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The United Kingdom in 1914

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Introduction

The First World War was a turning point in the history of the United Kingdom. The enormous demands of the war, and its vast expenditure (of men, women, and materiel) transformed both economy and society during the war and led to major ramifications afterwards. It was a 'total war'; one that required the mobilisation not just of the armed services but of society as a whole. This volume focuses on the ways in which the United Kingdom's home front mobilised for war and the impact of that mobilisation. The key question is: how much did Britain's economy and society have to change in order to support its war effort? Were there certain areas where change was more pertinent? To what extent were changes already in motion before the war that were subsequently accelerated by the outbreak of conflict? Or did the possibility of 'total war' arise from the ways the economy and society had begun to structure themselves before 1914? Embracing the four themes of this volume – politics, economics, society and identity – this chapter establishes what the UK looked like, and the primary issues it faced, in the immediate pre-war period. But first, what did the term 'United Kingdom' mean in 1914?

A Kingdom United?

The state that declared war on 4 August was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Britain itself was composed of England, Scotland and Wales, and Ireland was both divided internally over Home Rule and at odds with Britain. So how united were the four countries before the outbreak of war?

Although each had its own distinct identity, industrialisation and economic developments had set in train large-scale unifying and rationalising forces, and all political control stemmed from Westminster. Compulsory national education, railways, telegraph and postal services, and mass-circulation newspapers and magazines had transformed individual perceptions of the boundaries of community and national life. According to John Stevenson 'slowly and

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inexorably a national culture was seeping into the more rural parts of Britain'.[1] Local dialects and regional accents were under threat; the 'received standard English' of southeastern England had become the cultural norm and an indicator of social hierarchy. Acting as a magnetic core for all four nations was the 'gigantic hinge' of London, now the undisputed capital market of the world.[2] This impacted upon the national social structure. Investments and businessmen moved to London, London 'society' flourished, and the city became the centre of British fashionable and artistic life. As Jose Harris outlines: 'Older, regional, variegated, and customary society' was being restructured 'along more uniform, national and horizontal lines'.[3]

In her study of British national identity between 1707 and 1837, Linda Colley argues that England, Scotland and Wales were united primarily by conflict, a sense of the external 'other', and religion.[4] Keith Robbins also supports the argument that there was a growing sense of Britishness in the nineteenth century. A sense of common identity existed in Britain not because of an integration or homogenisation of disparate cultures but rather because it was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the 'other', particularly in response to conflict with it. In some respects, this feeling penetrated deeper in the period immediately before the First World War, assisted by travel, railways, education, migration, sport, commerce and literature. The extension of the franchise and the broadening of political participation in the nineteenth century also increased a sense of being part of a single political society. This is what Robbins has summarised as 'integrated Britain'.[5] This process of integration, not Anglicisation, in his view, 'makes it not inappropriate to speak of the making of a British nation whose sense of common identity and purpose outweighed in importance the still abiding consciousness of difference'.[6]

Nevertheless, throughout the early and mid-Victorian period Britain had remained a society that in numerous ways was fiercely variegated and local. The different linguistic, cultural, religious and (in the case of Scotland) legal traditions; the widely varying occupational and manufacturing specialisations of the new industrial centres; the municipal culture and civic pride of

[1] John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–45* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 29.
[2] Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19.
[3] Ibid., pp. 20–3.
[4] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 367–8.
[5] Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: Integration and Diversity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
[6] Keith Robbins, 'An Imperial and Multinational Polity: The "Scene from the Centre", 1832–1922', in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 251.

provincial cities; all combined to produce a society that in certain respects was less unified and metropolitan than a hundred years before. The north, for example, constructed a distinct image of itself that was composed of progress, industry, manufacturing, civic pride, and municipal enterprise, which were contrasted to the values of the southern aristocracy and financial middle class.[7] The preservation of local autonomy and culture was seen as a quintessential feature of British national character in marked contrast to the centralisation and legalistic uniformity imposed on continental countries.[8] Professional football, county cricket, and the county-organised Territorial Volunteer Force all propped up local patriotism and civic pride.[9] At times, regional identity was constructed in contrast to the centre, e.g. north versus south. At other times, and more often, regional and other local identities were seen as part of a wider national identity; local and regional identities provided the building blocks for national identity, foreshadowing perhaps the successful mobilisation of local identity for the national cause in the formation of the 'Pals' battalions of the First World War.[10] In many ways, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1914 was unified but not uniform. In areas, regional differences between the four nations outweighed the similarities.[11] There could not be a more convincing demonstration of the fact that Britain was both a multinational and national country than the question of Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, which came to a head in the month before the outbreak of war. In the early 1900s tensions were developing between the defence of the 'British Isles' and the preservation of the 'British Empire'; between the unity of the British Isles and the accommodation of their diversity. Although such pressures were by no means entirely new, by 1914 they were proving more difficult to reconcile.[12]

