

Remembrance Day: a Colonial Tool of Propaganda

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November 11 2023

Let's not waste any time.. Remembrance Day is used as a tool of propaganda to glorify war and keep up military recruitment. It's an event used to uphold nationalist ideologies and creates patriotic mindsets to maintain the power of the West over the rest of the world, particularly the Global South. Much like how we see police unions spend hundreds of thousands on the funerals for cops killed in the line of duty but never see so much as an apology for the individuals that police kill, we are expected to remember all the soldiers who "sacrificed" their lives for our "freedom" while the majority of us are nowhere near experiencing freedom. We are expected to give gratitude to the people who continue to carry out wars in Africa and the Middle East while never recognizing the innocent lives lost through the process of ongoing colonialism and imperialism. As I write this, we are 30+ days into the genocide of Palestinians in occupied Palestine; a genocide that has been ongoing for decades.

I don't care to wear a poppy any other year, but it feels extra hypocritical to see poppies being worn this year while we all witness genocides taking place right on our screens in Palestine, in Sudan, in Congo, in Tigray; genocides being supported and funded by Canada and other Western powers. "Never again" but, here we are, doing it again. And again. And again. The wars have never ended. Millions of people around the world continue to be murdered and displaced for their land and resources. We see the way the "rules of war" don't apply to everyone and how some are praised for their "self defense" while others are labeled oppressors and terrorists (see Ukraine vs. Palestine). We see the way media reports "conflicts" within European countries vs. that of those in the Middle East. We see the way racism, anti-Blackness, capitalism, and the greed of domination is what keeps the war machine going. The only thing "heroic" to recognize is the unwavering resilience of the colonized peoples who are forced to live under oppression and occupation every day of their lives.

And while we witness war and genocide take place in other parts of the world, we have yet to recognize the war and genocide taking place right here in so-called Canada. Sure, the war here may not see bombs being dropped on civilians; no, Canada is much more "covert" in its actions. Here, war and genocide looks something like missing and murdered Indigenous women, death at the hands of police, over-representation in the prison system, children being taken from their families, chronic homelessness. Indigenous Peoples in "Canada" literally still live under

The Indian Act and we have the audacity to call this a “free” country. Canada is a settler colonial project that requires genocide to survive, just as Israel is a settler colonial project that requires genocide to survive.

The field of crosses is a spectacle that takes place every year in Calgary, with over 3500 crosses being erected along Memorial Drive with the support of corporations such as TransAlta Corporation, Enmax, and the Calgary Stampede as well as support from individuals such as Shane Homes founder Cal Wenzel, Calgary Catholic School District trustee Shannon Cook, and CIBC Wood Gundy Vice President Daryl Howard. It’s also no surprise that the same man who founded the Field of Crosses, J. Murray McCann, also founded the annual Beacons of Hope event: an event to “*reflect, engage and acknowledge the contributions that Calgary Police Service members make each and every day to keep us all safe.*” Policing and military go hand-in-hand: they both love to give the perception that they exist to “keep the peace” while draining every possible resource from our communities and eliminating anything, or anyone, that gets in the way of their mission.

Here in Calgary, Indigenous Matriarchs have been organizing an event every year on May 5th for National Day of Awareness for Missing, Murdered, and Exploited Indigenous Peoples (MMEIP). They chose the site at 200 Memorial Dr NW to reclaim as “The Field of Red Ribbons” based on it being the site where the remains of Joey English had been scattered over the hill and throughout other parts of the city. Joey’s Mother walks hundreds of kilometres every year to bring attention to her daughter’s murder and the murders of other Indigenous women across the country. The event brings in families of missing and murdered Indigenous Peoples, creates space for them to share their grief, and displays red ribbons tied around the surrounding trees which are prayed over with Elders. In 2021, someone had removed the ribbons from the trees and threw them in the nearby trash cans while the crosses remained untouched. I remember the sadness felt by so many that day, and the work that went in to place new ribbons in the trees. You would never see someone disregard those crosses in such a way; surely the Calgary Police would have put in countless hours to find the culprit and charge them with a hate motivated crime. But, somehow, a response of “*I don’t know who did it — it wasn’t us*” was sufficient enough for them in this instance. The disrespect isn’t surprising, though. After-all, we are still waiting for Brady Landfill to be searched in Winnipeg for the remains of murdered Indigenous women.

