

Wreaths and Flags for Ukrainians

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At the war memorial by East Preston library, there was a murmur of approval when the first wreath was placed by a Ukrainian. At ceremonies and services around the nation, current conflict was in the thoughts and the prayers shared by participants, congregations and observers. Remembering those who died in conflict is a reminder of the responsibility for political followers and leaders to work for peace.

When speaking to students in this Parliament week, I ask when will the colour of skin be no more important than colour of eyes or hair, and think how many intense international wars have been between reasonably democratic nations?

The suffering of families of dead combatants on all sides is rightly mentioned. We also remember those facing each other across disputed borders and in so-called 'frozen conflicts'. Examples include the Indian and Pakistani forces facing each other at the Line of Control in Kashmir since 1947, with China taking a third-party role.

Diplomacy can step forward at times of natural disaster, such as the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and the India-Pakistan flooding in 2014. We should value the way good diplomats try to find ways to make progress towards resolution of apparently intractable disagreement.

If only Russia had not misled itself about the desire of Ukrainians to make their own choices about applying to be considered for membership of the European Union or of NATO. Until the unwise promotions of Vladimir Putin, it was possible to imagine Russia becoming closer to Western European standards of democratic elections, of reduced corruption in the ownership and operation of business, and in making agreements for peaceful borders.

Before Donald Trump, few Americans believed in big lies and fewer candidates for election thought the path to success required the endorsement of a bad man.

Some distinguished people made it their lives work to stand against bullies who thought force was all that mattered. Intellectuals mistakenly backed Stalin's misrule in the USSR. The trade union leader and Labour politician Ernest Bevin confronted communists at home and abroad. He was the key inspiration for the formation of the Western European Union; that led to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty political and military alliance. NATO is a defensive organisation. It should not have been seen by Putin as a threat.

Wars are always regrettable. Many are unjustifiable. One was the South African War, the second Boer War, of 1899-1902, a conflict between whites over land belonging to African tribal groups where four fifths of the population were black. History shows most politically conscious Blacks, Coloured and Indian groups hoped defeat of the Boers was the way to greater opportunities for education, work and political participation, wanting the Cape franchise to spread throughout the country. MK Gandhi encouraged the Indian community to show loyalty to Britain. Lord Kitchener's use of concentration camps was brutal.

Jan Smuts, who had been a Boer commando, helped negotiate the end of the war fourteen years before joining Lloyd George's Imperial War Cabinet in 1917, playing a leading role in the Paris Peace Conference two years later. He was the only person to sign the Treaty of Versailles and then the United Nations Charter in 1945.

I spoke at the Pier Pavilion with prize winners at Romero's Catholic High School. They knew how the saintly archbishop Oscar had given his life for the oppressed. Earlier, I had lunched at Speaker's house with representatives of British Overseas Territories and Dependencies. None of them choose dictatorship.

We have to continue support to the Ukrainian resistance to Putin's aggression. One day, Russians will come to see Western standards as international, values to be held in common and with benefits to share.