



Remembrance, Empire and Resistance

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Introduction

Remembrance Sunday. Someone, somewhere in Scotland, presses a television remote control: what images appear? Wreath-bearing politicians standing solemnly at the Cenotaph in London or Glasgow. Endless white crosses erupting from countryside of northern France. A lone bagpiper playing 'The Flowers of the Forest' from the battlements of Edinburgh Castle while the Saltire and the Union Flag flutter at half-mast. Newsroom lapels universally adorned with the red poppies which presenters simultaneously (and, of course, spontaneously) started wearing half-way through October. These scenes and sounds, or others like them, are what we expect to see and hear as we approach the anniversary of the armistice which ended the First World War; and in this, the centenary year, they have a particular poignancy. Yet what do they actually signify?

The official answer, and the one which perhaps most people would give, is that we are honouring the sacrifice of those who fell, that the acts of remembrance – the wreaths, the poppies, the bowed heads during the two-minute silence – are not political, and certainly not celebratory, but a simple mark of respect for the dead. Commemoration can indeed involve genuine personal moments of reflection on 'the pity of war'; but even when ceremonies do not involve the rituals of state theatre performed at the Cenotaph they are not as removed from the world of politics as we are led to believe.

It is not that these or other monuments themselves are intrinsically militaristic or designed to glorify war. As Angus Calder wrote of the design and construction of Scottish National War Memorial at Edinburgh Castle, completed in 1927:

Triumphalism was impossible. Christian dogma was no longer generally accepted. The society notionally united in grief was riven by 'class warfare' at a time when 'ex-serviceman' was virtually synonymous with 'unemployed'. The result of pressures to be truthful, decent and fair was a monument devised and executed with extraordinary thoughtfulness, sincerity and care.¹

Calder's point is generally applicable; but the 'class warfare' to which he refers was not suspended simply because the British ruling class temporarily felt unable to embody its attitudes and values publicly in stone.

Take the two-minute silence, first held at 11.00 am on 11 November 1919, after a proposal by the South African financier and politician Sir Percy FitzPatrick was eagerly seized on and implemented by the government. As Steven Brown writes,

...collective unity was a very real concern for the British government in 1919, faced with the task of managing the return of a significant number of demobilised soldiers with legitimate grievances against the state, who might potentially be recruited to either far left or far right political causes. The Two Minute Silence was then an opportunity for the collective to remember itself as such, to temporarily suspend disputes and come together in common remembrance of loss. ²

But as Brown also makes clear, central to this event was the 'shout for victory' with which the silence ended. Brown underestimates the actual level of industrial militancy (not to mention a guerrilla war in Ireland) with which the government had already been faced long before November. Across Europe, 1919 was the most revolutionary year since 1848 and, although the only states to be overthrown were those which had been defeated in the war, it also saw a highest level of class struggle in Britain than at any time in the twentieth century, with the possible exception of 1972. How close Britain itself came to revolution is a matter of dispute; what is not in dispute is that representatives of the ruling class genuinely believed this to be a danger, in a way they did not during the General Strike of 1926³. It was in this context that the two-minute silence was first introduced.

Respecting the sacrifice or justifying the war?

To the roll call of Our Glorious Dead first established in 1919 have been added those who have subsequently fallen. Since the British state has been at war in every single year since 1914, the list is by now a long one, although neither individually nor collectively have losses in the post-1918 conflicts come close to the 908,371 lost in the First World War, from Britain and the Empire⁴. But by dissolving all distinctions between the wars, the only one justifiable on moral grounds, namely the Second World War (or, more precisely, the aspects of that war which actually involved the struggle against fascism) is rendered undistinguishable from British attempts to suppress the national movement in Aden during the 1960s or to assist the USA in devastating Iraq in the 2000s. In every case the rhetoric of soldierly 'sacrifice' is invoked to silence dissent. Whatever your attitude to a particular war, the argument goes, surely you must support British troops when they are summoned by the call of duty? And of course, few anti-war campaigners are insensitive or stupid enough to blame the mainly young and working-class soldiers for the crimes and blunders of their masters, particularly when many of the former only enlisted because of the inability of capitalism to provide them with less deadly employment opportunities. Moreover, it might be argued that those who wish to stop British military adventures abroad have the interests of these soldiers at heart to a far greater extent than those who send them off to die in illegal and immoral invasions. Nevertheless, the often very effective sleight-of-hand here is to insinuate that criticism of Britain's wars must necessarily involve condemnation of the soldiers sent to fight them. In effect we are told, you can – if you really must – protest against any proposed military intervention before it actually takes place; but afterwards? Not a word, if you please, lest you suggest that the nation is not united foursquare behind 'our boys'.

