

Edith Cavell



War Memorials Trust

Edith Cavell was a British nurse at the time of World War I. She worked in Belgium at the start of the war, helping to save the lives of those fighting on both sides. She was executed in 1915 by a German firing squad for treason for helping Allied soldiers escape from Belgium. Her execution was condemned internationally and today, 100 years on from her death, her life is commemorated and remembered by memorials around the world.

This helpsheet is designed to be used by primary teachers as background information on Edith Cavell and to provide ideas for how her story may be used in the classroom. Information about some of the memorials to her can be found in War Memorials Trust's 'Memorials to Edith Cavell' information sheet.

Early life

Edith Cavell was born in Swardeston, Norfolk, in 1865. Her father was the local Reverend. After growing up in Norfolk she moved to Belgium to work as a governess but returned home to nurse her father during an illness. This is thought to be what inspired her to take up nursing and she trained in London before returning to Belgium in 1907.

World War I

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914 Cavell was back in Norfolk visiting family but returned to Belgium quickly to care for those who were involved in the fighting. She is well known for caring for the wounded on both sides, apparently stating that 'the profession of nursing has no frontiers.' After the German occupation of Brussels Cavell began helping Allied soldiers escape Belgium by getting them out of the country to the neutral Netherlands. Some also then went on to Britain. The German authorities became increasingly suspicious of her actions and she, among others, was arrested in August 1915. She was held in prison and charged with harbouring Allied soldiers. She admitted her part in helping Allied soldiers escape and was court-martialled as her actions went against German military law. The penalty for this was execution.

Death and aftermath

There was widespread diplomatic pressure on Germany to pardon Cavell, but despite this her execution went ahead on 12th October 1915. Most others who had been arrested alongside her were spared the death penalty and were sentenced to imprisonment or hard labour, but Cavell and one other were killed by firing squad.

The night before her execution Cavell was attended by an Anglican chaplain and is recorded to have told him 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.' Later, these words were added to the memorial to Cavell in London.

Cavell's death provoked worldwide condemnation and press coverage. She has probably become the most prominent female casualty of World War I. Her story, the outrage at a woman

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being treated so brutally and the resulting anti-German sentiment was used as propaganda for British military recruitment – in the two months after her death voluntary recruitment, which had started to drop by late 1915, doubled (conscription was not introduced until 1916). Her occupation as a nurse, her bravery and the stoicism with which she is said to have faced her death combined to make her into an icon.

After the war

Following her execution Cavell's body was buried near the prison she had been held in but in 1919 it was returned to the UK. She was taken first to Westminster Abbey where a memorial service was held before, at the request of her family, being taken to her home county of Norfolk and buried in the grounds of Norwich cathedral. Her burial followed an elaborate funeral procession through the city consisting of soldiers, nurses and representatives of the other women's services. The procession and burial was also attended and watched by thousands of people (footage can be seen on the East Anglia Film Archive www.eafa.org.uk) suggesting that sympathy for Cavell had not diminished since her death.

Many memorials to Edith Cavell were also created in the years following her death. Some of these are explained in further detail in War Memorials Trust's 'Memorials to Edith Cavell' information sheet.

Teaching suggestions

The story of Edith Cavell can be used in lessons in a number of different ways. Some ideas for primary school lessons are given below:

- Edith Cavell's story as outlined above, especially her work as a nurse and how she attempted to help others, can be used to teach younger children about the lives of significant individuals who have contributed to national and international achievements, in line with the National Curriculum for History at Key Stage 1.
- This could also be used in the wider curriculum as an example of how and why people help others. Comparisons could be made between Cavell's work as a nurse a century ago and now, to help develop an understanding of chronology and the passing of time.
- Examining the war through the experiences of such a significant person may also be useful as part of a wider introduction to the key events and dates of World War I and the reasons it and the people involved are still commemorated today. Focusing on an individual can be a more accessible way of learning about the conflict for younger children.
- Edith Cavell is an interesting example of how we commemorate the wars. Memorials that remember individuals, especially individual civilian women, are relatively rare. Cavell's memorials, alongside memorials to animals, civilians, individuals who served and of course the more familiar memorials that commemorate the fallen from communities, can therefore highlight the differences in what and who is commemorated.

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