“Why do we need something to remind us of how terrible war is when we’re constantly surrounded by it?” — Anne Theriault

Canada loves to put on a display for Remembrance Day with millions of dollars from corporate sponsors to fund the charade, The Royal Canadian Legion bringing in nearly \$20 million alone every year with The Poppy Campaign. But Canada fails to care for veterans every other day of the year. The State of Homelessness in Canada reports that in 2016 there were 2,950 veterans experiencing homelessness, making up 2.2% of the homeless population across the country. Does J. Murray McCann, or any one else who places veterans on a pedestal, understand that the same police they support violently arrests, assaults, and displaces houseless veterans every day? Do they know how many Indigenous houseless people who are survivors of the residential school system now sleep on those same streets? If we can understand the effects of trauma within war, then, surely, we can understand the effects of trauma when living through a genocide — an ongoing war against the people.

Did you know November 8th is National Indigenous Veterans Day? For decades, Indigenous veterans weren't able to actively participate in Remembrance Day ceremonies as a group or lay wreaths. *Historically, Indigenous Peoples who enlisted in the military faced discriminatory policies such as: loss of First Nations status, not being allowed to vote, and being prohibited from recognition at the National Memorial in Ottawa on Remembrance Day until the 1990s.* We still barely hear anything about this day, not in the way November 11th is thrown in our faces every year. You will never see the same kind of recognition, support and financial backing for National Indigenous Veterans Day or National Day of Awareness for MMEIP. Why? Because it's not profitable, and how do you maintain power if there is no one to exploit?

Much of what we are taught in school about world wars and overall world history gives us a very biased, surface level understanding. That is on purpose — it's part of the propaganda and indoctrination to keep us unaware of the historical and ongoing warcrimes of the countries we are to understand as the “good guys.” **There's nothing to be proud of.** The Western world is the definition of terrorism and, yet, we consistently pat ourselves on the backs for being “heroes.”

The First World War, the “Great War” and the “War to End All Wars,” came from the expansion of European nations because as countries like Britain and France expanded their empires, it resulted in increased tensions. In the 1900s, several European nations had empires across the globe where they had control over large amounts of land — land that had been forcibly taken from the Indigenous populations who had cared from them since time immemorial. Prior to World War I, the British and French empires were the world's most powerful, colonizing regions. As the British and French expansionism continued, tensions rose between opposing empires, including Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, leading to the creation of the Allied Powers (Britain and France) and Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire). It really was a threat of alliance power, and what those powers would be capable of, that began the First World War. It was a competition to take over.

This may all sound relatively familiar to you. However, what is often left unmentioned is that prior to the First World War there was The Scramble for Africa which took place between 1880 and 1914. Yes, it began not long after slavery (1526–1867) had been “abolished,” which took millions of Africans from their homeland to become enslaved by colonial powers and their settlers, and not long after the American Civil War (1861–1865), which was caused by the abolition of slavery. The Scramble for Africa, referred to as a ‘scramble’ due to the way in which the European nations raced to capture territory to expand their empires, was not only a successful attempt to capture power of a land that holds the world's most valuable resources, but also to further control the African people. It set the stage for World Wars to come and created the conditions we currently find ourselves living in, as European empires fought — and continue to fight — to gain as much power as they could.

“The problem is not people being uneducated. The problem is that people are educated just enough to believe what they have been taught, and not educated enough to question anything from what they have been taught.” - Richard Feynman

The Second World War is often one that seems “justified,” as most people only have an understanding that it was a “necessary” war in response to Nazi Germany's genocide of Jewish people — often forgetting about, or being unaware of, the genocides against millions of Black and Brown people at the same time and long before. But the Second World War was the “unfinished business” of the First World War, as described by colonial empires.

“What was the Second World War about? According to Allied leaders, that wasn’t a hard question. ‘This is a fight between a free world and a slave world,’ U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace explained. It is ‘between Nazidom and democracy,’ Winston Churchill said, with ‘tyranny’ on one side and ‘liberal, peaceful’ powers on the other.”

While Hitler is often the main focus when we think of World War II, Nazi Germany is but one colonial, genocidal piece. It’s also important to understand that most empires knew what was happening to the Jewish people but places such as Britain and France thought a stronger Germany would stop the spread of Communism from Russia. To make it extra clear: **they allowed Hitler to continue his actions as it benefited their own, and only stepped in once it became a threat to other European empires.** In fact, Britain attempted to send Jewish refugees back to Germany after the Second World War but then came to the idea of creating Israel instead. We are living in the aftermath of that colonialism. It will always come full circle.