This type of moral blackmail is not only intended to facilitate acceptance of new wars, but also to retrospectively justify old ones, which brings us back to the First World War. Such justification need not involve flag-waving bombast and can often be all the more effective for acknowledging the extent of the suffering involved. Here, for example, is the journalist and broadcaster, Jeremy Paxman, interviewed in the *Radio Times* to promote his book and television series, *Britain's Great War*:

The war was a disaster, but much more complicated and nuanced than the simple-minded, ignorant, post-1960s prism suggests. The message is always the same – what pointless sacrifice. We don't need the right-on prejudices of a generation far removed from what happened. ... We should respect such sacrifice.⁵

But does 'respecting' sacrifice necessarily involve justifying the 'disaster' which required it? To criticise the war is not to criticise those who fought and died in it, it is rather to ask *whether* it was necessary and, if so, *for whom* was it necessary that they had to fight and die. The idea that millions died pointlessly, or worse, died in pursuit of an ignoble objective is very hard to accept; it is far easier to pretend that the heroism, or simply the endurance of the men involved, dignifies the cause for which they fought – or perhaps simply renders it irrelevant.

The only type of criticism which has been tolerated hitherto is that concerned with the conduct of the war, not least because this can be framed as supportive of the soldiers themselves. In Britain, for example, it has long been acceptable to rail at the leaders of the British Expeditionary Force, the 'donkeys' of Alan Clark's influential 1961 book⁶. This sounds radical, and in Joan Littlewood's *Oh! What a Lovely War!* it actually was. But as Clark's own ultra-right-wing Conservative politics suggest, this can as easily be a call for patrician concern on the part of the generals rather than revolutionary refusal on the part of the men.

More generally, the emphasis on military incompetence or inhumanity can also function as an evasion rather than an explanation. It is certainly very difficult to read with equanimity passages such as Haig's diary entry for the second day of the Somme, 2 July 1916, where he writes "the total casualties are estimated at over 40,000 to date. That cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers engaged, and the length of front attacked"⁷. But we should beware the easy satisfaction of denouncing him and his fellow generals for their stupidity, for this is both to insult and to exculpate them. They were not lacking in intelligence, nor necessarily unfeeling. They chose to send thousands over the top to their deaths because the military options were relatively limited and an ineradicable risk of being a soldier – although admittedly one under-emphasised in Ministry of Defence propaganda – is to die in the pursuit of strategic objectives. After all, would the war have been acceptable if the levels of death and mutilation had been lower? If so, how much lower? Nor was the officer class particularly cowardly. The proportion of them who died in combat was actually greater than that of private soldiers, unsurprisingly, since they were expected to lead from the front (a practice which did not survive the armistice). Among members of the aristocracy the casualty rate was around 19 per cent compared around 12 per cent among the general population⁸. In England this was possibly the biggest slaughter of ruling class personnel since the Wars of the Roses, although the figures were comparable across all the European combatant states⁹.

As the centenary draws near, however, even this very limited form of critique is being ruled off-limits. No sooner had 2014 dawned than the Coalition Minister for Education, Michael Gove, set out the new dispensation in an op-ed piece, appropriately enough, for the *Daily Mail*:

The war was, of course, an unspeakable tragedy, which robbed this nation of our bravest and best. But even as we recall that loss and commemorate the bravery of those who fought, it's important that we don't succumb to some of the myths which have grown up about the conflict. Our understanding of the war has been overlaid by misunderstandings, and misrepresentations which reflect an, at best, ambiguous attitude to this country and, at worst, an unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage. The conflict has, for many, been seen through the fictional prism of dramas such as *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Monocled Mutineer* and *Blackadder*, as a misbegotten shambles – a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite. Even to this day there are Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths.