Political Challenges

The last pre-war election, held in December 1910, had brought the Liberals, with the cooperation of Labour and the Irish nationalists, to power. In 1914, they were led by Herbert Henry Asquith who had been in office since 1908,

[7] Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 67.
[8] Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 18–19.
[9] Ibid., pp. 17–18.
[10] Ward, *Britishness since 1870,* p. 68. See also Helen B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[11] Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 190.
[12] Keith Robbins, 'Introduction: Halfway House-Isles and Empire over Half a Century', in Keith Robbins (ed.), *The British Isles: 1901–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3–4.

while Sir Edward Grey had been Foreign Secretary for nine years. In the months prior to the outbreak of a foreign war, Asquith's government faced violent challenges at home from the Labour movement, suffragettes, Ulstermen and Irish nationalists.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, Labour had emerged as a serious politicised force nationally, with the founding of the Labour Party (1900) which returned forty-two MPs at the December 1910 general election. On the eve of the First World War, it still heavily depended on the trade unions for funds and parliamentary candidates. The rise of trade unions was one of the most striking industrial and social changes in the pre-war years. Between 1900 and 1913, the number of trade unionists rose from 2 million to 4.1 million.[13] With the organisation of unskilled and general labourers, and with increased cost of living before the war, industrial unrest became particularly widespread and militant, peaking in 1912–13. Several serious clashes took place between strikers, the police and troops. The worst year for disputes was 1912 when over 40 million working days were lost, compared to the previous peak of 15 million in 1898. There were national strikes on the railways in 1911 and in the coal mines the following year. In 1913, a sudden outbreak of strikes in Midlands engineering boosted union membership considerably.[14]

Yet to upper-class Edwardian men, the campaigns of the suffragettes were as alarming as those of Labour in pre-war British society. Although by 1909 most suffragettes were members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (N.U.W.S.S.)[15] – the constitutional movement led by Millicent Fawcett – it was the militant organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (W.S.P.U.) founded by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, that was attracting the most attention. To keep the cause in the public eye and to attract new members, the tactics of the W.S.P.U. had become increasingly shocking. Rough treatment of suffragettes by both the police and the public led them to resort to attacks on property, including smashing the windows of West End clubs, and acts of arson.[16]

However, the most serious challenge to parliamentary government in the period prior to the outbreak of war came from Ireland. In April 1912, the third Home Rule Bill began its passage through Westminster, and its ultimate aim was to establish a Dublin parliament for the whole of Ireland. By May 1914 it had been passed three times as required by the recently ratified Parliament Act

[13] Peter Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain 1914–1945* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 11.
[14] Ibid., p. 12.
[15] Martin Pugh, *State and Society: British Political and Social History 1870–1992* (London: Arnold, 1994), p. 135.
[16] Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866–1928*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

of 1911. However, both the Unionists and the Conservatives used this two-year hiatus to build-up resistance in Ireland. The dominant elite in Ulster – the Protestant minority led by Captain James Craig and Sir Edward Carson – feared a loss of power and status. Supported by the leader of the opposition Conservative Party, Andrew Bonar Law, they established the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) of some 90,000 men and embarked upon a series of illegal gun importations. As a response to the establishment of the U.V.F., the Irish Nationalists formed their own Volunteer army, the Irish Nationalist Volunteers (I.N.V.). The emergence of these private armies raised the prospect that civil war would erupt if a Dublin parliament was set up. The situation was compounded by the Curragh incident in March 1914 when around fifty-seven British officers, stationed in Ireland, pledged they would resign rather than enforce the Home Rule policy in Ireland. This sent the ominous message that Westminster could not rely on the army to carry out its orders. King George V warned on 21 July 1914 that 'the cry of civil war is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people'.[17] On 26 July, a detachment of the King's Own Scottish Borderers fired on a crowd of Dublin civilians on Bachelors Walk – suspected of being I.N.V. gun-runners – killing four and wounding many others. This sparked outrage in Ireland and was relayed to people in Britain under frightening headlines, like 'Slaughter in Ireland'[18] and 'Fighting in Dublin'.[19]

Retrospectively, the summer of 1914 was portrayed as the culmination of the long Edwardian idyll that stood in contrast to the rupture and disharmony brought by the war. In reality, the pre-war period was one of domestic unrest and mounting anxiety for the authorities.[20] But was it a specifically Liberal problem? According to George Dangerfield between 1910 and 1913, Liberal England was 'reduced to ashes' by the challenges mounted by the rise of labour and increasing militancy from suffragettes and in Ireland.[21] Certainly, the Liberal Party was under considerable strain in this period. The Conservative Party, defeated in 1906, had recovered by 1910 and was returning as a major political force. Two general elections, the death of Edward VII and the battle with the House of Lords to halt Conservative dominance, had taken their toll on the Liberals, who also struggled to coordinate their strategy over industrial relations. However, defining this period as simply a liberal problem risks

[17] Quoted in J. F. V. Keiger, 'Britain's "Union Sacrée" in 1914', in Jean-Jacques Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau (eds.), *Les societes europeennes et la guerre de 1914–1918* (Nanterre: Universite de Paris X, 1990), p. 40.

