

A Broken Silence? Mass Observation, Armistice Day and 'Everyday Life' in Britain 1937-1941

Introduction

As the assembled crowds in Whitehall bowed their heads for the two minute silence on Armistice Day 1937, this silence was broken by a man who pushed his way through the crowd, shouting about 'hypocrisy' and 'preparing for war'. Stopped by police before he could reach dignitaries assembled around the Cenotaph, his brief protest was nonetheless widely covered in the following day's newspapers, and broadcast to the nation by the BBC. The man was Stanley Storey, an escapee from a London psychiatric hospital. However, he had fought in the Great War, and could thus claim the 'moral authority' often accorded to veterans across post-war Europe. (Lawrence, 2003: 569; Hurcombe, 2008; Mosse, 1990) He consequently had a particularly authoritative position from which to accuse commemorative practices such as the Armistice Day ceremony of hypocrisy in the late 1930s.

Newspaper coverage of Storey's protest largely emphasised the fact that he was an escaped lunatic, using the occurrence as a means through which to highlight the courage of the new King, who stayed silent and still throughout the disturbance. The *Daily Mail* headline ran 'Shouts, but the King did not stir' whilst the *Manchester Guardian* extended the King's apparent stoicism to the crowds attending the ceremony, declaring 'Crowd unmoved by Cenotaph incident' (12 November 1937: both 11). In these accounts, Storey's brief protest appeared to have made little impact on the practice, shared across nation and Empire, of

standing in contemplative silence for two minutes at 11a.m. on 11 November each year. However, observation of the silence in public was widely policed, both formally and informally. Newspapers covered both the national ceremonies in London and local acts of commemoration, and the BBC broadcast the Cenotaph Service to the nation from 1928 onwards (Gregory, 1994: 135). Police stopped traffic and pedestrians were expected to remain still, employers organised workplace ceremonies and schools held collective silences (King, 1998: 234). The words of Mass Observation (henceforth MO) panellists, who were recording their feelings and activities on Armistice Day for the fledgling social survey organisation, provide us with some sense of the range of emotions felt by some participants in this silence. For some, Storey had given voice to a more widespread discontent with commemorative practice. For others, the predominant feeling was one of unease, or embarrassment. By the late 1930s the Spanish Civil War, the Japanese invasion of China, German re-armament and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, proved to some that the lessons they attributed to remembrance of the Great War had not been learnt. For others a temporal, emotional and generational distance from the war meant that they felt little personal connection to the rituals of remembrance. While participation in the silence may have been near universal, the meaning of this silence, and of the wider ceremonies of remembrance, were both multiple and diverse. For many of those writing for MO the meanings of Armistice Day, if they had ever been agreed, had already been broken.

This article examines the material on Armistice Day collected by MO between 1937 and 1941 to explore both subjective responses to the rituals, and the ways

that wider commemorative practices were integrated into everyday life in mid century Britain. In this, it moves away from the focus on public acts of commemoration, and the ways in which these were contested, that has shaped much of the scholarly work on remembrance of the Great War in Britain (Bushaway, 1992; Cannadine, 1981; King, 1998). As Adrian Gregory's exemplary study has shown, the meanings attached to the traditions of Armistice Day had been widely and deeply contested since their inception in 1919 (1994). Seen by some as a means to build imperial unity, suppress dissent and legitimate the decision to go to war, for others it was an opportunity to promote pacifism and critique the power structures of contemporary Britain (Tate and Kennedy, 2013: 5). Originally envisaged as a day of national thanksgiving for victory, a widely shared desire for collective commemoration of the war dead had led to the erection of a temporary cenotaph in Whitehall in 1919. Lutyens' permanent cenotaph, unveiled on 11 November 1920, and echoed in the erection and dedication of war memorials around the country over the next two decades, became the focus for acts of commemoration and remembrance in the following years, while Armistice Day became central to an emergent British 'myth' of 'peacefulness' (Lawrence, 2003). Veterans, many of whom were keen to celebrate victory, survival and comradeship, increasingly felt themselves marginalised within the day's activities. Although the presence of veterans remained central to the ceremonial aspect of remembrance, the wishes of many ex-servicemen to celebrate both victory and peace were increasingly subject to the desire of many of the bereaved, at least as represented in the national press, to preserve the 11 November as a day of solemn, formal mourning, and the parties and charity balls which had been held on the evening

