

First World War

Imperialist parallels then and now

Part IV 1914-1916 Opposition, war and conscription

A girl asks her father "Daddy what did *you* do in the Great War?" "I tried to stop the bloody thing , my child" replied Robert Smillie, Scottish miner's leader.

A Democrat insert

We are being bombarded with books, papers, radio and TV programmes, and events to mark the First World War. The bulk of this material concentrates on the war and carnage in the trenches. Our objective is to put a different point of view.

Note: The discussion covers the position in Britain, Ireland and Germany and suffragettes supporting Sylvia Pankhurst. Enlistment of a million troops from the colonies and China and conscription was used to fill the gaps in the trenches caused by the carnage of fatalities, physical and mental casualties and use of troops as cannon fodder

The Cabinet just before Britain declared war

Within the Cabinet, among those opposed going to war, was John Burns a Liberal and leader of the 1899 dock strike. He resigned from the cabinet. Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, was publicly ambivalent. Winston Churchill was an advocate for war. The Cabinet was split over whether or not to go to war and was mainly preoccupied by the situation in Ireland.

On 2 August King George V stated to the Foreign Secretary that it was "absolutely essential Britain go to war in order to prevent Germany from achieving complete domination of this country". Sir Edward Grey pointed out that the Cabinet was split and had yet to find a justifiable reason to enter the conflict. The King replied: "You have got to find a reason, Grey."

On the same day an anti-war demonstration was held in Trafalgar Square where they sang the 'International'. Respect was given to the assassinated French socialist leader, Jean Jaures. The meeting reflected widespread antipathy to the war. Keir Hardie attacked the absurdity of the impending prospect of mutual slaughter among workpeople of Europe and in his address said:

"Tonight there are millions of hearts in every country in Europe filled with sadness and foreboding. What is the cause of the war? You have no quarrel with Germany. German workers have no quarrel with you. German workers have no quarrel with their French comrades. Then why are we on the verge of the greatest calamity Europe has ever seen....

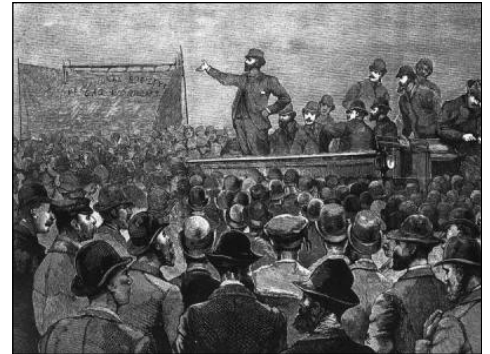
"Are we going to allow the Courts and the ruling classes to make treaties leading to war without our having a word to say?" Our shores and liberties are not being attacked. The only class which can prevent the Government going to war is the working class..."

Arthur Henderson in moving the official resolution for the meeting, drawn up by Ramsey Macdonald, declared that it was: "a day of humiliation for the democracy of Britain".

On 3 August letters to King George V from the President of France, Raymond Poincare, urged participation in the war and King Albert ranted on the violation of Belgium. These letters were sent to Grey with a note stating there was now "reason enough to go to war". This was just another clutch of straws for the war camp and resulted in a declaration of war on 4 August.

The Labour Party then voted to support the war. Ramsey McDonald resigned as leader in protest along with Keir Hardie the founding leader. As an MP Hardie fervently opposed the war in Parliament and put his health in jeopardy. He worked 'hand in glove' with Sylvia Pankhurst and brought together opposition to the war, women's emancipation, democracy, socialism and Home Rule for Ireland.

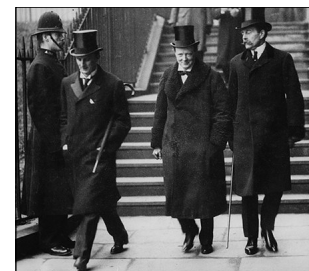
On 6th August 1914 ILP's journal, *Labour Leader* urged: "Workers of Great Britain, down with war. You have no quarrel with the workers of Europe. They have no quarrel with you. The quarrel is between the ruling classes of



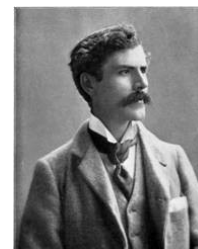
John Burns addressing a meeting of dockers



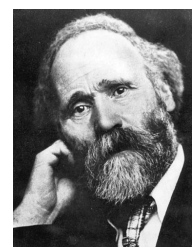
King George V
But, what were the medals for?



Grey, Churchill and Lord Crew



Keir Hardie



Ramsey MacDonald

Arthur Henderson



Europe. Don't make their quarrel yours..." The ILP was affiliated to the Labour Party.

After war was declared Henderson, now leader of the Labour Party, switched to supporting the war and took most Labour MPs with him and he joined the coalition war cabinet. The LP Executive and most Labour MPs joined in and took part in the recruiting campaign. However, one section, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) kept its opposition to the war and militarism.

Jingoism was whipped up and Labour Party members, trade unionists and socialists were amongst the ranks that decided they had "to see it through". International solidarity and anti-war policies were overturned or set aside without mandate or any proper discussion.

