

Layered Memories of Conflict



Alison Lochhead





War and conflicts have been going on since the beginning of humanity; but why? No war has resolved a problem. It may put it on hold for a while but inevitably it will raise its head again as the reasons for the conflict will not have been resolved; rather made a lot worse and deepened.

Wars are fought on the decision of those in power or seeking power and using the rest of the population to bear the brunt of those decisions.

The horrors and traumas which are experienced in war endure though ages.

At the start of the 20th century, 10% of those killed in war were civilians. Today, the reverse is true: 90% of those killed in war are civilians. As individuals or groups, there is a lot we can do to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. We have all the potential tools, skills and laws needed to abolish war.

So why do we continue to wreak such devastation on humanity and the whole world?



'I doubt the desert remembers the barbed wire and hooded and shackled prisoners. Does it remember the screams of a boy clinging to a father who mumbled comfort from beneath a black sandbag? I hope the desert too felt relieved when an American soldier cut off the plastic handcuffs, and the man could embrace his child.'

Photo and words; Jean-Marc Bouju. Iraq war.

(A picture of an Iraqi prisoner of war taken by the Americans (and UK). Why his child is with him is not clear.)

The land never forgets.

It remains a witness to the horrors we perpetrate upon it.

What do we see as strength?

The backbone is often used as a symbol of strength and moral bearing.

Backbone: 'The main support or major sustaining factor'.

Strength of character, resolution, daring, courage, determination, bravery, toughness, tenacity, fearlessness, moral fibre, boldness (amongst other words)

Collins Thesaurus of English Language, 2002.

An 'iron backbone' denotes strength and resolve; often used as a positive attribute of a government deciding to go to war. Yet iron is a weak and inflexible metal. If you hit cast iron with a hammer it shatters. It cannot bend or be 'strong and flexible'. It is unyielding of a decision made and can only direct itself in 'one direction' once that has been established.

A person who has no resolve and strength often described as having 'a paper spine' – you are weak. Paper has incredible tensile strength, it is very hard to tear thick paper; hit it with a hammer and it simply dents. It is very flexible yet retains its strength.





'If the majority of human beings do not want wars, but at the same time believe that it is impossible to stop them, then the first change we must bring about is in our hands. We must change the idea that "it is not possible" because it is only what we believe about reality that prevents us from transforming it.'

Mikhail Gorbachev, 1997



'I dream of giving birth to a child who will ask, "Mother, what was war?"'

Eve Merriam



'Meanwhile the dead were fallen all about me, nor were they interred by usual rites: too many funerals crowded temple gates...'

Fugitive Pieces, Anne Michaels



'Only the dead have seen the end of war.'

Plato



There is no such thing as an unwounded soldier.



'How can you have a war on terrorism when war itself is terrorism?'

Howard Zinn



'Destruction does not create a vacuum, it simply transforms presence into absence.'
Fugitive Pieces, Anne Michaels



'Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.'

Ernest Hemingway



'Will they ever live again? These bits and pieces of dirt and rags – stuffing – crawling – dribbling. These apathetic bundles of rags staring into space – waiting for trains that never came.'

Mary Kessel on children refugees in Germany, 1945.



'What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or democracy?'

Mahatma Gandhi



'If we don't end war, war will end us.'

H.G. Wells

The Ones who Continue to Flee in the Snow

The ones who continue to flee in the snow,
leaving behind them shrunken skies,
fragile, trembling walls,
are at the mercy of an unknown home
and the night's pale moon.

Why are they driven to obliterate memories
and give up their nostalgia?

And the ashes of the dead, the altars,
what will they come to?

Turn towards recollection, bless
the trampled flowers, the water of the wells
from which you have drunk,
they will protect you through the exile you have undertaken:
among enchanted woods
and pitiless seasons.

Gëzim Hajdari

Modern Poetry in Translation: The Great Flight, *the refugee-focused issue*





**There are 65 million people
fleeing from their homes worldwide
as it is not safe enough to stay at home.**

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