of Armistice Day had largely vanished by the mid 1920s. Some veterans went further in their critique, taking part in protests that emphasised the poverty and hardship being faced by many living ex-Servicemen whilst the dead were venerated (Gregory, 1994:56-60). By the mid 1930s pacifist organisations were contesting the day's meanings, with the Women's Co-operative Guild laying wreaths of White Poppies at memorials, and the League of Nations Union choosing the 11 November 1935 as the date on which to campaign against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The Peace Pledge Union, the largest British pacifist organisation of the 1930s, held its own ceremonies – which emphasised the need for peace as the key lesson of war- as an alternative to official commemorations. Hostility to each of these activities was widespread. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, in the aftermath of the Munich Crisis and 'Gas Mask Sunday', and the outbreak of war in 1939, the meanings of Armistice Day were contested again, seen by some as a validation of the decision to go to war in Europe once more, and by others as a shameful reminder that the search for peace had failed. Throughout the interwar period, and into the Second World War, debates raged about the meanings and efficacy of remembrance.

Both Gregory and Winter have considered the personal impact of remembrance, and the relationship between the public and the private that shaped practices of commemoration (Gregory, 1994; Winter, 1995, 1999). Winter's humanist 'social agency' approach can be read as an explicit critique of studies that, he argues, have over-emphasised the political dimensions of commemoration at the expense of individual agency. For Winter, grief, and the need for the bereaved

of the war to come together through rituals of remembrance which recognised and consoled them in their loss, underpinned and shaped the forms of commemoration that emerged in interwar Europe (1995). Key to these rituals in Britain was the two minute silence. Contemporary reports of remembrance in the interwar period, and of the widespread observance of the silence, demonstrate the extent to which the British people collectively acknowledged and marked the anniversary of the end of the Great War. However, studies of official practices of commemoration tell us very little about the ways that individuals may have negotiated remembrance and possibly grief in their everyday lives, or how they felt about the formal traditions of the silence, the placing of wreaths, the prayers and the marching. Not all of those attending commemorative events, or participating in the silence, were united by this practice. Indeed, as Alex King has argued, 'emotional states other than grief... were of enormous importance in the remembrance of the dead' (King, 1998: 221). Rituals of remembrance, such as the two minute silence, subject private emotions such as grief, guilt or anxiety to public performance, and even for the grief stricken, may not have always have offered the consolation which they sought (Niven, 2007: 40). In a thoughtful article from 1999, Winter argues that in interwar Britain 'the two minute silence can be understood as a secularized prayer', identifying the post 1945 years as the period in which the ceremony lost its meaning (Winter, 1999:3). However, the MO material on Armistice Day shows that the meanings of the silence were multifarious. As Winter states, 'war memorials were places where people grieved, both individually and collectively', but they were also sites where people felt a whole swathe of other emotions, ranging from anger and anxiety to boredom and embarrassment (Winter, 1995:

79). The material collected by MO on Armistice Day between 1937 and 1941 provides some sense of the varying responses to remembrance amongst the British people whilst war was prepared for, and then experienced once again.

Founded in 1937, MO set out to create 'an anthropology of ourselves' by collecting and analysing a range of data about the British. Methods for collecting this material included 'Directives' sent out to volunteer writers, known as the National Panel, day surveys, in which writers recorded their activities on a specific day, diaries, surveys, and a more traditionally ethnographic attempt to study the people of Bolton ('Worktown'). What draws this diverse methodology together is a common interest in the everyday, in the details and particulars of the ways that people lived their lives, and in the subjective experience of life in mid century Britain. It was this focus on 'the everyday life of all types of people' that underpinned the MO project (MO 1937: n.p.). Interest in people's response to public events, rather than the events themselves, was the driving force behind much of MO's early work. MO's emphasis was on the manifold ways that individuals negotiated and understood social life, a focus which enabled the organisation to build up a huge body of material that illuminates something of what it felt like to be alive in mid century Britain. The material collected by MO was never a 'representative sample' of the British population. Of the National Panel, who provided the responses to the 1937 Armistice Day survey, only 19% self defined as working class, while the manual working class made up approximately 60% of the population as a whole (Hinton, 2008:210-11). They were also younger than the general population, mainly aged between 19 and 44, largely based in the South East, and contained nearly double the ratio of male to

female members. Nevertheless, the material collected by MO offers an unparalleled insight into the subjective experiences of some of the British people, providing glimpses of 'private', emotional lives, and responses to public events, unavailable from more traditional, quantitative, sources (Hinton, 2010: 5-7). MO encouraged its panellists to 'self observe'; recording their thoughts and feelings and thus providing 'an invaluable insight into the WHY of what Britain is thinking' (Madge & Harrison, 1940: 20). It was this interest in accessing the subjective and its relationship with public habits that led MO to ask the national panel to record their activities on various days, including days of particular national significance. One of these was Armistice Day 1937.