[18] *Manchester Evening News,* 27 July 1914, p. 3.

[19] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 27 July 1914, p. 6.

[20] Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), p. 26.

[21] George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England, 1910–1914* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1935; 1961).

missing the point. Both parties were the products of an older, rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal political and social order; both were going to struggle in the face of protest from representative groups, especially organised labour and women. It was a British political problem, rather than solely the problem of a weakened Liberal Party. Whoever was in power would have to deal with what has been described as 'domestic anarchy'.[22] They would need to navigate demands for increased representation and better working and living conditions, while simultaneously facing resistance from elite figures who understood how increased state intervention would restrict their freedoms and cost them money. Thus, for many 'continuity was a stronger element than discontinuity', with much of the activity at national and local government during the interwar years, being based on the values still recognisable as those of the late Victorian period.[23]

A Complex Economy

Although Britain's relative position in the world economy had declined rapidly after 1880, it was still the largest exporter of manufactured goods in 1913, accounting for 30 per cent of the world total. In terms of total exports (not just manufactures), Britain remained the world's biggest exporter (by a short lead). The decline was, in part, the inevitable result of the rest of the world becoming more industrialised; being the first to industrialise was an advantage to competitors who could learn from earlier mistakes. But it was also the result of a decline in relative economic efficiency. Britain's export structure was biased towards old-fashioned and slowly growing trades, reliant on staple exports of the mid-nineteenth century (textiles, iron, steam engines, coal) and less dependent on newer technologies, such as electricity and chemistry.[24]

As has been discussed by Hew Strachan, Britain was the functional centre of the global economy in 1913.[25] As the largest importer of food and raw materials, Britain provided a market for the world. With no backstop to the business model of relying on imports, Britain was always going to be particularly vulnerable if circumstances evolved to reduce the interdependence of the major world economies. But Britain's role was more pivotal than this; it was also the largest source of long-term capital. Sterling was the world's major trading currency, since its value was stable, and, since Britain was on the gold standard, sterling could readily be exchanged for gold at any time and in any

[22] Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. VI, *The Rule of Democracy 1905–1914* (London: Ernest Benn, 1932), p. 441.
[23] Stevenson, *British Society*, p. 44.
[24] Dewey, *War and Progress,* pp. 15–16.
[25] Hew Strachan, 'The First World War as a Global War', *First World War Studies* 1:1 (2010), pp. 3–14.

place at an official, fixed exchange rate. London remained the major discount centre, clearing-house and capital market of the international economy. London institutions provided much of the world's short-term finance. The hiring out of British ships, the insurance of cargoes by British insurers, and the provision of financial services by British banks, helped considerably in the efficient and smooth workings of the international trading and financial system. In 1913, therefore, the British economy, as well as being the largest exporter of goods and of investment funds in the world, was the financier of the bulk of daily international trade, and supplied the means of exchange.[26]

The British financial position was, on the whole, strong before the war. Since the South African War, national debt had been steadily reduced. Taxation was low and relied on an income tax that was levied progressively, supplemented by a Super Tax, estate taxes and indirect taxation such as custom duties.[27] Income tax had been first adopted in Britain in 1799, specifically as a war tax. Almost half a century later, Sir Robert Peel had employed the tax in peacetime – on a temporary basis – to stimulate the expansion of commerce and consumption through free trade. The reality and burdens of colonial defence had increasingly blurred the financial distinction between war and peace and Gladstone's desire to abolish income tax became an ever more distant reality. The rebuilding of the Royal Navy, under the pressure of competition with France, raised the basic rate from 5d to 8d in the £ in 1885. The South African War pushed it up further, but in the five years before 1914 it had stabilised at 1s. 2d. In 1913, income tax was only paid by 2 per cent of the population (this would increase to 8 per cent by 1918); but what mattered was that, in 1914, Britain possessed – as no other nation did – the basis for a system of war finance. As Hew Strachan summarises, 'it had developed the machinery which enabled it to draw on the nation's liquid assets.'[28]

By the early twentieth century, the ongoing changes of industrialisation had produced an economy and society in Great Britain of great complexity. Since the eighteenth century, the first stages of industrialisation had made a profound impact on the structure of the economy as agriculture shrank and the industry and service sectors expanded. According to the 1911 census, on the eve of the First World War 18.3 million British people were employed. The largest sector was manufacturing, which (together with construction) provided work for 50 per cent of the total employed population (male and

[26] Dewey, *War and Progress,* p. 20.

[27] Martin Horn, 'War Finance (Great Britain and Ireland)', in Ute Daniel et al. (eds.), *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-10-24. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10986.