According to Gove British soldiers saw the war as 'as a noble cause' and unnamed but presumably reliably right-wing historians have apparently shown that they 'were not dupes but conscious believers in king and country, committed to defending the western liberal order'.¹⁰

Should the motivations, qualities and experiences of those who fought on the British side determine our attitude to the war? Take the qualities of 'patriotism, honour and courage' which Gove highlights. The German troops against which the British fought were also patriotic. Eighteenth-century Scottish Jacobites felt honour-bound to defend the Divine Right of Kings; nineteenth-century Southern Confederates felt honour-bound to defend plantation slavery. The Afghan Taliban displayed great courage in their struggle, first against Russian, then British and American invaders. These qualities are not positive in themselves, but dependent on the context in which they are deployed. And although the question of what combatants *thought* they were fighting for is extremely important, any judgment on the nature of the war can only be based on what they were *actually* fighting for, about which they may have been mistaken.

However, the main point to be made against both Paxman and Gove – those positions are otherwise by no means identical – is that the opposition to the war was not a retrospective attitude struck in the 1960s, or reflective of more contemporary 'prejudices'; **opposition took place at the time**, while the war was still underway. This opposition involved ordinary people, very few of whom were academics, although many more were indeed 'left-wing'. They included Marxist revolutionaries, Christian socialists, pacifists, trade unionists, conscientious objectors, suffragettes and many others who cannot easily be classified under any heading. John Maclean, who falls decisively into the first category, had the answer to Gove's predecessors and their demands for patriotic enthusiasm for the slaughter: "it is our business as Socialists to develop a 'class patriotism', refusing to murder one another for a sordid world capitalism. The absurdity of the present situation is surely apparent when we see British Socialists going out to murder German Socialists with the object of crushing Kaiserism and Prussian militarism."¹¹

Many are the books dedicated to those who fought in the war; this is dedicated to those who fought against it. Their reasons for resistance varied: some were opposed to all wars, others only to those conducted in the interests of the imperialist powers; some sought a negotiated solution, others the overthrow of all the combatant regimes. The resisters commemorated here are drawn from across the spectrum of opinion: the only criteria is that they saw the thing for the obscenity that it was and publicly opposed it.

Scotland for and against the First World War

The war was initially popular. Scotland contributed 320,589 recruits to the army during the initial fifteen-month period of voluntary enlistment – 27 per cent of the total and proportionally more than from any other part of the UK; 30,000 volunteers came from Glasgow alone in the first ten weeks¹². Not even the most fervent opponent of the war attempted to deny the genuine enthusiasm of the volunteers. Harry McShane enlisted briefly in a failed attempt to foment dissension in the ranks before deserting. He later recalled: "It might have been possible to get further with socialist propaganda in the conscripted army of 1916; but among the volunteers of 1914 it was impossible to persuade any of them that it was wrong."¹³ One volunteer, who later became a socialist partly as a result of his wartime experiences, left this oral testimony: "I wanted to escape from the humdrum life behind the grocer's counter and see a bit of the country. I've since been sorry I took that decision, but not having a social conscience I was just swept up in the wave of patriotism that swept the country."¹⁴ Escaping from the boredom of work or misery of unemployment, the appeal of nationalism and the possibility of seeing it validated in a swift, decisive victory – these evidently had more impact than Gove's edifying fantasies about defending the 'western Liberal order'. These motives were not confined to Scotland, and it may have been that the desire to escape from the alienation and drudgery of everyday working life were even more important than nationalism. Observing the crowds in Vienna rushing to enlist, Trotsky wondered what drove them: surely not nationalism, since Austria-Hungary was "the very negation of a national idea":

The people whose lives, day in and day out, pass in a monotony of hopelessness are many; they are the mainstay of modern society. The alarm of mobilization breaks into their lives like a promise; the familiar and long-hated is overthrown, and the new and unusual reigns in its place. Changes still more incredible are in store for them in the future. For better or worse? For the better, of course—what can seem worse...than 'normal' conditions?¹⁵

And to these positive inducements were later added the pressures of a campaign which insinuated, none too subtly, that any able-bodied man refusing to enlist – in Scotland invariably addressed in propaganda as 'laddie' – was feminine, cowardly, traitorous or possibly all three¹⁶.

