The Great War
Reflections on the centenary

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Editorial

The war to end all wars

In August this year, the British will solemnly remember the start of the First World War, the war which brought Britain’s century as the world’s perhaps foremost great power to an end. It was the war in which the horrors of industrial age warfare shattered the strong nineteenth-century belief in human progress, and brought many to think that European civilisation was no more. Yet it was also the war which rendered the endless Victorian discussions about who were “respectable” enough to be given the vote a mere embarrassment, and the war which gave hopes for a new beginning for society as a whole.

The watershed nature of this gigantic conflict can thus be seen in many different ways. But in the popular imagination in most countries today, it is the war which followed some twenty years later that attracts the greater attention. From 1939 to 1945 it was proven beyond doubt that “the war to end all wars” twenty-five years earlier had tragically failed to do so, pulling Europe even closer to the abyss than what had been seen in 1914 to 1918.

As Bernt Hagtvet argues on the pages below, however, the First World War retains its special status as the Great War in Britain and in France. For both countries, casualties were much higher than during the Second World War. But where the French remember WW1 as the great struggle for the nation (while WW2 remains a humiliating and embarrassing experience), it is over WW1 the great question mark hangs for the British. It was clearly not the “finest hour” of WW2, but how should WW1 be remembered? The British Education Secretary Michael Gove’s recent statements on the War – and the debate they provoked – seem to suggest that the British still find it difficult to get to terms with their role in the War. The article by Steven Powell below reflects upon precisely this point by looking at how satirical accounts of the Second World War have had much more leeway than those dealing with the First.

This issue of British Politics Review addresses the centenary of the Great War from multiple perspectives. A particular emphasis is placed upon the naval war, which is arguably where the War had the greatest impact on neutral Norway. Bernard Ireland analyses the performance of the Royal Navy, Britain’s “first service” and bulwark against invasion, while Geir Hasle demonstrates the dramatic effect the Battle of Jutland had for coastal communities of Norway. Patrick Salmond addresses the more general impact of the war on the neutral Scandinavian countries, a topic which is also addressed by Torunn Skjærstad. Finally, one of the essential domestic consequences of the War, was the downfall of the Liberal Party in Britain. It is analysed in the final pages of the Review by Matthew Johnson.

Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold (editors)

Contents

The First World War - systemic failure or sleepwalking into the abyss? 
Bernt Hagtvet pp. 3-5

Scandinavia and the First World War 
Patrick Salmond pp. 6-8

Died in the North Sea, buried in Norway 
Geir Hasle pp. 9-11

Norway - the neutral ally 
Torunn Skjærstad pp. 12-13

How did the Royal Navy fare in the First World War? 
Bernard Ireland pp. 14-16

The Great War’s culture war 
Steven Powell pp. 17-18

The Great War and the collapse of the Liberal Party 
Matthew Johnson pp. 19-20
The First World War – systemic failure or sleepwalking into the abyss?

We all know Lord Kitchener’s recruitment poster from 1914. Framed by a uniform cap and a notoriously rich moustache, his finger pointing imperiously at the viewer: “Your country needs you!” His call was heeded upon: more than 250,000 volunteered prior to conscription being introduced in 1916.

In early 2014, the iconic poster reappeared in British newspapers, but with a different twist. The caricature portrayed a slightly modernized Lord Kitchener pointing his finger at the Germans, stating: “You Started the War, Fritz, and You Damn Well Never Forget!”

The image is a fitting point of departure to delve into the debates about the causes of 1914 among the war’s protagonists. Before the centennial anniversary is solemnly marked in August this year, questions have been raised in both Britain and Germany about whether old enmities and stereotypes will return to the surface. The fear is that the mechanisms of hatred that generated Europe’s civil war will be visible yet again, if in a subtler form.

Michael Gove, the British Education Secretary, has contributed his share to supplying the anniversary with an awkward political edge. In January he raised his head from the trenches to state that time had come to end the belittling of Britain through satirical portrayals of the war. Films and plays like Oh, What a Lovely War and Blackadder convey an impression of wayward generals ordering tens of thousands to perish in the war, with no ability to acknowledge neither the horrors of war nor the many fatal strategic mistakes for which they were responsible. General Haig, to refer one example, put his faith in the cavalry and contended that the air force would play no major role in modern warfare.

Gove was rapidly countered by Labour’s Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt, whose message was that the anniversary should be a moment for national reflection and commemoration rather than a playground for political interpretations. From Cambridge University, the view of Professor Richard J. Evans was that the propagation of inaccurate myths is an unhealthy way of nurturing a national identity.

To contest these national representations, there is also the view that 1914 first and foremost demonstrated the bloody nature of nation-state rivalry. As such, it generated European integration as a necessary outcome, a peace-building project to which the abyss was the only alternative.

History is alive and present in 2014, and there is no shortage of source material to build rival interpretations on. An interesting facet of the German coverage is the approach to the First World War as a global conflict, reflected in a well-researched article series by Der Spiegel. In Britain, BBC alone will screen more than 2,500 hours of First World War coverage in the course of the year. It is accompanied by special issues of numerous newspapers and magazines.
In the massive set of books published to mark the anniversary, certain scholarly contributions have been subject to particular attention. That is clearly the case with Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Margaret MacMillan’s *The War that Ended Peace*, Max Hastings’ *Catastrophe 1914: Europe goes to War* and Mark Postridge’s *The Fateful Year: 1914*. The latter highlights how sudden the war broke out and how surprising it appeared in scale and consequence to its contemporaries. Britain was engulfed by domestic politics – the Irish question and institutional reform – and the war came as a terrible surprise.

Hastings has received much attention for his line of argument of why Britain was morally obliged to enter war with Germany in 1914. Following the German attack on Belgium, a neutral state, Britain could not remain pacific in the face of militant expansionism on the part of Germany. “Preussianism”, believed by some to be endemic to the German imperial state, had to be fought and defeated.

Hastings’ argument is a revised and updated version of the German historian Fritz Fischer’s classic *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961). Here, Fischer claims to have evidence from the sources that the German government harboured expansionist aims with the war which were largely correspondent to what Hitler presented twenty-five years later. A corollary of this argument is the hypothesis that had Lord Grey been more forceful in ensuring British support for Belgium, Kaiser Wilhelm II would not have dared starting the fateful domino game by invading. Other sources however suggest that the opposition within the German cabinet was far greater than the perception of crude German expansionism suggests.

Three topics recur in this enormous literature. First and foremost the classical one: who holds the primary responsibility for the bloodletting? I think it is fair to conclude by now that attaching the blame solely to Germany is misleading.

Yes, Bismarckian militarism was considered important. And the German military leadership was more autonomous from political (let alone democratic) accountability than was the case in Britain and France.

But militarism and the desire to settle old scores were present in all the belligerent countries. Russia and Austria-Hungary longed to see Serbia set in its proper place. Clark seeks to upgrade the responsibility attached to Serbia; but the German carte blanche to Vienna with regard to the Balkans is also a strong candidate as chief culprit. Paranoia was on the rise in St. Petersburg; the Russian desire to see the Ottoman Empire implode is part of the explanation why the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo led to such dire consequences.

We also now know that the British government was just as concerned about its ostensible ally Russia as its enemy Germany. France harboured an intense desire to see Alsace-Lorraine back on French hands. Britain wanted a balance of powers on the continent, in line with tradition, but was driven from pragmatism to a more ideological war against Germany, fortified by allegations of German attacks on civilians.

Propaganda ensured that enmity once established was embedded. Germany wanted the war completed before Russia became too mighty, repeating its fear of being “encircled” and trapped. Many intellectuals perceived through the fog of War the greatness that could put an end to the pettiness and triviality of liberal democracy. Even as rational a man as Sigmund Freud claimed that he could finally be proud of being Austrian. Mass hysteria took hold. One of the most fitting illustrations of what was to emerge from all this is the photo from Vienna of a young, enthusiastic Hitler receiving the news of the outbreak of the war.