[28] Hew Strachan, *Financing the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 67–8.

female) in 1911. The second largest was the service sector, which (including transport) employed 35 per cent. Agriculture employed 8 per cent (falling from 36 per cent in 1801) and mining 6 per cent. In 1911, over a million men worked in five broad groups of occupations: metals, transport, agriculture (including horticulture and forestry), building and mining. The other major occupations were commerce (0.74 million) and textiles (0.64 million). These jobs accounted for 8.6 million males, out of a total British male labour force of 12.9 million. For females, out of a total labour force of 5.3 million, there was only one outstanding employment, which was domestic and personal service (2.1 million). Apart from this, the two major female occupations were in textiles (0.9 million) and clothing (0.8 million), although 0.3 million were employed in the manufacture of food, drink and tobacco.[29]

These occupations varied considerably in importance from region to region and broad classifications only serve to conceal local diversity. For example, the West Midlands was most reliant on manufacturing, with 56 per cent of its population thus employed; South Wales was the most reliant on mining (32 per cent); textiles accounted for almost one-quarter of employment in the northern regions of Lancashire/Cheshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. Agriculture was of greatest importance in the eastern counties of England, north Wales, Ireland and north Scotland, where it accounted for about one-quarter of the employed population. Overall, on the eve of the First World War, the British economy was founded upon a strong industrial base, drawing from a large skills pool, and supported by an excellent railway network.[30] Scotland, where 10.5 per cent of the overall population produced 12.5 per cent of the economic output, was a key component.[31]

A Changing Society

By 1911, the expanding economy produced a larger population and bigger cities. There were considerably fewer villagers and more town-dwellers. The process of urbanisation, which characterised the Victorian period, continued at strength into the Edwardian era, and by 1914 Britain was primarily an urban industrial society, although Ireland remained predominantly rural. London was still a world phenomenon with its 7.25 million inhabitants.[32] Manchester had passed the half-million mark, and Birmingham and the West Midlands had a total population of 1,634,000 in 1911. By 1911 only one in four people lived in the countryside. The population as a whole had passed

[29] Dewey, *War and Progress*, pp. 1, 6–7.
[30] Ibid., p. 4.
[31] Christopher Harvie, *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 1.
[32] Stevenson, *British Society*, p. 23.

45 million by that date, an increase of 18 million in sixty years.[33] Only in Ireland had the population declined. However, falling birth rates in Britain – the result of a rise in the age of marriage, compulsory national education making children a burden on families for longer, and access to contraception – sparked fears of 'national deterioration' and a foreign take-over.[34]

With economic success came failure too. A marked feature of British society in the early twentieth century was the high degree of economic inequality, in both income and ownership of wealth. Contemporary attempts at income classification (for example by MP Leo Chiozza Money in 1908) and pioneering social inquiries (by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree) suggested that nearly a third of Britons were paupers who lacked the basic necessities of life. Cyclical and casual employment was a major contributory factor. Records for pre-1913 derive from trade unions. Between 1860 and 1913, at the troughs of trade cycles, about 8 per cent of trade unionists would be unemployed; at the peaks, about 2 per cent. Since trade unionists were more likely to be drawn from the most skilled ranks of the working class, and so less prone to unemployment than the less skilled non-unionist, the average rate of unemployment for the working class as a whole must have been much higher.[35]

British housing was deficient in quantity and quality before 1914. Pre-war housing in England and Wales suffered from overcrowding. In 1911, the proportion of families living at densities of more than two persons per room was approximately 5 per cent. Conditions were a lot worse in Scotland where the predominant housing form was the tenement. Most housing lacked basic amenities, e.g. a flushing toilet. Few working-class dwellings in Britain had bathrooms, and electricity was a rarity (although gas was fairly common). Nor was it unusual to find dwellings without a piped water supply, especially in rural areas. There was a growing intolerance of slum housing in which many of the working-classes lived.[36]

Concerns were raised by the poor physical condition of many South African War recruits and in 1904 a special inquiry was set up into 'Physical Deterioration' which it was feared would undermine the strength of the empire. This worry combined with an increased awareness of class tensions and the dangers in the unfair distribution of the increased wealth. As the Liberal intellectual J. A. Hobson said in an address to the National Liberal Club in 1912:

[33] Ibid., p. 21.
[34] Alan G. V. Simmonds, *Britain and World War One* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 6.
[35] Dewey, *War and Progress,* pp. 7–9.
[36] Ibid., p. 14.