Relatively few people were initially prepared to publicly oppose the war. The first peace demonstration to be held in Glasgow, one week after hostilities began, attracted 5,000 people¹⁷. Resistance grew as the sheer scale of the carnage became apparent and the losses began to impact on the lives of the relatives and friends of those dying at the front. Some struggles which began to emerge in 1915 were inevitably anti-war, above all against conscription, but others were more responses to its effects at home, notably the strikes against dilution in the engineering plants and increased rents. Many of the people involved in the latter two campaigns did oppose the war, but not all: the famous slogan of the rent strikes, 'my father is fighting the Hun in France, we are fighting the Hun at home', is certainly against the unfairness of unscrupulous landlords exploiting wartime conditions, it is not necessarily against the war itself. It is possible that the different struggles might have merged with the explicitly anti-war movement, but the rent strikers scored a historic victory and the others went down to defeat before this could take place. Indeed, as Christopher Harvie points out, the government was 'fortunate' to have defeated the campaigns against dilution and conscription by spring 1916, before the Battle of the Somme began in July and casualties began to exceed even those of the first months of the war¹⁸. The real social explosion came after the war's end, in 1919, but by then Scotland had suffered greater losses than every other nation except Serbia and Turkey: 26.4 per cent of those mobilised; 10.9 percent of males of fighting age; 3.1 per cent of the population as a whole¹⁹.

Reasons why: Prussians, sleepwalkers and erroneous decisions

Whether or not you find the kind of losses tragic, but ultimately necessary, depends on what you think the war was about. There are essentially three dominant explanations, all well represented in the centenary literature, all intrinsically political.

The most recent rejects all explanations which involve the conscious agency of the Great Powers, and invokes instead what Christopher Clark calls an "undetermined" one. From this perspective there are too many agencies involved for any ultimate cause to be identified. He begins his – in many ways highly impressive – book by invoking "contingency" and ends by describing the war as "a tragedy, not a crime", concluding that "the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world"²⁰. While this avoids making anyone responsible for the war and its outcome, it also dispenses with the notion of responsibility altogether, by dissolving it into a myriad of decisions leading to an unintended, if disastrous, result.

The main example of the 'overdetermined' type of explanation Clark seeks to avoid dates back to 1914 and was later enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles. It is, of course, that primary responsibility lay with Germany and to a lesser extent its allies Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. According to Gove the First World War was "plainly a just war" against the "ruthless social Darwinism of the German elites", "the pitiless approach they took to occupation" and "their aggressively expansionist war aims"²¹. One of the historians on whom Gove relies is Gary Sheffield, appropriately enough a former lecturer in Department of War Studies at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst:

Britain went to war with Germany in August 1914 for similar reasons to those for which the country fought Hitler's Germany in the Second World War: to prevent an authoritarian, militarist, expansionist enemy achieving hegemony in Europe and thus imperilling British security. Most historians argue that Germany and Austria-Hungary were primarily responsible for initiating the war (recent attempts to blame Russia are not wholly convincing). Whoever started it, the fact is that in 1914-18, Germany waged a war of aggression that conquered large tracts of its neighbours' territory. As has often been pointed out, there were distinct continuities between the policy and strategy of imperial Germany and its Nazi successor.²²

The ideological manoeuvre here is not exactly subtle: since most people who are not absolute pacifists tend to accept that Hitler's Germany had to be fought, the comparison with imperial Germany nudges us towards the same conclusion in relation to the earlier conflict, thus conferring on it the undeserved dignity of a war against fascism. The argument has been elaborated by Max Hastings:

In today's Britain there is a widespread belief that the merits of the rival belligerent's causes scarcely matter – the *Blackadder* take on history, if you like. ... I am among those who reject the notion that the conflict of 1914-17 belonged to a different moral order than that of 1939-45. If Britain had stood aside while the Central Powers prevailed on the continent, its interests would have been directly threatened by a Germany whose appetite for dominance would assuredly have been enlarged by victory.²³