MO panelists submitted 'day diaries' for 11 November 1937, when they were asked to record all of their activities between 10.30 and 11.30 a.m. In 1938 these diaries were replaced by a door to door survey of attitudes to Armistice Day, and between 1939 and 1941 the organization continued to collect and collate information on the behavior of the British people on 11 November, though in a less coherent and more traditionally observational manner. The material collected by MO on Armistice Day over this period of transition from war to peace is revealing. Attitudes towards remembrance varied widely, and were shaped as much by contemporary concerns as by reflection on the losses of the Great War. The rest of this article examines the material collected by MO on Armistice Day, and assesses the meanings of remembrance for the people of a nation preparing for, and experiencing, another total war.

Cleaning the bathroom: Armistice Day in 1937

By 1937 the traditions of Armistice Day were almost two decades old, and were deeply embedded into the everyday life of most British people. Public acts of commemoration at war memorials continued to be well attended, and most schools held their own Remembrance Service at 11am. Workplaces often held their own services, and many allowed their employees to leave work to attend civic or religious services nearby. This national pause in the day's proceedings however, whilst largely observed, often appears to have been simply that – a pause in people's daily life, which, for many by the late 1930s, had little personal, affective resonance. The diary of a 26-year-old housewife provides a good example of the interweaving of the commemorative into the everyday. She wrote:

10.55: I go into drawing room to switch on wireless as IZ wishes to hear the service. Go back to kitchen and finish putting vegetables to fry in fat. Go upstairs and into nursery and as I cross room to open window I hear Big Ben striking 11...Two cars draw up at side of road and men get out and stand hatless in road...A small old fashioned Austin Seven passes, driven by a man, at his side sits a woman wiping away tears with a handkerchief. I remember the vegetables and come downstairs. As I pass through the hall I hear 'O God Our Help in Ages Past' coming from the wireless. In kitchen I go on with the work of cooking. (MO: Respondent Number F080)

In this account the silence is another part of a busy day taken up with domestic chores. While she records the 'woman wiping away tears' that she sees from her window, her mind quickly returns to the 'work of cooking' as she notes the ongoing Service on her way back to the kitchen. While her diary describes events, and the mingling of the public and the private, it does not record any

personal, emotional response to these shared acts of commemoration. This embedding of the rituals of remembrance into everyday life can be seen in many of the MO day diaries for 1937. A London based journalist described wondering whether to have his bath before or after 11 o'clock. At 11, he was 'shaving, and thinking only about a meeting we have at 12', while a Kent housewife combined listening to the Service from Whitehall on the wireless with the weekly ironing and another woman listening at home put down her knitting for the silence, but took it up again during the rest of the ceremony. (MO: M246; F009; F523) The rituals of remembrance served to link these individuals with the collective. Even if just experienced as a momentary pause in the everyday, or an acknowledgement of *forgetting* to pause, knowledge of the significance of the time and date enters into their daily routines, a means of participating in the 'social imaginary' of interwar Britain (Taylor, 2004).

The greater number of those who kept day diaries for MO in 1937 were either at work, at school, or participating in a public ceremony of remembrance.

Although the vast majority participated in the rituals of the day, they often did so out of a sense of duty, or tradition, or a wish not to offend the bereaved. This led to a widely expressed sense of discomfort with commemoration, in particular with participation in the silence. A female office worker explained how her co-workers were 'hoping that bosses don't ring. Don't like being in corridor but more embarrassing to be with bosses at 11 o'clock (MO: F165). A male factory worker described how his colleagues, with the noteworthy exception of two ex-Servicemen, appearing to be 'bored, or uneasy' during the silence (MO: M205).

The discomfort that some expressed about participating in rituals they felt no personal connection with was shaped, in part, by the dominant emotional culture of the 1930s, which privileged stoicism and emotional restraint over any overt expression of emotions (Dixon 2015). One woman, who expressed her antipathy to 'a land of emotional orgy', concluded that 'I would not ...like to hurt anyone to whom such a ceremony is a real thing', while another woman wrote that 'it was a mistake artificially to prolong... a sentiment that by this time has naturally worn itself out.' (MO: F031, F032) Similarly, a Public Assistance Officer from London attributed her sense of disquiet with the silence – 'which I loathe' – to her emotional self-management, as 'I dislike public displays of emotion and am irritated by much of the sloppy sentimentalism which is displayed at the time', but nonetheless observed the silence while at work (F026). Others recorded their participation in Armistice Day rituals while noting that they, and sometimes those around them, felt unmoved and sometimes disconnected from remembrance of the dead of the Great War, such as the teacher who described herself as 'always being on the defensive during these two minutes' (F065). A female office worker wrote 'I did not see anybody looking in the least tearful or weeping, except for one woman in the courtyard who bent her head very low.' The young average age of MO respondents, together with the time that had elapsed since 1918, undoubtedly shaped the lack of personal affect noted here (M246; F018). However, even amongst those for whom remembrance had little personal meaning, observation of the traditions of Armistice Day, especially of the silence, remained an important part of the day.