The war in Vietnam, the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 which led to the “war on terror,” were all attempts to maintain and gain power through land grabs, resource extraction, and the genocide of those who get in the way. We talk about “terrorism” but never once are places like the U.S., Britain, or France ever named as main characters, despite their extensive, centuries-long track record of invading other countries and inserting themselves into foreign matters. 3000 people lost their lives in the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001. However, in retaliation, the U.S. has killed nearly 5 million people in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen through their “war on terror” efforts when the reality is that the majority of these people have been civilians, murdered and displaced over the greed of the West.

If that’s not terrorism, then I really don’t know what is.

“The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize they’re being propagandized.” — **Elmer Davis, head of the Office of War Information**

After the Second World War, and used again after the events of 9/11, Hollywood, in collaboration with the U.S. military, helped launch extensive propaganda campaigns to help convince those of us in the West into believing the “necessity” of war and its reasoning for invading places like the Middle East for over 20 years. This type of propaganda provides a false image of “good guy” vs. “bad guy,” one which involves the dehumanization of Black and Brown people while the white American is seen as a hero. These tactics are not new, but they’re becoming less and less subtle as people around the globe begin to make the connections between global imperial powers and those oppressed by them. Next time you plan to catch a war movie at the theatre, try to arrive a bit early to see the ads and I bet you’ll even notice recruitment adds for the RCMP or local police.

“It’s cool to be the good guys. It doesn’t matter that what they did as they loaded their guns and fired towards the enemies was also exactly what the enemies were doing. The bad guys had to die when they did it because well, they’re bad. And when the good guys did it, it’s very very cool — and Hollywood doesn’t hold back on this — because the good guys, the good guys are the epitome of the heroes.” - **Agnes Eveline Anton**

During the first 10 days of the Palestinian genocide, government institutions and media alike quickly launched a campaign to convince the public that the Palestinian people deserved what was happening to them based on the idea that they had performed “acts of terrorism” and narrowed it down to Israel vs. Hamas. We saw this not long ago when powers within the imperial core also labelled those who participated in the Black Lives Matter uprisings in 2020 as terrorists. The reality was that Black people were rising to resist 400+ years of colonial, genocidal violence which continues to be carried out by the police state. And the reality is, Palestinians are rising to resist 75+ years of colonial occupation while they live in the largest open-air prison on earth. It’s no coincidence that those with power will do everything they can to ensure the oppressed remains oppressed by using every resource available to them because without our land, resources, and labor, they have nothing.

Through ongoing propaganda force-fed to us through a variety of ways, including that of the dramatization of Remembrance Day, we have been desensitized to violence while at the same time being forced to live through the violence in real-time. The world is on fire (quite literally) and we are expected to go about our days as if this is what life is supposed to be. The majority of people on this planet can’t afford basic needs like housing and food, there are climate disasters happening all around us, we are watching genocides unfold right on our phones, and we’re expected to act as though these things are normal.

I refuse to accept any of this as normal.

There is a lot to unpack on this subject, and I know I haven’t covered it all in this 10-minute read. I encourage anyone reading this to follow the links provided throughout this piece, take the time to seek out more resources, and commit to educating yourself beyond what you think you know because I assure you there is more. We should never stop learning, never stop expanding our understanding of the world around us. Our future requires us to do that much.

And if you’re not quite ready to accept the reality we live in, if you still feel the need to wear that poppy and participate in Remembrance Day events and ceremonies today, consider a white poppy and take a moment of silence to recognize the people who have had — and continue to have — their rights and freedoms forcibly stripped from them every day through ongoing war and genocide around the globe. May we forever stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed by colonial powers and the soldiers who fight their battles for them.

“Never again” means never again.

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Retrieved on November 3 2025 from

<https://www.taylormcnallie.ca/post/remembrance-day-a-colonial-tool-of-propaganda>

“Taylor McNallie dedicates her time to seeking racial justice and collective liberation through education and hands-on work with both marginalized communities and allies alike. As the co-creator of Inclusive Canada, she provides education on anti-racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness. She is also a member of the Walls Down Collective which provides access to no-barrier resources and care such as Harm Reduction, free food programs and an alternative to local policing.”

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