Was there nothing authoritarian, militarist or expansionist in British behaviour then? Before the war Britain had allowed the death from starvation of five million inhabitants of Madras and presided over the invention of the concentration camp in South Africa. During the war Britain was allied with the feudal-absolutist Russian autocracy and engaged in violently suppressing the national aspirations of the Irish. By the end of the war Britain had 'acquired' several more oil-producing territories in the Middle East and helped establish the Zionist colony in Palestine. This was not done during a 'fit of absence of mind'; Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary of the British War Cabinet, wrote in 1917 that "control over these oil supplies becomes a first-class British war aim"²⁴. The British army included two and a half million imperial troops, of whom something like 65,000 Indians and black Africans died – colonial subjects fighting a war for freedom and democracy who were themselves unfree and denied democracy²⁵. None of this exactly provides moral high ground from which to criticise Germany, which after all only sought what Britain already had – an empire. Only those opposed to all empires have the right to condemn the German desire to possess one. Here is Mclean again, in a letter I have already quoted, responding to contemporary claims that responsibility for the war lay entirely with Germany:

Colonial expansion was denied the Germans because the British, the Russians, and the French had picked up most of the available parts of the world. What could the Germans do but build up an army and a navy that would hold its own against all comers? This it has done steadily for the last generation. It is mere cant to talk of German militarism when Britain has led the world in the navy business. It is merely 'the struggle for an existence' on a capitalist national scale²⁶.

We can safely say that Niall Ferguson is not an opponent of empire. He adheres to a third explanation, which holds that war was not only a 'tragedy', but a mistake, "the greatest error of modern history"²⁷. Here, Germany is no more culpable than anyone else, but simply behaves in the same manner as any other state – in accordance with the Realist doctrine of International Relations theory, in other words. Ferguson implicitly disagrees with Clark, since the former suggests that British decisions were decisive, while the latter holds that, in the chaotic flux of pre-war politics, no state could play such a pivotal role. Ferguson explicitly disagrees with Hastings,

not from any objection to the war as such, but because he believes that the ultimate cost to Britain would have been less had Britain entered later, or even avoided doing so altogether:

Had Britain stood aside – even for a matter of weeks – continental Europe could therefore have been transformed into something not wholly unlike the European Union we know today – but without the massive contraction in British overseas power entailed by the fighting of two world wars. Perhaps too the complete collapse of Russia into the horrors of civil war and Bolshevism might have been avoided²⁸.

Ferguson's lack of moral humbug and freedom from conventional pieties can be momentarily refreshing, but essentially his dispute with Hastings is a family quarrel among conservatives about what would have been the best way to advance the British national interest²⁹. Leaving moral issues aside, both fail to understand what had changed in state relations by the early twentieth century. Hastings imagines that the world of 1914 was essentially still that of 1815, 'the balance of power' in Europe being the key issue; Ferguson is more aware of the global implications of the rise of imperialism, but understands this entirely in relation to control over external territories, rather than the changes it signalled within the imperial states themselves, which was at least as responsible for the outbreak of war. A proper understanding of these changes suggests a fourth, and more plausible explanation for the war.

The logic of capitalist imperialism

All historians obviously recognise that the main players were established or aspirant imperial powers; but this fact is rarely given any explanatory power, so long as 'imperialism' is simply regarded as coextensive with colonialism. Yet the concept, at least within Classical Marxism, does not simply involve relationships of domination by the metropolitan powers over the colonial and semi-colonial world, but also – and in this context, more importantly – relationships of rivalry between the metropolitan powers themselves, a rivalry which fused economic and geopolitical competition³⁰. Ferguson's dismissal of the Marxist explanation therefore simply misses the point:

Inconveniently for Marxist theory...there is scarcely any evidence that these [capitalist] interests made businessmen *want* a major European war. In London the overwhelming majority of bankers were appalled at the prospect, not least because war threatened to bankrupt most if not all of the major acceptance houses engaged in financing international trade.

