe broke out – told the UN Human Rights Council in July, this ridiculously “general mobilization is enforced without any exceptions for conscientious objectors,” with “evasion” punishable by 3-5 years in prison. IFOR also, of course, condemned similar persecution in Russia.

In August, the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection organized a virtual ‘Peace Poetry for Ukraine’ event, in solidarity with the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement and in honour of conscientious objectors in Ukraine, Russia, and also Belarus. The dangers of traditional war ‘remembrance’ was a key theme, with Belgian poet-activist Ria Verjauw distilling the familiar process: “writing names in marble/singing the praise of guts/so that kids will keep saying/they will train as soldiers.”

Remembering and imagining are intimately linked. We will never have the strength to build a world beyond war if we continue, every Remembrance season, to just see red.