The desire not to offend the bereaved combined with an unwillingness to participate in something they felt unconnected to, or felt was hypocritical in the drift towards war in the late 1930s, meant that some of the MO respondents did their utmost to avoid the silence at 11a.m. One woman simply noted that at 11a.m. she 'cleaned the bathroom, including bath, handbasin and lavatory bowl.' (MO F023), while another recorded that 'not wishing to be out during the Silence I light a cigarette and sit down to read the paper' (MO: F022). One housewife locked herself in her bathroom to read the newspapers, as 'this is an occasion on which one has no right to hurt anyone else's feelings.' (MO: F099) Avoidance of the silence could be deliberate, as in this case, but could also be accidental: a female clerk noted that 'I was so absorbed in what I was doing that for the first time since the war, I forgot the two minute silence', while a male author wrote 'I was working hard to finish off some articles...and didn't notice anything between half past ten and half past eleven' (MO: F013; M388). For some, evidently, the demands of daily life outweighed the demands of remembrance in 1937.

Although very few of those who recorded their activities in 1937 were personally bereaved by the war, the ceremonies of remembrance, and in particular the silence, nonetheless had a personal resonance for several of the contributors. One woman, who had attended the Service in Whitehall had previously planted crosses in memory of her brothers in the Garden of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey, and another woman wrote that she spent the silence with her mind running 'like quicksilver over all kinds of remembered images' including friends who had died in the war. (MO: F059, F004) Most moving was the response of a war widow from Grimsby. She wrote:

I cannot buy a poppy for I have not got a penny...I am thinking and worrying about my child's wet feet...Wet feet mean bronchitis for her. Her father served throughout the war in the Royal Navy...his medals I would exchange for a pair of shoes for his child. (MO: F046)

While remembrance of the war dead had a personal resonance for this woman, this remembrance was shaped by her present, penurious circumstances, themselves a further legacy of the war (Lomas, 1994:221).

The links between remembrance of the Great War and fears of a future war were uppermost in the thoughts of many in 1937. In several of the responses, the past is understood as providing lessons that the present is unwilling or unable to learn. The pacifist movement of the 1930s had mobilized memories of the Great War to campaign for peace, and for many of the diarists, this linkage was especially significant. (Ceadel, 1980) For these, the changing nature of warfare, with its increased dangers for civilians, shaped their thoughts. 1937 was a key year for public recognition of the possible impact of air war on Britain. The Air Raid Precautions Act was passing through Parliament in November 1937 and the Cambridge Scientists' Anti-War Group's *The Protection of the Public from Aerial Attack* had provoked debate on the apparently inadequate plans to protect civilians from air raids. (Noakes, 2012; Cambridge Scientists' Anti-War Group, 1937). The potential impact of warfare on civilians was brought home by the air raids on Spanish cities throughout the year. The German Condor Legion had bombed the Basque city of Guernica in April, and the assault on the undefended city was widely reported in Britain, newsreel footage shown in British Gaumont cinemas ominously stating that 'this was a city, and these were homes, just like

yours.' (Overy,2009: 335) A 42 year old woman who spent the silence contemplating war in her workplace ended her contribution by describing 'the awful spectre of 'what if it happens again' which haunts every thought' while a woman in the centre of London, recorded a friend saying 'I was thinking what this would be like in an air raid.' (MO: F004, F027) Others used the silence to wish that 'there may not be another war', to reflect on 'the men who had... lost their lives in vain' and to consider 'the trouble that seems to be brewing in Poland, and the unhappy plight of Spain and China.' (MO: F032, F058, F008). For some, such as the housewife who wrote that the smoke from a garden bonfire 'looks like poison gas this morning' the past leaked into the present in uncanny and presumably unwelcome ways (MO: F038). The increasing likelihood of another war meant that many diarists found themselves in sympathy with Storey's accusations of hypocrisy. One teacher returned from the Service of Remembrance to lead a classroom debate as to whether or not the ceremony was 'calculated to encourage the idea that the next Great War is inevitable' while another, despite being told that 'personal opinion must not creep into the...talk' told her class that her thoughts 'were going to be apologies to the dead for our betrayal of their trust.' (MO: M421; F136) By 1937, fears and anxieties about the present and future occupied the thoughts of many during the silence, shaping their relationship with remembrance. While those being commemorated may have believed that the war they had fought was both just and justifiable, many of those participating in the commemoration in 1937 drew on the symbolism of 'the war to end all wars' to envisage them as the 'lost generation', whose lives had been sacrificed in vain (Todman: 2005).