> The sentiment of severance between rich and poor, the spirit of class hostility has grown more conscious and acute. This is not a popular thing to say to a middle class audience but it is true.[37]

Many historians of differing persuasions have identified the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the period in which class, as an organising social category, became all-embracing.[38] All other social and cultural attributes became overshadowed by class categories. Historians have tended to work with a tripolar model of upper, middle and lower or working classes, distinguished by property-ownership (or lack of it) but disagreements remain about the consistency of the different class groups and the precise location of boundaries between them.[39] The Representation of the People Act, 1884 had increased the size of the electorate considerably to include all men paying an annual rent of £10 and all those holding land valued at £10; however, it did not establish universal suffrage. All women and 40 per cent of adult males were still without the vote.[40] Apart from the stratifying impact of property distribution and large-scale machine-production, between 1870 and 1914 the organisation of work, schools, transport, housing, welfare, societal norms and recreation all combined to compartmentalise British society along class lines. Class distinctions were not only a question of wealth but culture and modes of behaviour; where and when one washed, where you took a vacation, and whether you ate lunch/dinner or dinner/tea.[41] As the campaigns of the militant suffragettes in the months preceding the outbreak of war demonstrated, British society was also changing along gender lines.[42]

For those working-class members of the population whose means were insufficient to see them through difficulty there were two sources of assistance before the First World War: private charities and the Poor Law.[43] Edwardian society was full of groups and communities who constituted unorganised 'social collectivism'. By the end of the nineteenth century most communities with a mixed social make-up would have boasted working parties, mothers' meetings, Bible societies and temperance societies. Also common were

[37] Quoted in Malcolm Pearce and Geoffrey Stewart, *British Political History 1867–1990: Democracy and Decline* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 187.

[38] Eric J. Hobsbawn, *Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Phoenix, 2000); F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London: Fontana, 1988); Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War: England, 1914–1918* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1987).

[39] Andrew Miles, 'Social Structure, 1900–1939', in C. Wrigley (ed.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 340.

[40] Chris Cook, *The Routledge Companion to Britain in the Nineteenth Century, 1815–1914* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 68.

[41] Simmonds, *Britain and World War One,* p. 7.

[42] Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 6–11, 23–32.

[43] Dewey, *War and Progress,* p. 10.

voluntary bodies with a specific welfare function, such as lying-in and maternity charities, blanket clubs, coal clubs, and medical clubs, amongst many others. At the heart of female culture in the nineteenth century, sewing was crucial to women's philanthropy and was a common feature of wartime solidarity efforts.[44] Jay Winter believes the pre-war philanthropy to be linked to the Protestant voluntary tradition which underlay the social contract. It was the very strength of this which perhaps helps account for Britain's endurance in the war.[45] Yet charities did not have the capacity to reach everyone in need and so the Poor Law was an important safety net. The minimal levels of relief offered, often grudgingly, meant it was the last port of call for all but the most desperate. But, even so, many people fell into it. In 1912, 780,000 people in England and Wales were given relief on the Poor Law; in Scotland, some 109,000.[46]

However, by the 1880s the challenges posed by mass poverty could not be mitigated by charities and the Poor Law alone. The election of a reforming Liberal government in 1906 provided the opportunity for change, with broader impetus provided by the campaign for National Efficiency. The principle of 'organisation' and the use of 'scientific' methods, which would be so significant during the war, drove calls for an enlightened, apolitical bureaucracy to bring rationality and efficiency to national institutions and local authorities.[47] The expanding role of the government showed in the growth of the civil service whose numbers tripled to reach 200,000. Central government was expanding and encroaching on areas previously dealt with by individuals, pressure groups, and organised classes. Collective state provision was fast becoming a citizen-entitlement.[48] A major turning point in education came in the form of the 1870 Education Act which laid the foundations of English elementary education, and by the eve of war its benefits had embraced all society. By 1914 literacy in England had reached almost 99 per cent for both sexes, up from 55 per cent for women and 70 per cent for men in 1850. In 1911, 57.5 per cent of twelve to fourteen-year olds were attending schools in England and Wales.[49] The Public Health Act of 1875 had been prefaced by fifty years of municipal concern for health. New ground was broken with the Old Age Pension Act of 1908 and the National Insurance Act of 1911 (against

[44] Frank Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse: Philanthropy in Modern Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 7, 17, 21, 42.
[45] Jay Winter, 'Popular Culture in Wartime Britain', in A. Roshwald and R. Stites (eds.), *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 330.
[46] Dewey, *War and Progress,* p. 10.
[47] Simmonds, *Britain and World War One*, p. 10.
[48] Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 11–13.
[49] A. H. Halsey (ed.), *Trends in British Society since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structures of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 163.

sickness and unemployment). These Acts are often regarded as the foundations of modern social welfare in Britain and formed part of the wider reforms of the Liberal government of 1906–14. For many, a new era of state intervention and social provision was at hand, and it had begun to transform people's lives in a positive way.[50]

Traditionally, it has been understood that, in the early 1900s, as the role of the state grew, the strength of the Church of England began to wane with the growth of secularism. According to this view, religion remained stronger amongst the agricultural rather than urban working-classes, and among the latter, where their religion was strong as in the northern towns or in the Welsh villages, it was the Chapel rather than the Church which dominated. By the end of the century a large proportion of urban workers and their families did not attend Church, or did so only for christenings, marriages, and funerals. The intellectual dominance of the Church was also waning. Religion was losing the battle with the scientists that followed the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, and the state was beginning to take over the provision of education.[51] Where religion continued to be important, it was more as an individual than a collective force.[52]