Ferguson then cites statements and actions by a range of mainly German business leaders indicative of either their hostility to the prospect of war or their disbelief that it would occur³¹. The citations are accurate enough; but the relationship of the war to capitalism is not disproved because individual capitalists were not demanding it.

For Maclean in Glasgow, Connolly in Dublin, Luxemburg in Berlin, Lenin in Zurich and Roy in Delhi, the outbreak of war may have been unintended, but it was not thereby avoidable, except by socialist revolution. At least some individuals among the ruling classes of Europe shared this understanding. The German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg was partly responsible for the outcome of the so-called 'Potsdam consultation' of 5-6 July 1914, at the end of which Germany committed to support Austrian military action against Serbia. Nevertheless, at the beginning of 1918 he wrote an extraordinary letter to Prince Max of Baden in which he said: "Imperialism, nationalism and economic materialism, which in broad outline have governed the policies of all the nations during the past generation, set themselves goals that could be pursued by each nation only at the cost of a general collision."³²

All the major participating states were either already capitalist or – like Russia or Turkey – in the process of completing the transition to capitalism. Their empires were important to the metropolitan centres for economic reasons; principally as captive markets, less so as a source of raw materials (except in the case of Britain) and least of all as the destination of investments. But even where colonies or ‘mandates’ had no direct economic rationale, this did not mean they were detached from the logic of capitalist imperialism. Once the race for imperial territory began in earnest during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it became necessary for strategic reasons to seize territories which were often of no value in themselves – indeed, which were often net recipients of state expenditure – but which were essential buffers from which to protect those territories which **were** of economic value, like India or South Africa³³. And in some cases the diplomatic alliances which eventually plunged the world into catastrophe had direct economic origins.

In the case of Russia, for example, grain exports and raw material imports for industry passed through the straits between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara or the Dardanelles and the Aegean. Early in 1914 Russia and her allies forced the Ottoman Empire to grant autonomy to the partly Armenian provinces of eastern Anatolia in order to pull the Christian Armenians under Russian influence. As a result the Turks began to form an alliance with Germany in order to protect the integrity of their empire³⁴. In the case of Britain, surely the most ‘capitalist’ of all the European Great Powers, economic specialisation, and the consequent lack of self-sufficiency in food and raw materials, made her dependent on these being constantly available from overseas, which in turn required the Royal Navy to protect the merchant marine. Challenged by the other European Powers, above all Germany, in the naval arms race from the 1890s, Britain began to create the continental system of alliances that would pull her into war³⁵. In both cases the logic of conflict was set in motion by tensions between the metropolitan centres themselves. In this historical moment, threats to overseas markets and sources of raw materials would have been causes for war even if the territories involved had not been actual colonies.

The generals, politicians and civil servants in all the combatant states were trapped within a structural logic which first led to war and then determined their conduct of it. Seemingly irrational decisions were in fact inescapable given the compulsions of competitive accumulation. Rather than ‘sleepwalkers’ they were ‘prisoners’:

The system and the age were as responsible as the actors for the July crisis and its ending in war. We can hardly imagine that any of the statesmen in office during the decade before 1914 would have acted in a substantially different manner from those of the July crisis if they had been in power at the time. The men actually at the helm of affairs, given the preceding decade of events and all the other conditions and forces of the time, would have been almost inescapably the prisoners of those factors in discharging the practical responsibilities of office.³⁶

This has contemporary implications, not because war is necessarily imminent between the core states of the world system; but direct confrontation is scarcely the only form of geopolitical rivalry. The key participants in the First World War had already been engaged in conflict-at-one-remove before 1914. The Boer War can be seen as a proxy war between Britain and Germany which backed, encouraged, trained and supplied the Boers. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, Germany supported Russia and Britain supported Japan³⁷. Since the end of the Cold War we have once again seen war ‘by proxy’, where the dominant states jostle for influence by supporting different sides in inter- or intra-state conflicts. As one analyst notes: “Whether these proxy interventions are undertaken between the US and China in Africa, by anonymous states in cyberspace or by P[ri]vate M[ilitary] C[ompanies] in the developing world, indirect interference in existing conflicts may reduce conflict escalation, but it risks conflict intensification³⁸. In fact, it risks both intensification **and** escalation. The different sides supported by France, Germany and

