

Richard Carr Abstract

Ex-servicemen, Britain, and the Idea of “Europe” Between the Wars

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In 1914 Europe experienced the start of a bloody civil war that would last four years. Britain, bound by treaty obligations, was dragged into a conflict in which some felt she had no concern, and still more believed had been waged at incommensurate cost. After 1918 she hid behind her Empire, praising one leader (Chamberlain) promising ‘peace for our time’ with Germany, and removing another intent on embarking upon unnecessary foreign adventure in Turkey (Lloyd George). She avoided the Soviet Union except when scrabbling around for allies in 1939, sought measures to disengage herself from continental affairs (Locarno Treaty, Disarmament), and generally acted like Europe - upon whose soil so many of her sons were buried - was none of her concern. The First World War, it seems, begat in British public life a suspicion of the very notion of “Europe” which lasts - amongst some sections of Conservatism - to this very day.

Interwar Britain should not merely be viewed from the perspective of 1939 however. Simply because 1914 essentially repeated itself, historians are rather inclined to treat the period as one of perpetual tension. This was not so. Concurrent to the clear worries about Russian Communism, German Nazism and Italo-Spanish Fascism, there was a clear fascination with European life which we will address. Often such perspectives are relegated to ardent British Nazis undergoing their pilgrimage to the Nuremberg Rally, yet this is unhelpful. In actual fact, technological developments (particularly in travel and radio communications) combined with a population which had, in large numbers and for the first time, recently stepped foot on continental soil through war service, produced a nation whose appetite to understand “Europe” had been wetted.

It is the second of these points that this paper intends to analyse. The tragedies of the war tend to obscure the cultural changes it wrought. No longer could the ordinary British regard Europe as an “other” - something they read about in newspapers but was essentially abstract - for it had been rendered real to them by that most bloody of excursions, active combat. Three million Britons saw service on the

western front during the conflict, what will be argued here is that this initial point of contact with Europe was but a precursor to an evolution of the collective mind.

After 1918 these servicemen returned home determined that war should not happen again. At first this took the form of demands for a Carthagian punishment of Germany. Longer term it saw former soldiers attempt to understand Europeans to an extent the British had never tried before. Young politicians such as Harold Macmillan traversed the continent, whilst ex-servicemen bodies established links abroad. By analysing the activities of such figures, and the extensive literature they produced, this paper intends to uncover a new social memory of the Great War present in British public life from 1918 to 1939. Even today many Britons treat the European Union as something alien to their tradition, this analysis contends this maybe a shaky assumption.