However, this view has been challenged over the past thirty years. Scholars have broken free from an interpretative framework of decline that associates industrialisation and technological development with a growing religious indifference in the new urban 'masses and classes'. Instead, they have demonstrated the vitality of late Victorian religion, which remained a pervasive and important aspect of working-class culture even in the twentieth century. Something of a consensus has emerged, among social historians of religion at least, that church attendance (and other forms of practice) actually increased throughout most of the nineteenth century to the point that they talk about the institutional *revival* of the churches.[53]

In contrast, there is little evidence to dispute the claim that the British press was growing in influence in the pre-war era. In 1914, it featured a vibrant assortment of metropolitan, provincial and specialist newspapers. The rise of the modern tabloid in the first decades of the twentieth century signalled the sustained market for a more commercialised and lucrative format for the popular press, relying on a compressed physical presence matched by more

[50] David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Ian Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900–1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[51] R. W. Breach and R. M. Hartwell (eds.), *British Economy and Society, 1870–1970: Documents, Descriptions, Statistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 33–4.

[52] Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, pp. 177–9.

[53] Jeremy Morris, 'Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern Britain', *Historical Journal*, 55:1 (2012), pp. 195–219.

succinct reportage.[54] According to Stephen Koss, London had fourteen 'major metropolitan dailies', ranging from establishment papers like *The Times* to newer, cheaper and more popular titles like the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror*. These were supplemented by periodicals such as the right-wing *National Review*, Henry William Massingham's trenchantly critical Liberal weekly *The Nation,* and the Independent Labour Party's (ILP) *Labour Leader*. Provincial cities also featured several titles and local papers were far more concerned with politics than they are now. The Conservatives had been increasing their influence in the national and local press, but many newspapers in 1900 still followed the Liberal tradition. Politicians used the press to 'place' stories in order to gauge public opinion or to bring an issue into the open. The power of the press was encouraged and exploited by proprietors like Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Times* and *Daily Mail*, and Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Daily Express*, and by politicians eager to cultivate support.[55] The relationship between politicians and the newspapers which supported them were probably closer, and less critical, than today. Lloyd George, for instance, had links with several, such as the *Manchester Guardian* and the *News of the World*.[56]

Understanding Nationalism, Empire and War

The United Kingdom was therefore part of a world empire and the centre of a global economic system. It was an outward looking nation (or collection of nations); travel, trade and migration since the seventeenth century had led to a multitude of exchanges.[57] But what did it mean to be British, or perhaps more specifically, English at this time of wealth and global power? Ideas of national identity included self-satisfaction, superiority, progress, and jingoism. Popular patriotism and a sense of national consciousness were powerful and pervasive forces, which – at the war's outbreak in August 1914 – fuelled the country's rallying cries of 'honour', 'duty' and sense of moral righteousness.[58]

[54] Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820–2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 84.

[55] Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, vol. 2, The Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 1, 7. See also David Monger, 'Press/Journalism (Great Britain and Ireland)', in Ute Daniel et al. (eds.), *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10280.

[56] Charles More, *Britain in the Twentieth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007; 2014), p. 13.

[57] Dudley Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[58] Stevenson, *British Society,* p. 45. See also Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

As W. J. Reader has shown, patriotic ideas of national superiority had suffused popular entertainment, education, juvenile literature, the arts, and the press in the decades preceding the First World War. An entire generation had been brought up with a particular set of attitudes about war, a favourable view of the armed forces in British imperial life, a veneration of the monarchy, and a belief in the importance of the British Empire for the spread of civilisation across the globe.[59] The Great Exhibition, and later the Queen's jubilees, were genuinely popular festivals reflecting the centrality of the monarchy to British national identity – in heading the national family and overcoming internal social and geographical division – since at least the late nineteenth century.[60] Arguably, so was Empire Day – an invented tradition adopted in 1902 – dismissed by some historians as unpopular and un-British, but highlighted by others, like Jim English, as a celebration that upheld a belief in racial superiority and the righteousness of the British Empire in the pre-First World War period.[61]

Nonetheless, there were concerns that, by the end of the century, the United Kingdom was losing its place on the world stage – economically, politically, socially and even racially. Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Recessional', published on the front page of *The Times* on 17 July 1897, expressed a sober view at the time of Victoria's diamond jubilee by providing a reminder of the transient nature of British imperial power. While there was an attempt during the last quarter of the nineteenth century to stimulate imperial fervour (for example via Disraeli's declaration of Victoria as Empress of India in 1876), imperial policy remained a minority interest, little reported in the press and with parliamentary debates on the subject poorly attended. Contemporary Cambridge historian John Seeley quipped that it was as if the British had 'conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind'. The 1906 general election saw a decisive defeat for Joseph Chamberlain's vision of an imperial federation – underpinned by the Tariff Reform League – and so could be interpreted as proof of the political weakness of imperialism, as well as evidence of the faith in free trade. Debates over tariff reform had split the Conservative Party and its coalition allies in the Liberal Unionist Party, weakening their position against the Liberals who advocated free trade. In addition, Chamberlain was associated with the setbacks of the South African War. For others, the fact that the white colonies had been given increasing self-government since the 1840s provided evidence that British imperial dominance was waning.[62] The white dominions themselves showed little enthusiasm