the USA during the disintegration of Yugoslavia was perhaps the first example of this strategy in the post-Cold War world; the conflict between NATO and Russia over Georgia (and the divisions within the NATO member states over attitudes to Russia) represent a second; a third, the crisis in the Ukraine which is still unfolding as I write, involves the same players plus the European Union. It is tempting to see the former Soviet republics as playing the role once played by the Balkans, but the dangers are actually more geographically widespread. Similar alignments are beginning to take shape in Central Africa where France is already in the dominant position among the Western powers, but where China is rapidly extending its influence. In Asia itself, the growing rivalry between the US and China is channelled through their respective nuclear surrogates in India and Pakistan³⁹. And then there is the growing tension between China and Japan. If the argument here is correct, then we may be entering a world situation which resembles in several important ways that of 1914, although the potential flashpoints in 2014 are actually more numerous. The moment of maximum danger for humanity will come if the contemporary capitalist great powers no longer express their different competitive interests by proxy in the Global South, or assert their interests over lesser states in the developed world itself, but when they directly confront each other on the geopolitical stage.

Conclusion

Our focus in what follows is on Scotland, and no discussion of the Centenary commemorations can avoid the fact that they begin little over a month before the referendum on Scottish independence. The closing ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow will seamlessly meld into the opening events of the Centenary in Britain as a whole, a wreath-laying at the Cenotaph in George Square⁴⁰. The great majority of resisters during the First World War were 'home rulers', if they had any position on the national question at all. (McClean is the great exception, but even he only adopted a position of support for Scottish independence after the war.) But whatever our individual positions, none of us imagines that a democratic, let alone socialist politics in Scotland, independent or devolved, will be progressed by embracing a national identity derived either from Scotland's role in the British Empire then or of Scots in fighting Britain's imperialist wars now. In this respect at least the last hundred years have not passed in vain. I noted above that the first peace demonstration to be held in Glasgow during the First World War only involved 5,000 people, and these were mostly already committed socialists or pacifists. The demonstration in Glasgow against the invasion of Iraq on 15 February 2003 involved up to 100,000, many of whom had never been on a demonstration before⁴¹.

In his outstanding account of war resisters across Britain as a whole between 1914 and 1918, Adam Hochschild writes that their example was "if not for their own time, then perhaps for the future": "I wish theirs was a victorious story, but it is not. Unlike, say, witch-burning, slavery, and apartheid, which were once taken for granted and are now officially outlawed, war is still with us."⁴² Witch-burning, slavery, and apartheid have proved far less central to capitalism than warfare. In this perspective, the origins of the First World War are not simply a matter for academic dispute, but a warning of what may await us, with different participants but even greater destructive capacity. In that sense we commemorate – we celebrate – those who opposed that war, not simply because they were right, but because we may have cause to emulate their example. And for that reason alone, we will remember them.