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Behind this wave of new publications Hew Strachan’s multi-volume work *The First World War* still resides. Strachan set as his aim to write the books to end all books about the war – or, more to the point, to write the authoritative account that others would be grounded in. On that ambition he has, not surprisingly, failed.
Were we to draw a general conclusion from the massive literature, it would be that it is no longer sufficient to blame the system – railway tables, mobilisation plans, promises to honour alliances. What we are dealing with is a set of decision makers driven by aggression, prejudice and ignorance. The summer of 2014 had plenty of opportunity for withdrawal.

Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, claimed that everyone involved in the fateful decisions leading to the war were affected by forces which they could not contemplate; they were sleepwalkers. They did not know what they were setting in train. Had they known, they would have turned around and returned from the edge of the abyss.

The fact that we do not even have a universally agreed number of casualties from the war says a lot about its horrific and unique nature. I have seen numbers ranging from 8 to 37 million dead or wounded in the bloodshed of 1914 to 1918. Eight million soldiers were enlisted only in France, of whom one and a half million did not return. Death tolls from the battle of the Somme, on 1 July 1916, range from 20,000 to 60,000. On one day. In the battles of the Maas and Somme together, British casualties reached more than double the death toll of the Second World War. Belgian casualties were three times as high, the French four times.

Finally, note the differences in how the centennial anniversary is observed. Prime Minister David Cameron has said that he will ensure that every British pupil be given the opportunity to visit the Flemish battlefields. That would have been impossible in Germany given its pacifist political culture. In Germany, moreover, the First World War holds relatively less emotional significance. It is overshadowed by the Second World War, by the Holocaust, by the total war with the Soviet Union and the complete submission in 1945.

In France, the First World War arguably fed into national myths in its own particular way. While the Second World War is first and foremost a dismal memory, the suffering of the First War is seen in a different light. On 17 March 2008 the last surviving soldier from the war was buried. His name was Laware Ponticelli, he was 110 years old and had volunteered as an Italian immigrant at the time. He was accompanied to his final resting place by two former presidents and the entire military and administrative elite. Ponticelli symbolised the sacrifice and the love of the fatherland in which “la grande guerre” was rooted. More broadly, he was seen to symbolise the guiding principles of French republicanism, the spirit of 1789.

Worth observing in the memorial literature currently on display is the tendency to draw parallels to the present age. Many contributors contend that nationalism has returned with its destructive powers intact. Relations between the great powers evoke those of 1914, it is said, with a weak hegemon – the United States – challenged by a rising power – China, much like Britain was faced by Germany in 1914. In both cases, a declining regional power clung to the skirts of its ally and protector; France in 1914, Japan today. The fight over territorial possessions – often symbolically laden – was present then, as it is today.

In 1914 the war was triggered by terrorists from a secret organization, “The Black Hand” in which the gunman from Sarajevo, Gavilo Princip, took part. Let us take heed to avoid that another secret terrorist organisation, Al Qaeda, takes a similar role as the centennial anniversary arrives.

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For many Scandinavians, and for Norwegians in particular, 1914 was a year of commemoration and celebration. A hundred years earlier Norwegians had established a democratic constitution at Eidsvoll, and had fought a war with Sweden that ensured that Norway would be treated not as a conquered province but as an equal partner (formally at least) in a union of two independent states which lasted until 1905.

An exhibition celebrating the centenary of the Eidsvoll constitution opened at Frogner Park in Kristiania on 1 May 1914 and attracted nearly three million visitors before it closed in the autumn. On 16 August, almost a hundred years to the day since the signing of the Convention of Moss, a gathering of 12,000 people witnessed the inauguration of a large peace monument on the border between Magnor in Norway and Charlottenberg in Sweden. There had been some discussion whether the ceremony should be postponed following the outbreak of the European war, but eventually it was decided to go ahead, not just to mark a century of Nordic peace but also as a protest against the war.

In August 1914 few Europeans had any comprehension of what such a war would be like, but Scandinavians could be reasonably sure that they would not be a part of it. Recent international agreements – the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Declaration of London of 1909 – had inaugurated an era that seemed to promise unprecedented respect for neutral rights in wartime. These had been buttressed by the joint neutrality regulations agreed by Norway, Sweden and Denmark in 1912. Scandinavia would therefore be left undisturbed to trade profitably with the belligerents.

To a large extent such expectations were justified. The three Scandinavian states managed to remain neutral throughout the First World War and in many respects the first two years of the war were success stories from the Scandinavian point of view. For Norway these were “halcyon years – jobbetiden – a time when ship-owners and merchants made vast profits and spent them prodigally; and much the same could have been said of Danish farmers or Swedish timber exporters.

Yet this was far from the whole story. Remote from the battlefields, the three Scandinavian countries found themselves on the front line of the economic confrontation between the Entente and the Central Powers. The scene was set for the bitter second half of the war: the hardship resulting from increasingly draconian Allied blockade measures, German U-boat attacks on neutral shipping, and a political polarisation that radicalised the working classes in all three countries and contributed to a decade of political instability after the war.

In the decade leading up to the war German, Russian and British naval and army officers had intermittently discussed the possibility of naval or military operations in Scandinavia, and some hints of these discussions had reached Scandinavian ears. There had been German overtures to the Danish general staff in 1906-8 and to the chief of the Swedish general staff in 1909-10. Units of the High Seas Fleet had accompanied the Kaiser on his annual visits to the Norwegian fjords; British naval and military planners had considered a Baltic offensive involving a military expedition to the Danish island of Zealand as well as the occupation of a number of bases on Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian territory.

Meanwhile the Russians had built strategic railways in Finland and subjected the population to a policy of forced Russification. All of these schemes were motivated less by aggressive intentions than by fear of what their opponents might do in a future war. Yet the first days of the war in 1914 were still tense, and any miscalculation might have tipped the balance in favour of Scandinavian entanglement.

Almost as soon as the war began, the belligerents started to probe Scandinavian defences. A squadron of thirty British vessels entered Norwegian waters on 7 August, stopping Norwegian vessels and seeking German ships thought to be hiding among the offshore islands. That evening several Norwegian warships were sent to the area. An official Norwegian protest was made the following day, leading a week later to a full apology.

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On 9 August (in an incident that fortunately remained unknown until after the war), a Russian fleet under Admiral von Essen left Kronstadt on course for the Swedish island of Gotland, on the basis of a false report that a Swedish fleet was there, ready to join forces with the Germans. He was ordered to turn back only at the last minute.

It was fortunate that the belligerents soon turned their attention elsewhere. For in these circumstances diplomacy could do little to influence the fate of the Scandinavian states. What could they say to the European great powers, and why should those powers bother to listen? The best they could do was to issue statements. The joint neutrality declaration issued by Sweden and Norway on 8 August 1914 affirmed their resolve to stay out of the war and ‘to exclude the possibility that the state of war in Europe in any circumstances shall lead to one Kingdom taking hostile measures against the other.’ In the context of the strained relations between the two countries since 1905 this statement had symbolic importance, but it had no practical effect.