[59] W. J. Reader, *At Duty's Call: A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
[60] Paul Ward, *Britishness dince 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[61] Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904–1958', *The Historical Journal*, 49:1 (2006), pp. 247–76.
[62] Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London: Penguin, 2015).

for an imperial federation at a time when they were seeking greater political and economic independence from the 'mother country'.[63] This is not to suggest that the British people were anti-imperial in the lead-up to the First World War. There were many personal connections to empire, particularly via the approximately 6 million 'transplanted' Britons who sought a better life abroad between 1871 and 1911, mainly in the dominion countries of Australasia and Canada.[64] Such links to the colonies created a more authentic feeling of solidarity between English society at home and the overseas British societies in the empire.[65] More accurately, according to Bernard Porter, the majority of Britons treated the 'project of empire' (as opposed to British people living across the empire) with ambivalence or apathy.[66] According to Robert Tombs, respectable workers despised soldiers and, though patriotic, their love of England stopped at Dover.[67]

National anxieties focused on the United Kingdom's ability to defend the empire or repel a foreign invasion. These came to a head during the South African War of 1899–1902. A sense of a disaster narrowly averted triggered a tremendous upsurge of interest in the military in Edwardian Britain. In 1901 the National Service League (N.S.L.) was founded to campaign for universal male conscription in peacetime. Led by prominent Conservatives, such as Lord Roberts, the League claimed 200,000 members by the outbreak of war.[68] Attempts to reform the army were fulfilled with the appointment of Richard Burdon Haldane as the Secretary of State for War in December 1905. Tasked with cutting the budget, Haldane reorganised the Volunteers into the Territorial Force, a 'citizen army' designed for home defence and as a way of heading off the N.S.L.'s call for conscription. It included the establishment of the Officers' Training Corps in universities and schools. Haldane also created the British Expeditionary Force which could be deployed quickly to take part in an overseas conflict.

Yet the consensus of opinion rejected conscription as a solution to the United Kingdom's military problems. Despite constant attempts to entice the working-classes the League never became a true mass movement. The Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party were consistently hostile to any form of conscription, and the League remained a middle- and upper-class

[63] Anthony Webster, *The Debate on the Rise of the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 41.
[64] Simmonds, *Britain and World War One,* p. 6.
[65] Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880–1932* (London: Longman, 2000), p. 187.
[66] Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[67] Tombs, *The English,* p. 588.
[68] Anne Summers, 'Militarism in Britain before the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 2 (1976), p. 106.

association. Support for conscription could not take root in Britain, a largely 'anti-militaristic' society that believed its island status necessitated a strong navy, reflected in the pre-war rate of taxation, not an army. The avoidance of conscription was a privilege paid for in cash.[69] Writers such as Norman Angell argued that militarism and expansionism did not offer any benefits because the increasingly pan-national system of economic markets made war an irrational act that would damage any combatant's 'great power' status.[70] Ideas made popular by the Manchester School of liberal economics, led by Richard Cobden and John Bright, won a wide hearing based on the argument that free trade would lead to a more equitable and peaceful society.

Overall, popular militarism had its limits. The Territorial Force in 1914 was way below its recruiting target and declining. While the Volunteer movement had played an important role in the social and recreational life of the country – and hundreds of thousands participated, as spectators or competitors, in rifle shooting contests, 'sham fights' and military reviews – it is better understood as 'the spectator sport of mid-Victorian Britain.'[71] Along with organisations like the Boy Scouts, these activities were a symptom of increasing leisure time, and one to be aligned with sport as attempts to regulate working class communities, rather than as evidence of popular militarism in British pre-war society. The most recent conflict Britain had been engaged in – the South African War – had caused a good deal of controversy, costing three times more than the Crimean War and using four times as many troops.[72] People had watched their loved ones depart, to die abroad or to return home wounded. Public and political opposition amongst Radical Liberals had arisen over government policies during the war, including the use of concentration camps for Boer families and prisoners. David Lloyd George was a vocal, if lonely, critic of the aims, direction and management of the conflict.[73]

Developments in war had also led to attempts at its regulation. Like most Europeans, the British people imagined themselves at the crest of a constantly advancing civilization greater than any the world had known. One aspect of civilisation was a conscious turning away from war.[74] War now came to be understood as a moral phenomenon and one in which ethical considerations

[69] Strachan, *Financing the First World War*, p. 68.
[70] Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (London: Heinemann, 1910).
[71] Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History, 1859–1908* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), pp. 33, 46, 49–50, 68.
[72] Iain Smith, *The Origins of the South African War, 1899–1902* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 1.
[73] Travis L. Crosby, *The Unknown Lloyd George: A Statesman in Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), p. xi.
[74] Tombs, *The English*, p. 595.

were of major importance.[75] The Hague Conventions were negotiated at the First and Second Peace Conferences in 1899 and 1907 respectively and, along with the Geneva Conventions, were among the first formal statements of the laws of war and war crimes. There was an understanding that war could either be prevented through pacific settlement or, if it did break out, be regulated to protect the innocent.