Legislation was passed to prevent and suppress agitation against the war.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) sent to France was made up of volunteers of those who had enlisted. Between August 1914 and February 1916 those who enlisted totalled over three million or a third of the workforce. This included over 1,743,000 from manufacturing (28.3%) and was the reason for women being employed in factories. A further 313,000 enlisted from mines and quarries or nearly 25% of this workforce. This in itself weakened the labour and trade union movement. Employers and the government pressed for and obtained longer hours and no-strike deals.

As the war progressed there were not enough troops to fill the gaps of those killed and maimed. A campaign to recruit volunteers was mounted and led by Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener in the infamous finger pointing poster along with white feathers and other intimidation.

The Boy Scouts, Boys' Brigade and Church Lads' Brigade had military trappings and drill. Viscount Haldane, as Secretary of State for War between 1905-1912, tried to persuade the Scouts and Boys' Brigade to combine them in a national cadet force but they declined.

Later, the South African imperialist Baden Powell had taken the opportunity and grabbed hold of the scout movement. He offered the War Office the Boy Scouts as the fifth line of defence if Britain were invaded. About 40% of the army were made up of former members of these youth organisations.

In September 1914 the ILP National Administration Council declared: "In our view the operation of a sort of moral press-gang will be inequitable and unjust. We must also protest against all attempts to force men into the ranks by withholding assistance from them, or dismissing them from their employment..."

Financial, government and intense social pressure was put on men to enlist to serve their country. Employers threatened that if employees did not enlist they would be sacked. This included large estate owners, especially by the aristocracy, where there was tied accommodation.

The enlistment of millions of men subjected to the slaughter and carnage in the trenches meant they were simply cannon fodder at one end of the manufacturing industry and coal miners and women in factories and other jobs were at the other. Huge profits were made out of the war whilst wages were pressed down.

An organisation of suffragettes led by Sylvia Pankhurst was widened to deal with the plight of families left at home whilst men were at the front. This included the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS). Meanwhile the main suffragette organisation led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, put all its efforts into promoting and supporting the war and dropped votes for women.

Volunteering dried up and resistance to the war in Britain mushroomed in 1915 especially as food prices and rents increased. This resistance grew rapidly when conscription in Britain took place on 2 March 1916 with the Military Service Act.

To further bolster troops and supplies to the front an additional million soldiers were recruited from the colonies and even China. Some of these carried out the



Jingoism



Sylvia Pankhurst addressing an anti-war meeting



Colonial troops

'dirty' jobs of digging trenches, moving supplies and munitions to the front. Some in this enlistment from the colonies were not used to fight in the trenches because they were 'black' or 'coloured'. The French military command had no such qualms and used 'black' troops alongside the French which suffered severe losses. There was opposition to the war in parts of the British Empire based on their objective of independence and an end imperialist rule. This warrants a study in itself

Ireland

Resistance against the war was strong and the Irish Citizen Army led by James Connolly, was epitomised in one of the best slogans ever: **"We serve neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland"**. This army was based on the Irish TGWU at Liberty Hall in Dublin.



Sylvia Pankhurst who worked with Keir Hardie supported Home Rule for Ireland, worked in solidarity with James Connolly and had seen the Irish Citizen Army. In 1913, following brutal police attacks on suffragettes, a Citizens' army was set up and drilled in Victoria Park (known locally as the People's Park and now in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets). The primary purpose was to protect suffragettes but Sylvia and others around her no doubt had other long term purposes in mind!

Picture from Women's Dreadnought and can be seen on the excellent DVD about Sylvia Pankhurst



Because of the opposition to both the war and conscription by the republicans, along with agitation for Home Rule, the Asquith government did not introduce conscription into Ireland. Although Connolly warned it would be introduced piecemeal into the provinces starting with the Unionists in Ulster.

Home Rule had been promised and legislated for but was dropped by the Asquith government. This revealed the British government had no real intentions for Ireland which further antagonised Irish republicans.

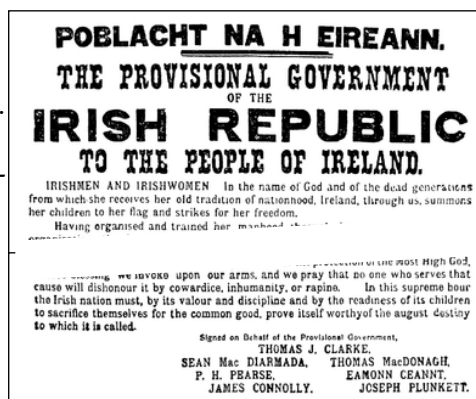
Trade unionism grew across the country. Because civil rights were under serious attack, along with the threat of conscription, democratic forces came together. The struggle for democracy, national and civil, was conducted in conjunction with the workers' economic demands.

Connolly and others believed the interests of labour demanded a national revolution. Despite many political and practical difficulties they decided to take the opportunity of England's engagement with the war to establish an independent Ireland. This culminated in the Easter Rising of 1916 but well laid plans fell apart due to divisions and broken agreements. However, the Citizen Army and Volunteers took up positions around Dublin Castle, took over the GPO above which the Irish tricolour was hoisted.