In fact the war was to demonstrate the limited scope for effective Scandinavian cooperation in the face of growing belligerent pressures. In the nineteenth century pan-Scandinavianism had been an attractive doctrine for kings and intellectuals, but had failed when put to the test in 1848–9 and 1864. Would the outbreak of war in 1914 encourage Scandinavians to reconcile their differences? And would the belligerents welcome such a development or try to thwart it? In practice Scandinavian cooperation amounted to little more than further joint declarations – frequently watered down by one or other of the signatories – and occasional symbolic gatherings. While Scandinavia remained insulated from direct involvement in hostilities, it was increasingly exposed to economic pressures from the belligerents. These resulted mainly from the changing nature of warfare at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Royal Navy was still the most powerful in the world, but modern technology and Germany’s strong defensive position (strengthened further in the first days of war when Denmark accepted the German demand that it should lay mines in the entrances to the Baltic) meant that it could no longer risk a close blockade of German ports. Instead the British would impose a ‘distant blockade’ of the approaches to Germany between the Shetlands and the Norwegian coast, and between the French and British shores of the English Channel.

The blockade of Germany would therefore be effective only if the neutral countries bordering on Germany were blockaded as well. In other words, they would have to be rationed in such a way that they received the supplies they needed to survive, while ensuring that there was no surplus left for export to Germany.

From the autumn of 1914 onwards the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Norway were all brought into the British machinery of economic warfare. Sometimes the British did deals with neutral businessmen, as they did with Dutch merchants and in Norway, where the first of the so-called Branch Agreements with groups of Norwegian traders or manufacturers were concluded in April 1915.
Increasingly, however, they had to negotiate with governments—and Scandinavian governments for their part had to acquire new powers to command the economy. War trade agreements were concluded with Sweden in December 1914 and Denmark in January 1915. Both were able to secure significant concessions from Great Britain: Denmark because it was vulnerable to German pressure, Sweden because it was more economically self-sufficient, controlled the main route by which supplies reached Russia from the west and – not least – because there seemed a real risk of Swedish intervention on the side of the Central Powers.

These favourable conditions did not last long. In 1915-16 the British intensified their control of Scandinavian trade, culminating in the coal embargo imposed on Norway in the harsh winter of 1917, while in 1916-17 they abandoned their cautious approach to Sweden in favour of a draconian blockade which, together with the entry of the United States into the war and the collapse of the Russian war effort, imposed severe hardship on the Swedish people before their government finally reached an agreement with the Allies in May 1918. Only the Danes succeeded in moderating British pressure, mainly because the British realised that too much pressure might drive them into the German orbit.

As the British controls tightened Germany resorted to another technological innovation—the submarine—in its attempt to impose a counter-blockade of the British Isles. Again the Scandinavian countries found themselves in the front line. Germany first proclaimed a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare on 4 February 1915. There were too few U-boats to make the threat an effective deterrent to trade with the United Kingdom, and the policy was soon modified in response to neutral objections. Nevertheless, the German decision marked a new ruthlessness in the waging of war at sea. A further intensification was marked by a submarine campaign off the coast of North Norway, in retaliation for the British-Norwegian shipping agreement of August 1916, when eleven small ships were sunk in eight days, some members of their crews dying of exposure in the cold waters of the Arctic Sea. Finally came the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917, intended to starve Britain into surrender before America’s entry into the war shifted the balance decisively in favour of the Entente. For Britain, the danger was real enough: in April 1917, 25 per cent of the ships leaving British ports failed to return. For Norway the ultimate outcome of the U-boat war was the loss of one half of its merchant fleet and the lives of 2,000 merchant seamen.

The pressures exerted by Britain and Germany in their efforts to control the transit trade through the northern neutrals therefore divided Scandinavian societies and undermined Scandinavian solidarity. While Norway was bullied into becoming Britain’s ‘neutral ally’, Sweden provoked Allied reprisals for maintaining its pro-German stance and paid a high price for its ultimate status as ‘neutral victor’. Denmark, meanwhile, turned its weakness into an asset and maintained a precarious but remarkably successful balance between the two belligerent camps.”

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The submarine war. Small German mine sweeper used in The First World War.

Source: the Digital History Project - digitalhistoryproject.com
Died in the North Sea, buried in Norway
By Geir Hasle

If a well-educated Briton is presented with the question: *what was the Battle of Jutland?* there is a good chance he will answer that it was a major naval battle in the North Sea during the First World War, and perhaps also that the Royal Navy defeated the German navy of Kaiser Wilhelm. If you ask a well-educated Norwegian, however, it is more likely that you will draw a blank.

The reason for this ignorance among Norwegians is probably quite straightforward. Norway, just as the other Scandinavian countries, remained neutral throughout the war, and the great clash in the North Sea soon disappeared from their collective memory.

In 1916, however, all Norwegians knew what had happened out there at sea on 31 May and 1 June. 250 German and British warships had met in the greatest sea battle of all time. 25 of them had been sunk, and more than 8600 sailors never returned home. At a stroke, the war had moved much closer to home for the Norwegians.

Once the din of battle had died down, it was clear what was to come. With losses of such a magnitude on both sides so close to the Norwegian coastline, it was simply a matter of time before fishermen, the coastal navy and the population on the southern Norwegian coast would have to face the inevitable consequence of war: dead bodies. The question was just how many would reach the coast of Norway.

Most of those who died in the battle went down with their ships. Those who did not were taken by underwater currents, carried through the Skagerrak, and dispersed across the North Sea. In the weeks after the battle, dead sailors floated by their hundreds in a north-easterly direction, and the harrowing job of lifting them out of the water fell on Norwegians, Swedes and Danes. In Norway, the grim task of collecting the corpses was given to the coastal defence navy, but it often happened that fishermen not only reported of, but themselves brought dead sailors ashore. In the report of the Norwegian Admiralty from 1916, this particular kind of work was categorised as the "Salvaging of dead bodies", and all together 160 dead sailors were taken out of the water and brought ashore. The report told stories of strongly decomposed bodies which, after an inquest, were buried in the nearest churchyard under full military honours, though there were exceptions. Some of the corpses were so damaged that the captain of the vessel which found them deemed it better to bury them at sea.

Not all sailors were dead when they fell in the water, but few stood much chance of survival. Mouthfuls of seawater led to rapid dehydration, but worse was the hypothermia which set in very quickly. The seawater temperature in the Skagerrak was unusually low for the time of year in June 1916, with an average temperature of around 12°C and, under such circumstances, one could not expect to survive for much longer than about three hours. The fact that many of the sailors would have been injured when they fell in the water and most certainly in shock, did not improve their chances of survival either.

For reasons we can imagine, it was a deeply disturbing sight which met those whose job it was to salvage the dead sailors. The corpses were dark and discoloured, and it was not uncommon for whole pieces of flesh to fall off when they were hauled on board the ships. Hair and nails were usually gone, and many were otherwise deformed, or had lost limbs.

The first reports of floating dead bodies appeared in the press just over a week after the battle itself. On 9 June, the newspaper *Fredriksstad Blad* reported of a fisherman who had observed eight dead sailors and a considerable amount of wreckage off the north of Jutland. In the same issue was also a report on the steamer *Wanda* which had just arrived at Gävle in Sweden with a cargo of coal from England. The crew members gave accounts of the macabre sight which had greeted them. They had sailed through thick layers of oil, and passed clusters of dead fish and human corpses. The captain had had to alter the ship’s course several times to avoid running into them. Most of the dead sailors had lifebelts on, and their heads and shoulders had been visible above the water. It was a horrifying spectacle to behold; the crew-members of the *Wanda* would later narrate. For five long hours the ship had no one on board had been able to sleep the following night.

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The captain of a Danish ship who was interviewed by a newspaper could report a particularly chilling episode. They had passed more than ten dead sailors in the water, British and German, and one of the Germans was an officer wearing white gloves. As the seaway moved his upright body up and down in the water, it seemed as if he was waiving to them. This was spooky, even for a seasoned Danish seaman.