In 1914 there had been 'no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what [modern] war was like. All imagined that it would be an affair of great marches and great battles quickly decided'.[76] The Balkan Wars of 1912–13 introduced the idea of modern warfare encompassing mass armies, machines, high casualties, atrocities and entire civilian populations. Yet although they shocked contemporary opinion, they also seemed remote.[77] Some people believed that the major battles of the next war would be at sea, and they placed their faith in the unquestioned dominance of Britain's navy. Anyone who did contemplate a large land battle thought of it in Napoleonic terms: decisive battles, admittedly bloody, but brief.

Conclusion

The United Kingdom, on the eve of the First World War, faced a number of serious challenges. Politically, it was arguably one of the most divided of all the great powers, facing threats from Labour, the women's suffrage movement and Ireland – even before what hindsight has led us to call the July Crisis was added to the maelstrom. The question of how deep these divisions ran is of less importance than how serious they were perceived to be by contemporaries and, in particular, by the decision-makers of the time. As Adrian Gregory and I have highlighted, what is of interest is less the reasons why Britain finally entered the war (which will perhaps never cease to be debated) but *how* a country apparently so divided was able in the final resort to unite and to produce so quickly its own *union sacrée* on 4 August 1914.[78] While other European belligerents, such as France and Germany, saw a similar process of domestic division and discontent suspended for the greater good of the national cause once war was declared, the United Kingdom was unique in

[75] John Gooch, 'Attitudes to War in Late Victorian and Edwardian England', in B. Bond and I. Roy (eds.), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 93.

[76] A. J. P. Taylor quoted in Stevenson, *British Society*, p. 49.

[77] Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[78] Keiger, 'Britain's "Union Sacrée" in 1914', p. 39; Pennell, *A Kingdom United*; Adrian Gregory, 'British "War Enthusiasm" in 1914: A Reassessment', in Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–1918* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), pp. 67–85.

the way it faced the onset of civil war on its doorstep in the pre-war years.[79] Perhaps, then, a more profitable comparison can be made between the UK and the Austro-Hungarian Empire; a multi-national entity whose differences were exacerbated and stretched to the limit by the experience of war.

The economic and societal landscape was also complex. The head start in industrialisation enabled many British citizens to enjoy a high standard of living; by the mid-nineteenth century Britain was also predominant in the world economy. Thereafter, its relative lead slowed, particularly in comparison to other industrialising economies by 1914. The importance of industry and services had risen at the expense of agriculture. Industrialisation had set in motion enormous social changes, which reverberated through British industrial society.[80]

Socially, the British were now a nation of town-dwellers. There were substantial economic inequalities in society, although these did not emerge from the process of industrialisation alone. After 1900, these inequalities were to some extent mitigated by a greater concern for the less well-off, but the majority of the population were vulnerable to economic fluctuations and had few resources in the event of hardship. According to A. J. P. Taylor, before the war 'a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state beyond the post office and the policeman'. Broadly speaking, the state acted only to help those who could not help themselves. The war would change all that, relying on the active participation – sometimes volunteered, sometimes coerced – of its citizens to serve the state in the pursuit of the national cause of victory over Germany. The history of the state and the people of the UK merged for the first time and the combination, while relaxed when peace returned, would never be removed entirely (and was ramped up again during the Second World War).[81]

The international position of Britain, although still dominant, was being challenged. Its imperial position, while not insignificant, was potentially diluted by ambivalence at home and early calls for independence abroad. The demands placed on the colonies during the war would serve to further complicate this relationship. The rise of other industrial exporters, and the lagging rate of growth in British efficiency, meant that the British position was bound to be further eroded. However, there was nothing inevitable about this

[79] Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914: Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977); John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jeffery Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[80] Dewey, *War and Progress*, p. 21.

[81] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 1–2.

process, and the rate of decline was gradual and long-term; 'there was no reason to suspect before 1914 that it would be an abrupt one'.[82] Britain's geo-political and economic position in the world meant its national interests were best protected by the maintenance of peace in Europe. According to Peter Dewey, the worst event would be the outbreak of a major war, which would disrupt Britain's trade and force it to diversify into military production while its competitors took advantage in former British markets. This is precisely what happened after August 1914.[83]

[82] Dewey, *War and Progress,* p. 21.
[83] Ibid.

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