1938: A failed remembrance?

A wise instinct has kept the ceremonial of Armistice Day without alteration, and indeed its unfailing impressiveness is largely due to its unchanged simplicity. Yet while the method of observance does not vary from year to year, the Day itself always seems to take on some new shade of meaning from the circumstances in which it finds us. (*The Times*, 11 November 1938: 15)

Published on the 20th anniversary of the 1918 Armistice, *The Times* Leader of 11 November 1938 reflected on both ceremonial continuities and the changed circumstances in which these were practiced. Armistice Day followed close on the Munich Crisis and 'Gas Mask Sunday', and while the Munich Agreement had averted an immediate conflict it was clear that Britain would soon be facing a very new sort of war; one that was likely to take the lives of civilians alongside combatants (Grayzel: 2012). This rapidly shifting international context shaped responses to Armistice Day that year in both the popular press and in the material collected by MO. Covering the Cenotaph Service for the *Daily Express* the journalist Hilde Marchant wrote:

I was embarrassed in the silence- I did not know where to look or what to think. Then suddenly the limping men with their medals rattling and a crutch supplying the bass, went past...The wrecks of the last war are still suffering... Then came women in tweed coats with ragged bunches of chrysanthemums and occasionally a child... It was the celebration of the Armistice of 1918 and the Peace of 1938... His (Chamberlain's) tribute to 'the Glorious Dead' was Peace, in September 1938, - Peace is what they fought for. (12 November 1938: 5)

For Marchant, Armistice Day 1938 was not only a reminder that the Great War continued to have an emotive, economic and psychic impact on the lives of both veterans and the bereaved; it also validated the policy of appeasement.

The approach used by MO in 1938 to investigate the meaning of Armistice Day shifted from the 'personal anthropology' model used in 1937 to a more traditionally observational ethnography, with volunteer and paid Observers questioning people in Camden and Fulham, two largely working class districts of London, and recording their observations of small number of commemorative ceremonies. While the material collected for 1938 accordingly offered fewer insights into the interior experience of Armistice Day, it did draw on responses from a wider group of people than the self-selecting MO panel who had written in 1937. For one 40-year woman living in Fulham, the relationship between the Great War and her current anxieties were all too clear. She answered:

Keep on with it...we don't ever want it again. My God, I lost my father and mother and three brothers...how can I ever forget it all (cries)...on Armistice Day I take the children and we kneel down and pray...I tell them all about what it means... I tell them what an air raid was like... We can't live with the dead but we can think of them that day. I went nearly mad when they told me there was no mask for the baby, that I should have to wrap it in a wet blanket...and he's bad with his chest...I told them they could have the gas masks back for all the family.... See them 2 medals, well I always tell the children what they represent and what they meant in death in our family. (MO, 1938)

For this woman past, present and future were disturbingly woven together in her thoughts, with the deaths of the Great War shaping her fears regarding the impact of any future conflict. In this she was not unusual: wars rarely end with an Armistice. As Michael Roper has argued, one of the multiple legacies of the Great War was the ways that 'its effects were enacted on loved ones.' (Roper, 2009: 15) Families across Britain and around the world lived intimately with the aftermath of war as it continued to shape the affective, emotional, economic and psychic lives of millions in the decades following 1918. The MO surveys of 1938 offer some sense of these ongoing effects.

Another interviewee wanted the ceremonies to be abandoned because of the familial impact of the invocation to remember. She argued that 'I don't think we ought to have it...my sister's husband was killed, she goes all to pieces on that day...my chap was there...it causes too much misery now'. (MO, 1938). Another woman agreed, describing how 'it brings back memories. My husband was killed in it. It makes me miserable all day'. Her household was doubly effected as 'my second husband goes all of a tremble when it comes, he was shell shocked then...my poor pop jumps out of his boots at it.' (MO, 1938) For some of the bereaved though, the continuance of Armistice Day traditions was vital as a mechanism for preventing future conflict. A 30 year old woman wanted it maintained to 'show that war is terrible', describing how her father 'when he hears the whistle for the silence goes off into a fit, it makes him think of the lad killed.' (MO, 1938) In this case, the familial legacy of the war, seen in her father's distress, was emphasised in an attempt to highlight the impact of the Great War and help to avert a second.