Facing the dead bodies had a similar effect on the men enlisted in the coastal defence navy, and after repeated newspaper reports of Norwegian sailors who could neither eat nor sleep, the commander of the Hvaler-contingent of the coastal defence felt the need to issue an official statement. His men were in good shape, he insisted, and were coping with the task as could be expected of them. It was clearly seen as necessary to dispel any impression of a collapse of morale among the men.

In the following weeks, dead sailors were a frequently recurring topic in the local press. Headlines such as “Dead bodies on the way”, and “Corpses seen in Stromstad, soon they will be here” were commonplace. Fishermen and other people in the coastal towns of Norway now reported dead sailors being found all along the southern coast. At Lindesnes, for example, a total of 20 corpses drifted ashore, and many of them were beyond any possibility of identification. The dead sailors who were brought ashore were buried in a number of Norwegian towns from Fredrikstad to Farsund, and one might reasonably argue that they received a more dignified end than most of those who fell at Verdun, the Somme, Ypres or any of the other slaughter houses on the continent. In the whole of Scandinavia, the dead sailors were buried quickly, systematically and in a dignified manner. The same could hardly be said for those who were left rotting in the “no man’s land” of the Western Front.

In the wake of the battle, the belligerents were not particularly concerned about the dead bodies which drifted ashore in Scandinavia, however. The guns had hardly fallen silent before the German propaganda machine fired new salvoes. A historic German victory over the superior British navy was proclaimed, and victory-scenes erupted on the streets of Germany. Within a few days the whole world was convinced that the Royal Navy had been decisively beaten, and on 5 June the Kaiser himself went to the main fleet base at Wilhelmshaven to address his sailors. Overcome by emotion he exclaimed that “the curse of Trafalgar has been broken, and the navy of Nelson forced to flee”.

On the British side, by contrast, naval minister Arthur Balfour gave a surprisingly honest account of the battle, and made no attempt to hide the scale of the British losses. In his eagerness to give an accurate account to a news-thirsty British public, however, he completely forgot to mention that the Royal Navy still commanded the North Sea – as well as most other oceans – and that the Germans had fled for their lives. Some began to wonder how it could be that a “winner” had turned tail, and steamed back to his home port at full speed.

The German propaganda machine had clearly overplayed its hand, and would eventually have to be force-fed on the realities. It was true that British losses and casualties had been higher but, at least as far as warships were concerned, the British had many more of them to start with. Moreover, and most importantly, the British blockade of Germany had not been affected, and could continue as before. In the view of one American journalist, the German High Seas Fleet had “assaulted its jailer, but remained in jail”. In the long run, this was more important, and the British could rest assured that they had won a strategic first prize, despite greater losses of men and ships.

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The Battle of Jutland answered the main question concerning the war at sea, and the German fleet was never again a serious threat. British losses had been painful, but in terms of tonnage, they were soon replaced, and the relative strengths of the Royal Navy and the Kriegsmarine had not been altered. And while the Germans spent weeks and month licking their wounds, the British were fully operative again within a few days, breaking the waves as the undisputed masters of the seas.

By the time the German fleet had been repaired and declared ready for action again, the supreme commander of the fleet, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, had discarded any intention of challenging the Royal Navy. He had simply lost all enthusiasm for further operations using surface-ships, and concluded that to do so would be tantamount to suicide. The strategy the Germans had devised for the Kriegsmarine had proved unusable, and experience now told them that smaller tactical victories in the North Sea would not improve Germany’s strategic position. The country was geographically locked-up, and it’s fleet inferior. Moreover, Scheer had become convinced that even the most successful naval operation would not bring the enemy to negotiations, and concluded that the mighty battleships Germany had spent a fortune building “had been reduced to the blunt stock of the weapon whose sharp blade was the U-boat”. If Germany was to stand a chance, then the focus would have to be on using submarines to cut the vital supply-lines to Britain from across the ocean.

The Battle of Jutland also came to represent a turning-point in the war for the foreign policy adopted by the Norwegian government. Continued British control over the seaways, combined with a pro-British population, made it easier to turn ever more towards the west. More and more, Norway came to act, and be perceived as, a “neutral ally” of Great Britain and the USA. The Germans certainly took due notice of that.

Many Norwegian sailors’ wives had every reason to fear for the lives of their menfolk. All-in-all Norway lost over 2,000 sailors and 900 ships during the war. That amounted to about half the entire Norwegian merchant fleet, and meant that – proportionately speaking – Norway lost more ships than the belligerents themselves. In the first two years of the war the German attacks on shipping was dominated by gentlemanly practices. The crew on neutral vessels were allowed to enter their lifeboats before the ship was sunk and, if the attack was carried out by surface units in the German fleet, then the sailors would often be taken on board the German ships. All this came to an end with the Battle of Jutland. The German naval command gave up the use of surface ships, and instead stepped up the use of submarines, the U-boats, from September 1916. In January 1917, Germany declared a strategy of “unrestricted submarine warfare”. Any ship entering the waters around the British Isles would now been seen as a legitimate target, and sunk without warning. The gentlemanly approach had clearly come to an end.

For the Norwegian merchant marine the consequences were immediate and dramatic. In the second half of the war, Norwegian losses increased dramatically, so that, on average, 15 Norwegian vessels were lost per month. From the German side, however, the U-boat war was a last desperate attempt to force neutral countries to stop bringing vital supplies to Britain, in the hope that this would bring the enemy to his knees and, for a while, it seemed to be working. At one point in 1917, for example, the British had reserves of flour to last for six weeks’ consumption only. Yet, the German high-command had entered a high-risk game. The unrestricted submarine war challenged the – by then – neutral USA, and arguably played a major role in bringing the Americans into the war – on the side of the allies.

In way of conclusion therefore, the Battle of Jutland could be seen as a large-scale German attempt to break the British blockade, but it was an attempt which failed.
When war emerged from the spiraling confusion of 1914, few could envisage the scale it would take over the following four years. Prior to that year, moreover, few had expected war in any form. The inability to predict the war was highly present in Norway. In 1913, Prime Miniser Gunnar Knudsen considered it improbable that the world would ever go to war again. The optimism in Europe had everyone believe the world was moving forward to become a better place.

Four years later, the countries that left the war behind would each in their own way be dramatically changed. This applied to Norway as a non-belligerent as well. The 1814 centenary and the recent dissolution of the Union with Sweden had brought about great national pride and enthusiasm. However, the short history as a neutral state also meant limited experience in guiding the nation through dangerous waters. Norway simply lacked experience and knowledge as the war broke out in 1914. The natural reaction to war was therefore neutrality. Both Britain and Germany recognised that Norway would be of a greater importance as a neutral country, because of her economy and merchant fleet. Her neutrality would therefore be the best solution for all parts involved. This, however, would prove difficult.

The drama in which the Norwegian fleet took part during the Great War is without doubt an understudied topic in modern Norwegian history. Arguably, formal neutrality during the war has contributed to the limited interest in Norway’s role. But how should neutrality in this context be understood? In 1965 Olav Riste published The Neutral Ally: Norway's Relations with Belligerent Powers in the First World War. This term, neutral ally, has become a part of the terminology in which scholars and the general understanding have come to label Norway with regard to the Great War. Norway has often been portrayed as a faceless, pacifist state without military clout, minimising risk by sustaining neutrality while binding its fate, informally, to that of Britain.

The realisation hit Europe by January 1915 that this war would be different from anything the world had ever seen. Despite managing to keep out of the war itself, Norway was pulled into the economic warfare between Britain and Germany. Norwegian neutrality was challenged due to her merchant fleet.

At the outset of the Great War, almost all shipping lanes were immediately affected, and on 4 August almost no ships went to sea. During the first weeks of the war, ship owners were unsure of how the merchant fleet would be treated by the belligerent powers. Ship owners and merchant staff were very doubtful of the situation. Even though shipping activity was somewhat reduced at the start, it quickly returned to normal. Norway had a rather smooth relationship with both Britain and Germany in the first two years of the war, as few Norwegian lives or ships were lost at sea during this period.

