

From the Kitchen

11 November 2009

Today we are urged to remember something that many men and women are still trying to forget – Armistice Day. Like ANZAC Day, it brings back memories of the atrocities they witnessed or were forced to be part of. And what is forgotten on this day of remembrance is that, even on the day that World War 1 ended exactly ninety-one years ago, it took some six hours for the ceasefire to take effect. Germany had already surrendered a day or so earlier – the document was signed at 5 am, and was worded to not take effect until 11 am. Was the ritual timing so important? How many thousands died in those six hours?



On days of remembrance, much is forgotten and much is blocked out; some of it for good reason, some through laziness and some to protect the guilty.

What those who fought in World War 2 are still trying to keep out of consciousness, affects us all. Not the images, memories of deeds, the fear and terror itself, but the effects of all of these on people we know. Few passed through those years with equanimity and their children and grandchildren often bore the brunt of their silences, their moodiness and their outbursts. Many still bear it.

Twenty years ago, the Berlin Wall was symbolically breached and then demolished. Many hailed it as finally laying the aftermaths of World War 2 to rest, but that was false. What is happening in the Middle East today is part of that aftermath. For example, the stand-offs between the Israelis and the Palestinians; the conflict in Iraq; the instability in Lebanon; the repeated strife in South-East Asia. Aspects of all of the troubles in these places have their origins in the ending of the two ‘Great Wars’ – much of it through the careless drawing of lines on maps or the installation of ‘puppets’ in positions of power.

What those of us who weren’t directly involved are asked to remember, are the things of official history. What is forgotten in the process is all the vast mass of events and experiences that did not make it into any of those official histories.

Another day of celebration is 26 January. When I was at school, this was celebrated as the date (in 1788) when the first shipment of convicts and soldiers landed on the east coast of this continent and ‘founded’ Australia. The societies that had inhabited this place for probably more than sixty thousand years were considered irrelevant or a nuisance.

It is ironic that Governor Phillip’s ‘first law’ was against slavery. It is still hailed as a world first. What did they call the work without pay that the thousands of Aborigines did for the Whites for more than a century?

It is also ironic that 11 November is one of those days on which much is made of the sacrifice of over a hundred thousand men and women during World War 1 to safeguard our way of life and our freedoms. Only fifty-seven years to the day later and after several more wars to supposedly protect those freedoms, Governor-General John Kerr sacked Gough Whitlam’s government, which had been freely elected.

We could also ask: “What about others’ freedom?” I’m thinking again of the Middle East, as well as Korea (1950s) and Vietnam (1960s and 1970s).

Conflict usually relies on rhetoric which distorts the truth. In order to convince people to perpetrate atrocities against the Jews and others, Hitler had to promulgate a new 'truth': Arian was good, non-Arian was inferior and to be stamped out or subjugated. In order to get enough USA citizens behind him for an invasion of Iraq, George W Bush had to create a threat in their minds. The truth be damned and those heathens living in the Axis of Evil along with it.

Mind you, if some despot decides to invade Australia, I will not be a pacifist.

Back to 26 January ... We were taught in school that there were no large-scale hostilities between Whites and Blacks in this country – the Aborigines declined through disease and through intermingling with White society. And many of them just gave up the land because they had little or no sense of ownership of or connection with it. Yes, of course! There was some mention of minor skirmishes, during which a few people may have been hurt, and occasionally a renegade settler did wrongly shoot an Aborigine for stealing a sheep. We were also taught at school that those Aborigines who gave up tribal life to live on missions or in White settlements, did so gladly, because they understood the superior qualities of White society and Christianity. Those that didn't see it that way were excused because, after all, they were such primitive people.

At least there are now at least a few historians and other writers who are amending the official histories.

Lest we forget.