For those whose lives weren't shaped by wartime bereavement, thoughts on Armistice Day were influenced by both expectations of a coming war and by concern for the bereaved of the Great War. Of the approximately 400 people interviewed by MO in 1938, 43% wanted it abolished and 41% maintained. (*Picture Post*, 12 November 1938: 78) A cloakroom attendant told the Observer the traditions should be abandoned because 'they only make people miserable, and what's the use of it? With another war so close?' (MO, 1938) A 27-year-old woman was forthright: 'It's disgusting. The crisis showed that they might very well have had us fighting again by 11 November', a reaction taken further by a man who claimed that '(t)here should be capital punishment for the crime of organised hypocrisy' (MO, 1938). In 1938, in the aftermath of the Munich crisis and Gas Mask Sunday, contemporary preoccupations were shaping the understanding of Armistice Day for many.

For some, the perceived impact of Armistice Day ceremonies on the bereaved continued to shape their thoughts. The belief that the rituals of remembrance were 'bringing back sad memories' and 'bringing up memories of the dead who always have our sympathies anyway' was widespread (MO, 1938). A woman of 45 from Fulham argued against the maintenance of the ceremonies as 'I think them as lost anybody goes through hell that day, it's all bought back', thoughts echoed by a 30 year old woman who said 'I don't think those who lost theirs should have it, it's too much to think of for them.' (MO, 1938) Some though, particularly older interviewees, had the opposite view, emphasising the importance of the traditions for the bereaved. A 60 year old woman stated 'it

should be kept, for them to think of the ones they lost', and a man of the same age agreed that 'if it gives people comfort it should be continued' (MO, 1938)

This focus on the bereaved is more apparent in the material collected by MO for 1938 than in the 1937 diaries. This may be a product of the different processes used to collect the material across the two years, with 1938 interviewees simply being asked what they thought, while 1937 diarists were asked to record all thoughts and activities for one hour, and it may be a product of the different groups being surveyed, with more working class and older respondents, who were more likely to have personal memories of the war, in 1938 than in 1937. However, contemporary issues also surely played their part. Especially in London, presumed target of the devastating air raids that were expected to begin any future conflict, the impact, and legacy of war in terms of death, grief and bereavement, would have been uppermost in the thoughts of many.

A 1938 article in *Picture Post*, which asked 'Has Armistice Day Changed Its Meaning?' summarised some of the shifts in attitude that had taken place:

...to everyone it survives as 120 moments in a National Communion, which is becoming less and less a memory of the last war and more and more an occasion of silent prayer for the prevention of another (12 November 1938: 77).

The expectation of imminent conflict with Nazi Germany had been accompanied by an upsurge in preparations for air raids, the distribution of gas masks accompanied by the digging of trenches across city parks and the issuing of handbooks advising on the defence of the home against gas and high explosive. As Harold Macmillan wrote three decades later, people 'thought of air warfare in

1938...rather as people think of nuclear warfare today.' (Macmillan 1966: 575). For others though, including the Communist M.P. Willie Hamilton, appeasement was breaking a contract with the dead of the Great War. In a Commons debate of 8 November 1938 he decried the policy of appeasement, as the war dead had died 'to ensure the maintenance of freedom and democracy.' For Hamilton, the attendance of government ministers at the Cenotaph that year was nothing but 'hypocrisy' as 'every one of those whose memory is being honoured has been wantonly betrayed' (Hansard, 8 November 1938: col 114). By 1938, Armistice Day was decried by some as too distressing for the bereaved and supported by others as providing solace. Some believed it reminded people of the horrors of war and thus made peace more likely, while others argued it was an anachronism, out of place in a world heading for a very new kind of conflict. It was seen as hypocritical by those who opposed appeasement and saw the fight against fascism as embodying the values the Great War's dead had died for, and by those who opposed rearmament as an abandonment of the peace for which they believed these men had died. The last Armistice Day of peacetime was deeply contested, its multiple meanings often unmoored from remembrance of the dead.

1939-1941: Remembering Peace in War

The irony of remembering the dead of the 'the war to end all wars' after September 1939 was not lost on either the British public nor on their politicians. Formal commemoration was abandoned for the duration of the war, although a Service of Remembrance from Westminster Abbey was broadcast in 1939 and the collection for the British Legion Poppy Fund gained a new urgency. The

continued significance of the date was widely reported in the British press. *The Times* chose to emphasise underlying continuities:

In a remarkable degree, the present conflict is a continuation of the last... We cannot falter where they stood fast; we cannot grudge to give our little where they gave their all (11 Nov 1939: 7)

These links were made across a range of other British newspapers and magazines. *The Observer* reported on troops placing poppies on graves in the cemeteries of the Western Front and described Belgian villages where 'tanks rumbled through... with poppies fixed to their guns' (12 November 1939: 9). *The Listener* printed a full-page photograph of two British soldiers at prayer in an Imperial War Graves Cemetery in France, evoking continuities of sacrifice and suffering across the two conflicts. (16 November 1939: 965) *The Daily Mail* marked Armistice Day by publishing Gerald Sanger's poem 'Remembrance', the final lines of which read:

So in Remembrance, pledge that we will not cease

Our toil and travail till the deed is done

And we redeem our fallen comrade's glory (11 Nov 1939: 6)

In the absence of formal commemoration, the injunction to remember combined with an injunction to fight.