A declaration for independence headed "The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic – to the people of Ireland" was read out on the steps of the GPO and posted up around Dublin.

The details and history surrounding this momentous event are well documented. Suffice to say the uprising was put down by the British Army with the aid of a Royal Navy warship *Helga* which sailed up the Liffey to shell the GPO and other positions held by the republicans. Property was destroyed but class power is more important than class property and a lesson for today! Fifteen leaders of the revolt were arrested and assassinated, including Connolly who was wounded and strapped in a chair.

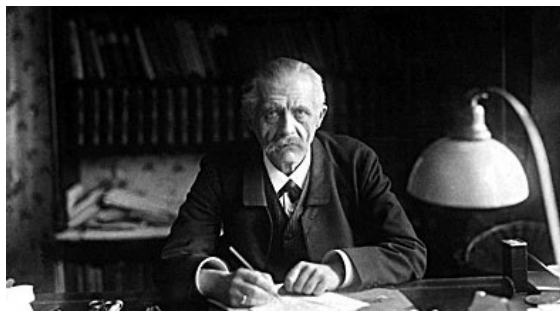
However, the key historical and political point about Easter 1916 is that it was the climatic point of the First World War, even though at first sight it appeared to have failed and labelled by some, even today, as a 'blood sacrifice'. It was then that the war ran into crisis. The lead had been given to the popular forces throughout the world which began to take the offensive. The British and other Imperialists must have sought out clean underwear!



British troops firing at the GPO



German troops marching to the front



Friedrich Naumann

Sources used in this supplement include

DVD film: *Sylvia Pankhurst-Everything is Possible*: www.worldwrite.org.uk
 Torquil Cowan: *Labour of Love, The Story of Robert Smillie*
 Douglas Newton: *The Darkest Days, The truth behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914*.
 Peter Simkins: *Kitchener's Army, The raising of the New Armies 1914-1916*
 Interview note between King George V and Edward Grey (*Daily Telegraph* 18.8.14)
 C Desmond Greaves: *The Life and Times of James Connolly*

Next issue—Part V End of the war, Armistice and failed Peace Treaty, growing opposition to war, conscientious objectors, US entry into the war and campaigns for peace.

Further copies of each of the parts I-IV
 5 copies - £1 post free
 10 copies - £2 post free

**Printed and published by
 Democrat Press
 PO Box 46295**

Germany

At the end of 1914, the German peace movement started its first steps after its total defeat at the beginning of the war. In November 1914, activists founded the Bund Neues Vaterland (New Fatherland Association) which acted in favour of an immediate peace agreement. On 2 December 1914, SPD member Karl Liebknecht was the first German representative to vote against new war credits in the Reichstag (German parliament).

In 1915, opposition against the war rose remarkably in the SPD. Police repression rose as well. Pamphlets published by the Bund Neues Vaterland were banned; in 1916, Lilli Jannasch, the secretary of the organisation, was sent into prison. Liebknecht was taken to court and imprisoned as well after taking part in a demonstration on 1 May 1916. On this occasion, Liebknecht had shouted: "Down with the war! Down with the government!" It led to his being arrested immediately.

In 1915, the public debate on the German war aims focussed to a high degree on a book published by the famous liberal politician Friedrich Naumann. His book which proved to be quite influential even in later times had as its title *Mitteleuropa* ("Central Europe"). In it, Naumann promoted an economically united federation of European states created around Germany and Austria-Hungary as its core. According to the author, more and more countries especially in eastern and south eastern Europe had to be integrated into this economic union which would enable German companies to expand to the Black Sea and the Middle East. Naumann was very clear in his aim that the German Reich should hold homogenous power in the "Mitteleuropa" federation, at least informally - shades of the EU!

Whereas hundreds of thousands of soldiers lost their lives at the eastern front and in the trenches in the occupied French territories, the social situation inside Germany deteriorated rapidly. In January 1915, the government took first measures to ration food; there was only limited access to bread and to flour and, starting from the spring of 1916, even to potatoes. Prices rose sharply: In 1916, butter prices had doubled compared to the summer of 1914; eggs cost three times as much as before the war. Poverty rose parallel to the prices. Most families of soldiers were suffering from malnutrition, reported a trade union motion in Erfurt already in October 1915. The first hunger revolts of the war started in the same year.

So far the war for Germany, cynical as it is, produced not only millions of dead bodies and mass poverty, but also big winners: the owners of the German arms industry. Rheinische Stahlwerke, for example, increased profits from 2,8 millions Marks in 1914/15 to 8,1 millions Marks in 1916/17. During the same time, Hoesch AG increased profits from 1 million Marks to 17.5 million Mark. In spite of this, until 1916, arms producers did not have to pay taxes on their war profits at all.

Conclusions

The labour movement in all three countries largely abandoned socialist and democratic principles. International solidarity was set aside. Those who worked hard to oppose the war and took part in the alleviation of financial and social problems kept their principles.

German theorists were working for a financial and economic union which are part of the roots of the EU.