References

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- 2 Steven D. Brown, 'Two Minutes of Silence: Social Technologies of Public Commemoration', *Theory and Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 2 (June 2012), 240, 241.
- 3 Iain Maclean is notoriously sceptical about potential for revolution in 1919, but he assembles a collection of quotations which show that politicians and officials at the time took a less relaxed view. See *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), 136-137. See also Winston Churchill's account of the various 'threats' which the government faced between January and March in Hansard (29 May 1919).
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- 5 Andrew Duncan, "'I Love this Country—Often We don't Know How Lucky We Are'", *Radio Times* (25-31 January 2014), 17.
- 6 Alan Clark [1961], *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1991).
- 7 'Haig and the Somme', in *Reportage Scotland: History in the Making*, edited by Louise Yeoman (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2000), 397.
- 8 Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: a Story of Protest and Patriotism in the First World War* (London: Pan Books, 2012), xiv.
- 9 Ted Crawford, 'Mutiny and the Cohesion of the Armed Forces', *Revolutionary History*, vol. 8, no. 2, *Mutiny: Disaffection and Unrest in the Armed Forces* (2002), 11-12.
- 10 Michael Gove, 'Why Does the Left Insist on Belittling True British Heroes?', *Daily Mail* (2 January 2014). As is quite often the case, Gove is oblivious to the incoherence of his own arguments: if soldiers volunteered to fight for 'King and country' - i.e. on a nationalist basis - then presumably it would have made no difference to them what the nature of the Western 'order' was they were supposedly defending.
- 11 John Maclean, 'The War and Its Outcome', *Justice* (17 September 1914), 4.
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- 13 Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 69.
- 14 Robert Irvine, interviewed in 1963, in *Voices from War: Personal Recollections of War in Our Century by Scottish Men and Women*, edited by Ian MacDougall (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1995), 28.
- 15 Leon D. Trotsky [1929], *My Life: an Attempt at an Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 240-241.
- 16 Ian S. Wood, "'Be Strong and of Good Courage": the Royal Scot's Territorial Battalions', in *Scotland and the Great War*, 118-119.
- 17 William Kenefick, 'War Resisters and Anti-Conscription in Scotland, an ILP Perspective', in *Scotland in the Great War*, 63.
- 18 Christopher Harvie, 'Before the Breakthrough, 1886-1922', in *Forward! Labour Politics in Scotland, 1888-1988*, edited by Ian Donnachie, Christopher Harvie and Ian S. Wood (Edinburgh: Polygon: 1989), 23.
- 19 Fergusson, *The Pity of War*, 299. The comparable figures for Britain and Ireland were 11.8 per cent, 6.3 per cent and 1.6 per cent.
- 20 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2013), 562.
- 21 Gove, 'Why Does the Left Insist on Belittling True British Heroes?'
- 22 Gary Sheffield, 'The First World War Was Far from Futile', *The Guardian* (17 June 2013).
- 23 Max Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War, 1914* (London: William Collins, 2013), xviii-xix. The continuing obsession of British conservatives with the pernicious influence of the last episode of *Blackadder Goes Forth* ('Goodbyeeee') is surely a testament to its greatness.
- 24 Quoted in Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: the Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 188.
- 25 Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: a Short History of British Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1975), 235. Porter points out that the imprecision of the figures is because 'black men were never counted so carefully as whites'.

- 26 Maclean, 'The War and Its Outcome', 4.
- 27 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 462.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 460.
- 29 For summaries of their respective positions see Max Hastings, 'The Case for War' and Niall Ferguson, 'The Case against War', both in *Radio Times* (22-28 February 2014), this setting indicating the inevitable book-television special tie-in.
- 30 The argument is put most powerfully by the Bolshevik, Nikolai I Bukharin [1915], *Imperialism and World Economy* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), esp. chapter 11.
- 31 Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 32 and 31-33 more generally.
- 32 Bethmann-Hollweg to Baden, 17 January 1918, reproduced as an appendix in Egmont Zechlin [1964], 'Cabinet versus Economic Warfare in Germany: Policy and Strategy during the Early Months of the First World War', in *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, edited by H. W. Koch (Second edition, London: Macmillan, 1984), 286.
- 33 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 66-69.
- 34 Norman Stone, *World War One: a Short History* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 13.
- 35 Avner Offer, 'Costs and Benefits, Prosperity and Security, 1870-1914', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 3, *the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 703-708.
- 36 Bernadotte E. Schmitt and Harold C. Vedler, *The World in the Crucible, 1914-1918* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 23.
- 37 Boris Kagarlitsky, 'From Global Crisis to Neo-Imperialism: the Case for a Radical Alternative', in *The Politics of Empire: Globalisation in Crisis*, edited by Alan Freeman and Boris Kagarlitsky (London: Pluto Press in Association with the Transnational Institute, 2004), 74, note 3.
- 38 Andrew Mumford, 'Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict'. *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 156, no. 2 (April/May 2013), 45.
- 39 Harsh V. Pant, 'Rising China in India's Vicinity: a Rivalry Takes Shape in Asia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 1 (March 2013), 12-14.
- 40 'Glasgow to be the Centre of Commonwealth Events to Mark the Centenary of the Start of First World War', <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=9949>
- 41 Stephen Naysmith, Alan Crawford and Jennifer Johnston, 'Millions March to Say No to War', *Sunday Herald* (16 February 2003).
- 42 Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, xvii.