As in the pre-war years however, the MO material on Armistice Day collected between 1939 and 1941 showed there was no particular agreement amongst those surveyed about the meaning of Armistice Day. For some of those whose views were recorded in 1939, the relationship between remembrance of the war dead of 1914-1918 and the present war was all too clear. One young woman,

working in a Bolton factory, wrote that 'I heard some girls crying and afterwards I saw that their eyes were red; one of the girls I know has a boy in France.'

(MO,1939) A Mass Observer in Fulham noted the new bunches of flowers at the War Memorial there; on the card attached to one small bunch of chrysanthemums was written 'In loving memory of our dear son George Andrew Ford, killed in active service in France, August 22nd, aged 19 years x. Mum and Dad, forever in our thoughts.' (MO, 1939)

Without formal commemorative ceremonies, many either forgot that 11 November was Armistice Day, or were unsure how to mark the occasion in wartime. Although the majority of those questioned by MO stated that they did intend to keep the silence, surveillance by Observers and diary entries submitted to MO for November 1939 suggest that, for many, the demands of everyday life in the midst of a second war effectively pushed remembrance to the side-lines. An Observer in West London recounted the passing of 11a.m. in the local Woolworths store:

The only sign that people were at all aware of the occasion was when at about 11, one of the assistants rang her bell for change...(this) made everyone start and look around a trifle self consciously and curiously...For one moment everyone wondered if THAT was a signal for silence. When they found out it wasn't they hastily resumed their buying or perusal of goods (MO, 1939).

A similar uncertainty was perceived by an Observer at St Pancras Station, where 'there appeared to be an immobility and withdrawnness amongst a few of those standing about, as though standing on purpose and possibly praying. None were noticed, however, to stand like this for more than half a minute' (MO, 1939). A

student diarist at Oxford wrote that 'at 11a.m. 'no-one in the lab appears to remember that this was the time of the silence' while a female diarist from London was on a 'bus at 11a.m. and 'heard no one else speak of the silence'. (MO: Diarists 5126, 5275) Possibly the most compelling evidence for the marginality of Armistice Day in 1939 can be found in the numbers who included it in their monthly MO diaries: of 459 diary entries submitted for November 1939, only 46 mentioned Armistice Day. The formal rituals of remembrance, so widely observed in the interwar years, appear to have quickly lost their grip on the British public in wartime.

Storey's 1937 accusation of hypocrisy, however, seemed to many to have gained a new relevance. A Great War veteran from Leeds wrote 'I feel sick. Do we ever learn?' and a warehouseman from Birmingham fumed 'this Armistice Day is useless and meaningless...I have heard the word 'hypocrisy' used many times.' (MO: Diarists 5230, 5228). A man from Hampshire, who recorded that he and his wife spent 11a.m. washing up, concurred: 'surely it's time to drop this farce of mourning the last war's dead while the deaths from this war slowly mount up.' (MO: Diarist 5201) Several of those interviewed by MO agreed. A middle class housewife reflected on 'how bitter all those men and women are going to be who lost sons and husbands in the last war, all for nothing' while a man suggested the purchase of three poppies would be appropriate – 'one for 1914, one for this war and one for the next.' (MO, 1939) If a popular attitude to remembrance was discernable in 1939, it was one of bitterness at a perceived betrayal of the dead of the Great War.

By 1940, Armistice Day fell in the midst of the blitz. The impact of aerial warfare could be seen in the Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey, which included a new area for wooden crosses to commemorate civilian war dead. According to a Mass Observer in Whitehall, a small crowd did still gather at the Cenotaph, though, he noted dismissively, it was mainly composed of 'idlers and casual sight see-ers'. At 11a.m. 'most people were looking round and talking'. For some though, the personal, affective meanings of the day were maintained: the Observer noted two women arriving to lay a wreath, and by 11.45 there were several dozen wreaths in place, the majority dedicated to individuals. (MO, 1940) The *Daily Mail's* correspondent perceived a linkage between the two wars, claiming that women at the Cenotaph were paying homage to 'dead husbands and sweethearts of the last war, and... pray(ing) for sons and brothers carrying on the new fight.' (12 November 1940: 5) For this commentator, personal acts of remembrance were intertwined with the war aims and experiences of 1940.