In order to remain neutral, Norway had to protect her national interests without damaging relations with either of the two. Government foreign policy statements suggested a focus on maintaining imports of wheat, sugar and materials essentials for agriculture and the fish industry. Food and everyday supplies, such as soap, sugar and coal were deemed more imperative than industrial materials. However, imports were not initially controlled by Norway. The British government would present Norway with requirements and expectations and there was little Norway could do to stop Britain from getting her way. Britain would threaten to block essential merchandise or refuse to import essential Norwegian goods. Norway was not able to negotiate or put up counter claims as she was so dependent on British trade. Despite Norwegian neutrality policy, she did not wish to end up on the opposite side of Britain because of vital trade.
Britain’s neutrality laws allowed her to utilise the freedom of the seas and the neutral countries and their merchant fleet throughout the war. When Britain introduced the blockade of Germany, licenses had to be given to the neutral countries when importing or exporting goods from Britain. Given these licenses, clear guidelines had to be followed, which unmistakably favoured British interests. This gave Britain the opportunity of demanding more of the neutral states. Throughout the war, her demands would become harsher and licenses more difficult to get hold of. To retain the lucrative British fish exports, a fish agreement was signed on 5 August 1916. Britain secured 85% of Norwegian fish exports at fixed prices until the end of the war. The negotiations and the agreement were poorly managed by Norway. Germany was left out of the negotiations. When the deal was leaked, it caused exasperation in Germany. Norway favoured and caved in to British demands without negotiating or conversing with Germany. It strained German-Norwegian relations while strengthening the British-Norwegian relationship.

A second important agreement was concluded in August 1916, which cut Norway’s export of copper pyrites to Germany. The British claimed Norwegian copper pyrites was used to create German ammunition. Britain demanded the termination of this trade. The agreement faced difficulties because of opposing views regarding the percentage of copper in other merchandise allowed to cross the ocean. As a result, the Rio-Tinto agreement was concluded. Rio-Tinto was a British-Spanish company that would control and watch the copper pyrites export from Norway and make sure none of it went to Germany. Again, there was little Norway was could do to prevent Britain from damaging Norwegian trade with Germany.

The two agreements that were signed by late 1916 had little effect on Norwegian everyday life. Two incidents in 1917 however dramatically changed the course of events. In early January 1917 Norwegian newspapers were outraged by a rumour that Britain would no longer ship coal to Norway. The temperature in Oslo averaged 15 degrees below zero in January 1917, and without British coal, lives would be in danger due to the cold. London had the dominant position in the coal market and it extracted high prices and favourable tonnage agreement with Scandinavia and Norway in particular. Again, Norway was in the middle between the conflicting demands of the belligerent powers. Norway simply needed British coal and had little say in the negotiations. However, because Norway accepted British demands, she violated her neutrality. Foreign minister Nils Claus Ihlen botched the situation when he failed to inform Germany about the agreement. Again, German – Norwegian relations were off balance.

Together, the Fish agreement, the Rio-Tinto agreement and the threatened coal embargo changed Norwegian neutrality. Norway was no longer outside the war. She was indeed a neutral who favoured allied policies. The war was also brought home as 1,162 Norwegians sailors were killed and 943 disappeared at sea. The North Sea saw numerous torpedo incidents, not just of Norwegian ships, as international cargo was hit as well. Ship wreckage, mines and human body parts emerged on the beaches on the coasts of Norway. The Great War was not just a war in mainland Europe, but it was a part of everyday life in Norway too.

What then, is a neutral country supposed to do? Norway was intensely trying to maintain her neutrality without angering the belligerent powers. The Norwegian political and commercial actors wished to protect and promote their interests and needs. Neutrality is a complex and difficult issue at times of war, but the term “neutral ally” is somewhat misleading. Norway was a neutral state intimidated by Great Britain, forced to accept terms and conditions violating neutrality in order to survive. Norwegian lack of experience regarding foreign policies certainly played its role, as the government could have informed and communicated with Germany more systematically. However, the balancing act of being a neutral ally was less a choice than a necessity. It was a policy that was rightly controversial but succeeded in keeping the country out of war. In strictly financial terms (and despite the loss of men and tonnage), the Norwegian Merchant fleet has rarely seen such a golden age as in the years from 1914 to 1918.
How did the Royal Navy fare in the First World War?

By Bernard Ireland

In considering the activities of the Royal Navy, 1914-18, it should be remembered that the service had been involved in no major maritime war for a century, a century of unprecedented change and technological development. Without the stern test of conflict, the Navy could not be certain if its basic organisation was sound, whether its planned strategy was correct, or even if it comprised the correct types and numbers of ship.

Only with the 1889 Naval Defence Act had the ‘museum of experiment’ begun to make way for homogeneous classes of warship. This process was ruthlessly pursued from the turn of the century by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John (‘Jacky’) Fisher who, convinced of the inevitability of war with Germany, axed all obsolete tonnage (‘that could neither fight nor flee’) and brought home all useful warships from distant stations. This was in response to Admiral Tirpitz’ boast that the battle fleet that he was creating for Kaiser Wilhelm II was designed to realise its full potential ‘between Heligoland and the Thames’.

The Navy had immense confidence – perhaps over-confidence – in its own abilities, confidence based upon centuries of warfare against the foremost sea powers of their day, followed by 100 years of ‘Pax Britannica’, during which its authority was absolute and rarely challenged. In contrast, the German fleet appeared to have little basis in national necessity, to have been created for political reasons, and to possess no real tradition. The quality of German ship design and construction, and the training, bearing and enthusiasm of personnel were never, however, in doubt.

The core of the Royal Navy’s strength was vested in its battle fleet, known as the Grand Fleet. Just 48 hours before the signal for hostilities, the Admiralty boldly appointed the 52-year-old Admiral Sir John Jellicoe to its command. He defined his priorities as:

1. Safeguarding the British merchant marine and its essential sea lanes;
2. Weakening the enemy by exerting powerful pressure on his economy;
3. Transporting armies and supporting them in expeditionary warfare, and
4. Preventing the invasion of Great Britain or its overseas dominions by enemy forces.

The order in which he puts them is, in itself, interesting and we will briefly examine each priority in turn.

First – the protection of British trade. On 1 July 1914 this required 8,587 steamers and 653 sailing vessels, aggregating some 19,250,000 gross registered tons (grt) and comprising about 43 per cent of the world fleet. By far the greater proportion of food consumption was imported, making Britain vulnerable to starvation by guerre de course.

The nation earned its living by importing raw materials and exporting finished goods. As an island, she conducted trade by sea. By any yardstick, her merchant marine was of paramount importance.

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The German discovered that disguised armed merchantmen (Hilfskreuzer) were far more effective for cruiser warfare.

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Neither Britain nor Germany had, in 1914, appreciated the potential of the submarine as a commerce destroyer, the British Admiralty having prepared for conventional cruiser warfare. Although justifiably taken seriously, the few enemy cruisers thus employed proved no more than a fleeting embarrassment.

To operate effectively against commerce, submarines were obliged to ignore international maritime law (the ‘Prize Rules’), requiring stop-and-search and the safeguard of crews and passengers. Perhaps there was a measure of British naivety in believing that the enemy would observe the rules. He didn’t.

Technically, the submarine had a huge advantage in that, once submerged, it was virtually undetectable, and that no effective underwater weapon existed. (The depth charge was both simple and effective but of little practical use without sonic echo-ranging (Asdic/Sonar) that, even by 1918, was still experimental.)
German U-boat warfare underwent several phases of ‘restricted’ and ‘unrestricted’, depending primarily upon the degree of outrage being expressed by neutrals, notably the United States.

