



MEMORIALIZATION

Between the Memory of War and the Refusal of War: The Symbolism of Flowers

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ABSTRACT

The use of plants to memorialize conflicts is not specific to the twentieth century. The flower wars of the Aztecs or the War of the Roses (1455-1485) suggest an older relation, one that nevertheless reached its peak during the twentieth century, all while becoming more complex from a semantic point of view. On the eve of the First World War, flowers were a symbol of individual and collective heroism. They adorned the uniforms of elite troops, and embodied the courage of soldiers leaving for war with a “flower in the gun barrel.” Beginning in 1915, they also came to evoke the sacrifice of men who had fallen on the field of battle. They became the emblem of the peace movement in the 1960s, and today express the remembrance of nations mourning acts of terrorism, which some political leaders have likened to war. As a sign of bravery and suffering—as well as the refusal of armed conflict—flowers are a polysemic symbol of the memory of wars in Europe.



Monument honoring the Great Patriotic War in Chisinau (modern-day Moldova).
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The Creation of Floral Symbols during and after the Great War

From the beginning of the Great War, temporary cemeteries were prepared in the immediate vicinity of combat zones; their tombs flowered spontaneously, drawing the attention of certain combatants. In 1915, flowering poppies in Flanders inspired the Canadian lieutenant-colonel John McCrae to write the poem *In Flanders Fields*, which established the poppy as a symbol of the blood spilled by the men who fell on the battlefield. In France, those who survived the conflict's first year called recruits of the class of 1915 *bleuets* (cornflowers). While this nickname is explained by the new horizon blue uniform, it was also chosen because, like the poppy, this blue flower continued to grow on battlefields. On the German side, other flowers symbolized the war that dragged on, sometimes in line with uses dating back to the prewar period. This was true of the myosotis, called *Vergissmeinnicht* ("forget-me-not") in German, and which before 1914 was already a flower of remembrance representing the loved one far from home. Dried and carefully conserved, it was slipped (like the reseda) into letters, and gave material form to the permanent bonds between the front and the rear. Soldiers engaged in the Great War developed intimate practices involving flowers, such as the Canadian George Stephen Cantlie, who sent his daughter flowers gathered on battlefields, and whose gesture was recently made famous by a travelling art exhibition.

During the postwar period, flowers became the collective symbol for all of a country's victims. Initially mobilized as part of individual and private initiatives, the poppy became institutionalized after 1920 in Great Britain. In 1921, the Marshall Douglas Haig organized a *British Poppy Day Appeal* to raise funds for disabled and moneyless veterans. The practice was rapidly extended to other Commonwealth nations, transforming the armistice into Poppy Day, when many Britons wear a poppy in memory of the soldiers who died in combat. Their importance in memorializing the conflict was reflected in the major role they played during events marking the centenary of the

Great War, as over 888,000 poppies—one for each soldier killed—were planted before the Tower of London in the summer of 2014.

Like the poppy in Great Britain, the cornflower truly emerged as a marker of remembrance in France only after the conflict. However, unlike the floral emblem chosen in Commonwealth countries, it did not refer to all combatants who fell on the field of battle, for Charlotte Malleterre, the daughter of the commander of the *hôtel national des Invalides*, and Suzanne Lenhardt, an *infirmière major* (military nurse), made it a specific symbol for the *gueules cassées* (facially disfigured veterans). It honored the 300,000 soldiers who bore the scars of war on their bodies and faces. Paper cornflowers were produced in workshops by those who had been mutilated, and sold to provide them with additional income. This tradition experienced renewed interest after 1945, and led to their sale during the anniversary dates of 8 May and 11 November, with the proceeds being used to support veterans, the wounded, and war widows, and more recently victims of terrorism.

A Symbolic Practice that Continued during the Second World War

By giving flowers the rank of a memorial marker, the Great War invented a tradition that continued during the Second World War. As in Flanders in 1914-1918, the graves dug in Italy during the Allied campaign (1943-1945) quickly flowered, with flowers coming to symbolize this terrible theater of operation. After the recapture of Mount Cassino in May 1944, a song popular with the Polish soldiers who fought in the battle evokes the poppies that have “drunk the blood” of their comrades. The floral symbol also took hold in popular culture. In the Hollywood film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, by John Sturges, a Second World War veteran is looking for a Japanese farmer in Arizona to give him the medal of his son killed in combat during the Italian campaign. On the ravaged farm, before a flowerbed of wild flowers bringing to mind those from the battlefields of the Italian peninsula, the former soldier understands that a body was buried at that spot.

However, flowers did not solely refer to the death of soldiers during the Second World War. From 1940 to 1945, the daisy became a patriotic symbol and emblem of the Dutch resistance against the occupier: worn by Queen Wilhelmina in exile in Great Britain, given as a first name to the crown princess, and worn by refugees, it also embodied the hope of an imminent end to the war. Similarly, in the Italian song *Bella Ciao*, a flower adorns the tomb of a partisan who died for his country.

Flowers as a Symbol of Peace and Refusal of War

Flowers do not solely express the memory of men fallen in combat, or the glorification of resistance members. During the Great War many soldiers, such as the French infantryman Gaston Mourlot, made herbariums to break with the temporality of the conflict, collecting an element to embody the peace that once was and that was yet to come. There is a powerful relation between peace and vegetal elements, from trees of liberty planted in France after the Revolution of 1848 to personify reconciliation between citizens, to the olive branch symbolizing peace, a symbol that Picasso's dove from 1949 enduringly established in the international imagination. The Cold War and its related conflicts (such as the Vietnam War) associated flowers with the struggle for peace. Peace demonstrations in the United States saw activists opposing law enforcement with flowers, a scene that was immortalized in Washington in 1967, in a famous image by the photographer Marc Riboud. At the same time, the Flower Power movement and its rejection of conflict was exported to Europe. In April 1974, the Carnation Revolution in Portugal showed that the soldiers themselves could use this symbol to express their refusal to participate in wars of decolonization, as well as their desire to break with an authoritarian regime exhausting itself by waging them.

Flowers continue to embody the memory of past conflicts and the suffering enduring in Europe. In Sarajevo, the scars from the bombing of the city between 1992 and 1995 were filled with red resin, a “rose” that recalls the wars of the former Yugoslavia. Further East, the laying of carnations, especially at Piskarevo cemetery in Saint Petersburg, where the victims of the siege of Leningrad (1941-1944) are buried—or at the foot of the memorial

honoring the soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and in Afghanistan (1979-1989), in Chisinau, Moldova—show that the desire to remember is also expressed through floral elements in this part of the European continent.

A memorial marker of war, flowers in Europe have long exalted patriotism. However, they now appear to be “dead to [jingoistic] thinking” (Emanuele Coccia). Left en masse at the sites of terrorist attacks in Berlin, Paris, London, and Barcelona, they are a reminder, beyond national differences, that European societies share common rites of grief, memory, and the refusal of violence, for which flowers have become one form of expression.

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