1941 was the final year in which MO made a specific effort to collect material on Armistice Day. Again, the material consists of observation of public behaviour combined with short interviews. Poignantly, one Observer described a cross being planted in Westminster Abbey's Garden of Remembrance for a baby killed in the blitz (MO, 1941). The new technologies of war were making the traditions of remembrance horribly relevant to a new generation of the bereaved. For those who hadn't suffered a personal loss through war though, Armistice Day provoked a mixture of resignation and confusion. The tendency seen in 1939 to forget the significance of the date without the full force of official commemorative activity was even more pronounced. An Observer in a

Woolworths store noted there was 'absolutely no notice taken', although the majority of people, especially near Whitehall, continued to purchase and wear poppies (MO, 1941). Of those interviewed, most thought the day had 'lost its meaning', and many claimed to have forgotten that it was Armistice Day (MO, 1941). Interestingly, given the disassociation of many veterans from commemorative activities in the interwar years, the only dissenting voice, arguing for both its continuation and its relationship with the Great War, belonged to a veteran. His comments are notable not only for this emphasis, but for the apologetic language in which they are expressed:

I was terribly disappointed it was not observed. It belongs to the last war, not this. Don't think I'm sentimental but I can't help thinking of the chaps that have gone – my own friends, I always think of them...I've always kept the two minutes and I'm afraid I always will. (MO, 1941)

By 1941, the meanings of Armistice Day, always more fluid and less constant than public discourse would have us suppose, had been thoroughly destabilised by the Second World War. Ignored and forgotten by many, the lone voice of one veteran recorded by MO attempted to return it to what he perceived as its original meaning.

Conclusion

The almost universal participation in Armistice Day ceremonies in interwar Britain has served to elide the diversity of meanings attached to these rituals by those who observed them. Deeply embedded into both national culture, and into the practices of everyday life, Armistice Day may have been experienced collectively, but its meanings varied hugely amongst those who took part. The

material collected by MO shows us how diverse these subjective understandings of Armistice Day were. While some were spending the silence in reverent remembrance of the dead, others were considering the possibility of another war, or the hypocrisy of commemorating war dead while preparing for another conflict. Still others described their discomfort or even embarrassment at having to participate in rituals that meant little to them, but which they observed in order not to offend others. Although few would have taken the sort of public action that Storey did, many privately agreed with his claim of hypocrisy.

Formally abandoned for the duration of the Second World War, the rituals of remembrance were reinstated in 1945. Following VE Day, politicians and civil servants began to consider how best to commemorate 'two national deliverances and...the fallen of both the wars' (The National Archives, Home Office Files, 1945). Although a range of dates were suggested for a day of remembrance, the coincidence of 11 November 1945 falling on a Sunday meant that Remembrance Sunday, initially envisaged as a temporary date for the commemoration of both wars, became embedded in the national calendar as a replacement for Armistice Day. Whilst the date shifted slightly the Home Office was keen to ensure a continuity of ritual between the interwar and postwar ceremonies, leading *The Times* to reflect on the 'solemnity and dignity' which marked both days, and the presence of the newly bereaved, 'reflected in the black, bemedalled clothes of women' at the Cenotaph (The Times, 12 November 1945: 4). Although MO didn't carry out any further detailed studies of the meaning of remembrance, the comments of one Panellist, writing in 1947, echo those of many of her predecessors. She wrote:

The 11 o'clock must have struck. I didn't hear it...perhaps I was shouting at my sister, my mother or vice versa. We were busy straightening the house for visitors, or I was having my Sunday morning snooze with the duster in my hand (MO, 1947).

While the rituals of remembrance established in 1919 continued to be widely observed in the postwar years, subjective responses to these rituals continued to be diverse and wide ranging.

Although the ceremonies of Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday formed a key date on the national calendar, and were deeply embedded into the everyday life of the majority of the British people, MO's surveys of days of remembrance illustrate the wide variety of individual feelings about the injunction to remember. The willingness of these people to embrace the abandonment of Armistice Day rituals between 1939 and 1945 may be in part explained by the irony of commemorating the dead of the 'war to end all wars' in the midst of another conflict, but was also underpinned by the breadth of meanings attached to the ceremonies in the interwar years. Storey's 'broken silence' of 1937 went deeper than the confused protest of one man; it represented instead a more profound lack of consensus around the meanings of Armistice Day in mid century Britain.

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