British mercantile losses were soon due overwhelmingly to submarine action. An average of about 50,000 grt monthly, in 1914, became 71,000 grt in 1915, 103,000 grt in 1916, and 311,000 grt in 1917. In the face of such insupportable rates of loss, the Admiralty’s response, failing an effective means of finding and sinking submarines, should have been to initiate a convoy system. Convoy had served the British well in all wars since the 17th Century but, despite the success of small-scale convoying to Scandinavia, the Netherlands and western France since 1914, the Admiralty set its face against ocean convos on various grounds, including the inefficient use of shipping time. Sheer desperation, together with Prime Ministerial pressure and exasperation from the Americans (Britain’s ‘associates’ after April 1917) saw convoy universally adopted during 1917, with an immediate effect on losses, reduced to ‘only’ 168,000 grt monthly in 1918.

Britain lost a total of 7,830,000 grt of shipping during World War I, 85 per cent of it to submarines. The Royal Navy had been ineffective in its protection.

Jellicoe’s second priority was to wage economic war on the enemy, weakening his resolve and his capacity to wage war. As part of mainland Europe, Germany could not be blockaded by land. Shipping was a different matter; the British Isles blocking access to German ports except via the Dover Strait and the 200-mile Scotland – Shetland – Norway gap. Dover was a fully-controlled chokepoint and, in the north, the Admiralty deployed the Tenth Cruiser Squadron (10CS) in a series of patrol lines, intercepting all shipping and, when required, sending it in for examination at either Kirkwall (Orkney) or Lerwick (Shetland).

Not surprisingly, German-flagged shipping had all but disappeared, so dealings were with neutrals, many of which, the United States particularly, were actively hostile to what they viewed as infringements of the nebulous concept of ‘freedom of the seas’. Involved in a struggle for her very existence, however, Great Britain was in no mood for friendly compromise.

Cargoes deemed to be, even remotely, beneficial to the enemy military were impounded, those benefiting the enemy civil population not immediately so. Risking all, neutrals could make huge profits, and false paperwork to disguise true ‘end-users’ was endemic. Neutral states recorded enormous increases in imports, ostensibly for domestic use. That much was for sale and shipment to the enemy was something that diplomacy, rather than blockade, tried endlessly to stop. In cases of doubt, the British Government would compulsorily purchase a cargo to prevent onward transit.

Despite permanent paper warfare between the Admiralty, the Government, the Foreign Office and irate neutrals, together with neutrals continually being given the benefit of the doubt, the blockade really began to bite. Bulk cargoes of fertilisers, for instance, were impounded, affecting successive German harvest yields. Some alleviation of irritation for both sides resulted from the adoption of ‘Letters of Assurance’, popularly known as ‘Navicerts’, to guarantee both origin and destination of cargoes.

The obsolescent regular cruisers that originally constituted 10CS proved unequal to the severe northern conditions, and were soon replaced with converted passenger liners, which eventually numbered a couple of dozen.

The duties of 10CS were unremitting and arduous, diminishing only after the eventual entry into the war (April 1917) by the United States. Although oft overstated, the effect of the slow throttling of enemy’s imports became a major factor in the final collapse of his morale. To the British, the beauty lay in the slender resources that needed to be devoted to the task while, to their surprise, the German Navy made no real attempt to target the vulnerability of patrolling 10CS ships.
The Royal Navy had centuries-old experience in the transport and support of military forces, Jellicoe's third priority. During the long years of the stalemated Western Front, every last soldier and bullet had to cross the English Channel by sea. Millions of men, billions of components. The movements were vital and constant; successful interdiction by enemy naval forces could have been disastrous. Yet, despite the Grand Fleet being based far to the north, and immediate southern defence depending mainly upon the Dover Patrol and the Harwich Force, little attempt was ever made by the German Navy to interfere. This lack of enterprise remains another of World War I's mysteries.

It was desirable to divest the enemy of his foreign possessions, not only for political purposes but also because they all played a part in the German strategic communications network, while offering support facilities for ocean raiders. Such operations – Togo, the Cameroons, South-West and East Africa, New Guinea and the Pacific – were perforce of the second order, not in any way being allowed to impinge on the main effort in Europe. Territories were so vast that only the main centres of population and ports were occupied.

Turkish hostility led to military intervention in Mesopotamia (Iraq) in order to safeguard the Royal Navy's commitment to oil-firing. In November 1914 a scratch collection of warships landed a mixed battalion of troops to secure Basra. This opened the 'Mespot' campaign, a wearying slog that culminated in the capture of Baghdad in March 1917. As in the Sudan campaign of thirty years earlier; the army's operations followed the course of the great rivers, relying on support and re-supply by the Royal Navy. Following the rainy season, the featureless landscape became a vast, shallow lagoon; in the dry season it was a desert, flanking the depleted waters of the rivers (generally summed-up as 'too much water for the Army and not enough for the Navy'). Key to the Navy's success were specialised river gunboats, prefabricated in Britain and shipped to Basra for assembly.

As the first great amphibious operation of modern times, the Dardanelles landing of March 1915 was an ad hoc success for the Navy, despite significant personnel losses. Similarly, the evacuation of January 1916 was a triumph of good organisation. Between these two events, however, the naval experience was not a happy one, marred by lack of boldness, an unwillingness to risk ship losses, and questionable judgement. Among other points: Why was a thin-skinned, modern battle cruiser employed to engage fixed fortifications? Why were destroyers/minesweepers not deployed to clear the minefields when trawlers failed? Why was the considerable force of available pre-dreadnoughts not viewed as expendable and used to force the strait? If the fleet had forced the strait and appeared off Constantinople as intended, and the Turks had then refused to capitulate, how would the fleet have been supplied and/or extricated?

Admiral Jellicoe's own Grand Fleet was the key to the fulfilment of his fourth priority, preventing the invasion of Great Britain (imperial possessions were never under threat). His task was made the easier by geography and the Kaiser's own order that his High Seas Fleet should not be hazarded. As noted above, the Royal Navy's closure of the Scotland-Norway gap confined the enemy to the North Sea on pain of a major fleet action. The Kaiser regarded his fleet as a valuable post-hostilities bargaining chip, and an attraction for alliance with like-minded states.

Despite massive building programmes, the Royal Navy did not enjoy overwhelming numerical superiority. To seek a Trafalgar-style action (as many wished) would have involved Jellicoe in unnecessary risk. It was said of him that 'he was the only man who could lose the war in an afternoon', meaning that a heavy British defeat at sea would be followed by German invasion. With Britain's small standing army, the reverse was never true. Despite numerous German attempts to wear down British strength by attrition, therefore, Jellicoe rightly ignored accusations of being ‘defensively minded’ by adopting a policy of containing the enemy while remaining ready for a fleet action when opportunity offered.

The poor performance of British hardware at Jutland showed that Jellicoe's caution was justified. History also followed the precedent of the French wars, where the British benefited through being continuously at sea while the enemy, safe in port, slowly corroded through inaction, leading eventually to personnel unrest and mutiny.

"The Royal Navy of 1914-1918 was thus neither invincible nor perfect. War exposed its shortcomings – elements of poor ship design, sub-standard ammunition, deplorable signalling procedures and an over-reverence to authority..."
The Great War's culture war

By Steven Powell

George MacDonald Fraser's comic creation, Sir Harry Paget Flashman VC KCB KCIE, died an octogenarian in the first year of the Great War. Despite his cowardly and treacherous manner, Flashman had somehow survived and emerged as a hero from the Retreat from Kabul, the Indian Mutiny, the First Sikh War and the Taiping Rebellion. But he did not live long enough to witness the worst horrors of the trenches. His absence, although natural given the character's age, is indicative of how there has been relatively few comic portrayals of World War I in British culture, and yet the productions that have been made have unduly influential in portraying the disaster as the fault of upper-class twits.

One hundred years since the start of the war, this perception is being put to test. David Cameron, himself nicknamed Flashman by Labour leader Ed Miliband, has been keen for the government to commemorate Britain's role in the war. Inevitably, an argument has broken out over the tone of the government to commemorate Britain's role in the war. But humour has been largely rejected by the Conservatives, with a nudge from Labour's Shadow Secretary Michael Gove penned an article in the Daily Mail celebrating Britain's and the Allies' role in the conflict. In a sign of how polarising this argument has become, Education Secretary Michael Gove penned an article in the Daily Mail celebrating Britain's and the Allies' role in the conflict and attacking left-wing academics for perpetuating myths. One hundred years since the start of the war, this perception is being put to test. David Cameron, himself nicknamed Flashman by Labour leader Ed Miliband, has been keen for the government to commemorate Britain's role in the war. Inevitably, an argument has broken out over the tone of the government to commemorate Britain's role in the war. But humour has been largely rejected by the Conservatives, with a nudge from Labour's Shadow Secretary Michael Gove penned an article in the Daily Mail celebrating Britain's and the Allies' role in the conflict.

By contrast, there is not such a left-right political divide in the historical debates about World War Two. Issues such as the bombing of German cities still generate controversy, but there is a consensus about the necessity of defeating Nazi Germany, and the policies of appeasement of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments have been looked back on with contempt ever since they and other notable appeasers were named and shamed in the wartime publication Guilty Men (1940). To understand the criticism being levied at Cameron and Gove, it is necessary to trace how cultural, particularly comedic, depictions of the war have had a considerable impact on both academic and public thinking on the subject, ultimately bequeathing the present government with a divisive issue in its centenary year.

I would argue that the Second World War has been a more fertile ground for humourists than the First. In the 1970s, there were two popular sitcoms set during WWII, Dad's Army and Allo Allo, and there have been comedy films such as On the Fiddle (1961) and How I Won the War (1967). One of the most memorable Monty Python sketches depicts RAF pilots using their own unique form of banter: 'Bally Jerry, pranged his kite right in the how's-your-father; hairy blighter, dicky-birded, feathered back on his sammy, took a waspy, flipped over on his Betty Harpers and caught his can in the Bertie.' The gag is that they can't understand each other, but the implication is clear. These men are enjoying the camaraderie of war.

The fact that such an irreverent portrayal could exist without arousing controversy is telling. The ability to laugh at ourselves is a key part of British identity. The Germans, so the stereotype goes, have no sense of humour; making the very act of British humourists at once patriotic and undermining. Yet the Great War has proved to be much more difficult as a target for humourists. Whereas the Second World War provided a clear moral mission, the First did less so; and although bravery allows for self-mockery in the 1940s, the issue is much more complicated in 1914-18. In cultural terms, the Great War has broadly framed the generals and upper classes as warmongers, thus seeing the generals leading the war as the Guilty Men. The death toll among British soldiers adds further to the chilly perception of a War with a muddled purpose and horrible losses.

Thus, the Great War seems to have tested the concept that the British as a nation could make light of anything: an overtly comedic approach might be seen as a vindication of Britain's role in the war. But humour has been used to question the validity of the Great War. Richard Attenborough's film adaptation of Oh! What a Lovely War (1969) and the acclaimed historical sitcom Blackadder Goes Fourth (1989) have contributed to this perception. Oh! What a Lovely War suggests that humour was important to people during wartime, as the very funny musical numbers were taken from songs popularly sung during the conflict, thus embedding one form of irreverence within another.

Whereas the Second World War provided a clear moral mission, the First did less so; and although bravery allows for self-mockery in the 1940s, the issue is much more complicated in 1914-18.”

Considering it has a reputation as a left-wing history lesson, Oh! What a Lovely War had a somewhat unorthodox genesis. The play was developed by Joan Littlewood and was partly inspired by Alan Clark's controversial history The Donkeys (1961). Clark's revisionist history was scathing in its assessment of the Generals of the British Expeditionary Force and took its title from the expression 'Lions led by Donkeys'.

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Clark later admitted he could not find the genesis of the expression and falsely attributed it to the memoirs of General Erich von Falkenhayn. Clark cut an unlikely figure as an anti-war historian: a Tory MP on the Radical Right of the Conservative Party. He was often accused of being a fascist, to which he would cheerfully insist he was closer to being a Nazi. Nevertheless, he played a significant role in creating a cultural mindset about the war which appeared to be the antithesis of Tory belief.

Blackadder Goes Fourth (1989), regarded as the best of the four Blackadder series, makes brilliant use of the claustrophobic trenches and lack of clear progress to emphasize the boredom of the troops. Unlike the cheerful RAF crew in Monty Python, the fourth Blackadder series relies on the brilliantly dry observations of Captain Edmund Blackadder, a career soldier who misses the comforts of a pre-war empire posting and will do almost anything to avoid going ‘over the top’. Blackadder is an intelligent man who endures the horrors of war with the same weariness with which he regards the idiotic Private Baldrick and the optimistic, patriotic but hopelessly dim-witted Lieutenant George.

Despite its many qualities, Blackadder has contributed to misconceptions about the war. Firstly, it gives the impression that soldiers spent almost the entire war living in the trenches, as the historian Dan Snow has pointed out, men were rotated in and out of the trenches spending perhaps ten days a month in a trench, and only three of those days in a front-line trench. Another misconception is that the war was almost entirely the fault of the upper classes who shared none of the suffering. Blackadder reports directly to the anachronistic General Melchett, a man who is barely sane let alone competent and seemingly living in the wrong century. In one episode, Melchett has Blackadder sentenced to death for shooting his favourite carrier pigeon. The tone shifts to one of pathos by the end of the series however: Blackadder runs out of excuses for going over the top, and he leads his men into No Man’s Land. The image of carnage on the battlefield dissolves into a field of poppies. It is one of the most moving scenes in British television comedy, and it contrasts sharply with a scene from the novel Flashman at the Charge (1973), set during the Crimean War, in which the titular hero suffers from a heavy bout of flatulence which inadvertently sends the Light Brigade charging into the Valley of Death. Both men were glorious cowards, but Flashman could romp his way through the battlefield. Blackadder’s war does not lend itself as well to farce, and he often appeared sulky by comparison. Military disasters can make for promising comic material, but if Blackadder broke down comic barriers regarding the war, it also enforced the same prejudices of Oh! What a Lovely War. Cultural depictions were closing down historical debate. To question the Blackadder viewpoint of the war, as Michael Gove has done, was to undermine the sanctity of the soldiers’ sacrifice.

Since Blackadder, the most notable work to approach WWI from a relatively comic perspective was The Wipers Times (2013), which seemed to signal a new look at the war. Adapted for television by Private Eye editor Ian Hislop, The Wipers Times tells the true story of how a group of British soldiers began the titular satirical magazine after discovering a printing press near the front line. Wipers was the British pronunciation of Ypres, a name which in the British psyche rivals the Somme for evoking images of horrendous loss of life. The film portrays the Herculean efforts of Captain Fred Roberts and Lt Jack Pearson to produce the poetry and comic sketches needed for the magazine and distribute it among the soldiers while still combating the full horrors of war. The Wipers Times seems to be at least partly inspired by its comic predecessors, but Hislop and his co-writer Nick Newman regard the trench magazine as giving birth to modern satire. The film largely avoids Lions and Donkeys clichés: Roberts becomes gradually more obsessed with the magazine but does not use it as a tool to pass severe political judgments. Although he faces some disapproval from senior officers, he is bolstered by the support of General Mitford (played by former Python Michael Palin) who recognises the value of their work.

If The Wipers Times represents a more nuanced form of satire, then it may be an indication of the sensibility of Blackadder and Oh! What a Lovely War losing their cultural grip. Audiences will not be so taken in by the idea that the war was a disaster because of upper class twits and incompetent generals. We may never see a Flashman figure charging over the trenches, but future comic portrayals may well have to challenge the orthodoxy of past works before they can shine some more irreverent light on the conflict.
The Great War and the collapse of the Liberal Party

By Matthew Johnson

By the summer of 1914, a Liberal government had held office in Britain for almost nine years. During this time the Liberals had won three consecutive general elections, and had established a substantial record of social, fiscal, and constitutional reform. Their achievements included the introduction of old-age pensions and a scheme of National Insurance against sickness and unemployment, new innovations in progressive taxation – most notably in the famous ‘People’s Budget’ of 1909 – and the curtailment of the legislative powers of the unelected House of Lords. The governments led by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Henry Asquith during these years are still widely regarded as ranking among the most significant reforming administrations of the twentieth century. By December 1918, however, the Liberal government had fallen, and the wider Liberal Party was in crisis. A Conservative-dominated Coalition held office, and the Labour Party, which had only formally been constituted in 1906, was already in the process of replacing the Liberals as the principal party on the left of British politics. Labour would go on to form its first government as early as 1924, whilst the Liberals would never again hold office as an independent party.

Historians have long debated the reasons for this remarkable collapse in Liberal fortunes. It has often been claimed that the Great War, which broke out in August 1914, effectively ‘killed’ the Liberal Party in Britain, by presenting the nation with a series of challenges that Liberals were ideologically incapable of meeting. Certainly, the war was problematic for British Liberalism. Asquith’s Cabinet was badly divided in its response to the European crisis, and many ministers accepted the case for military intervention on the continent only with deep reluctance. Moreover, the coercive and collectivist state policies seemingly demanded by the waging of ‘total war’ in an industrial age were not always easy to reconcile with Liberal sensibilities. Even those in the party who had welcomed greater state intervention for social and economic purposes before 1914 were often uncomfortable with the implications of a more authoritarian statism in wartime. During the early months of the conflict the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, came under sustained criticism in the right-wing press for his reluctance to order the wholesale internment of enemy aliens living in Britain, whilst ministerial assurances that the war need not disrupt economic ‘business as usual’ came to be seen by critics of the government as evidence of a Liberal failure to put the country on an effective war footing. Perhaps most damagingly of all, Liberal anguish over the introduction of military conscription in January 1916 has been seen as proof of Liberalism’s inability to offer a coherent formula for the prosecution of war on a continental scale.

It would be misleading, however, to attribute the Liberal collapse during the Great War simply to ideological inflexibility. In fact, government policy during the first year of the conflict was shaped less by political ideology than by a particular set of strategic assumptions about the best means of securing victory over the Central Powers. The government’s approach was rooted in a conception of the ‘traditional British way of warfare’, which emphasised the use of economic pressure and a naval blockade to defeat Germany, and anticipated only limited British involvement in military operations on the continent. The failure of this strategy to deliver a rapid victory, and the consequent recognition that Britain’s ‘continental commitment’ demanded a more substantial military contribution to the Allied war effort, fed directly into the growing political pressure for the introduction of conscription during 1915.

Yet, whilst the coercive nature of compulsory military service was deeply troubling to many Liberals, it is notable that the principal opponents of conscription within the Cabinet – most notably McKenna and Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade – continued to base their case, not on grounds of abstract principle or the rights of the citizen, but on the damage to Britain’s economic and industrial output which they feared would result from an over-commitment of manpower to the army. Furthermore, a significant minority of Liberal MPs at Westminster, organizing themselves in the Liberal War Committee, actively championed the introduction of compulsory service, arguing that it would create a more ‘democratic’ army – and, as such, one that would better reflect ‘Liberal’ values. Indeed, the Cabinet minister most conspicuously in favour of conscription by the end of 1915 was David Lloyd George, the erstwhile Radical Chancellor of the Exchequer who, in his new post as Minister of Munitions, had emerged as a committed advocate of a more vigorous prosecution of the war. Clearly, Liberal principles during the Great War were more flexible than is sometimes assumed.

In fact, it could be argued that Liberal difficulties after August 1914 owed less to questions of ideology than to structural changes in the operation of party politics during the war. The most obvious of these changes came with the formation of a coalition government in May 1915. Asquith’s decision to invite the Opposition leadership to join the Cabinet was motivated in large part by his desire to avoid a potentially divisive wartime general election. His insistence on excluding Unionists from the key Cabinet offices, however, meant that the Tories developed little loyalty towards the new administration.
In December 1916, following a bitter dispute over proposals to streamline the machinery of government, they joined with Lloyd George to effectively force Asquith from office. A new coalition was then formed, with Lloyd George as Prime Minister; but with most of the other vital Cabinet posts in Unionist hands. The war thus allowed the Liberals’ traditional rivals to re-establish themselves as the predominant party of government without even needing to secure an electoral mandate. Worse still, Asquith’s refusal to join the new administration in a subordinate position created a rift within the Liberal Party. Tensions reached a peak in the ‘Maurice Debate’ in May 1918 – when Asquith attacked the government’s handling of troop reinforcements on the Western Front prior to the German Spring Offensive – and culminated in Lloyd George’s decision to fight the 1918 general election in partnership with his Unionist allies, and against the ‘official’ Asquithian Liberals.

The wartime realignment of party politics also served to destroy the rationale behind the Edwardian ‘Progressive Alliance’ between the Labour Party and the Liberals, which had sustained the latter in office after the general elections of 1910. The inclusion of Arthur Henderson in the Coalition Cabinets formed by both Asquith and Lloyd George, and the involvement of trade unionists in the running of the wartime state, offered Labour a new credibility as a party of government. Henderson also used the final year of the war to oversee a substantial reorganisation of the party, laying the foundation for its emergence as a truly national force.

The British electorate in December 1918 – including millions of men and (for the first time) women newly enfranchised by the Representation of the People Act – were thus presented with a political landscape markedly different from that which had existed in 1914: A Liberal Party at war with itself, an emboldened Labour Party emerging from the ruins of the pre-war Progressive Alliance, and a Unionist Party that had re-established itself as the dominant force in national politics. The result of the election was a disaster for the Liberals, with most of the Asquithians losing their seats. Lloyd George retained the premiership, but only until 1922, when the Conservatives decided that the Coalition had outlived its usefulness. There has never been another Liberal British Prime Minister.

It remains impossible to say with any certainty what the Liberal Party’s prospects might have been in the 20th century had the Great War not broken out. For all their achievements, the Liberals were confronted with serious long-term challenges by 1914. The Nonconformist culture that defined and united the party was eroding, as religious denomination began to lose ground to class as the defining determinant of political identity. The long-term success of Liberal attempts to preserve a cross-class ‘progressive’ politics rooted in a vision of collectivist social reform remained uncertain. By 1918, however, this ‘New Liberal’ agenda had stalled.

The Liberals were not yet a spent force: Even in the general election of 1923, when the two wings of the party finally reunited, they polled only slightly behind Labour. But by allowing Labour its electoral breakthrough in 1918 the war had already dealt the Liberal Party its fatal blow. Once Labour had emerged as a credible, independent political force, the stage was set for a reframing of national politics as a choice between ‘socialism’ and ‘anti-socialism’. In this world, both Labour and the Conservatives had a clear role, but the Liberals were inexorably relegated to the status of a minor third force.