The Shaping of British Public Opinion during World War I

Matthew Morris

British History

Professor Angelos

November 17, 2010
In 1914 Lloyd George had remarked that Europe “stumbled and staggered into war” (Teed 71). This quote describes how a domino effect had brought all the major European powers into the First Great War. World War I was caused by a buildup of "one thing led to another," or the treaty alliance system that was in place in Europe (First). The series of events that took place on the continent of Europe before the start of the war were crucial reasons for why the war itself happened and for why the major powers were a part of it. Although Britain is an island that is isolated from the rest of Europe, these crucial events dragged them into the war. Britain entered the war for two main reasons; one because they were under treaty with both France and Belgium, making them feel it was a “moral obligation” to defend them from the Central Powers. The second reason Britain entered the war was to justify the principle that small nationalities are not to be crushed by the arbitrary will of strong overcoming power (Arnstein 321). These are the reasons for how Britain justified entering the war making it The First World War. However to the public and even some highly regarded government officials these reasons were not enough at the start, middle, or end of the war. Any time a nation enters a war it is important to get a strong base of public support behind the decision so that it is a positive situation throughout the entire nation. It was not until late August at the public interest grew for this war with a “mixture of fear, curiosity and anticipation, spurred on by the realization that this was a struggle for national preservation” (Donaldson). The public had been unaware of the war that was brewing across the continent that it seemed to be caught off guard upon its arrival. This would make it even more challenging to shape a positive public opinion for the First World War. When Britain declared for war it was the public opinion in which they would need to influence in a positive manner if they were going to be able to supply soldiers to the front lines, raise enough money to fund the war, and operate the factories at home. The ability of the government to provide proper
reasoning for the decision to go to war will be important in attracting a positive public response. Although it only matters how the people of a nation take to that reasoning and choose whether to support the cause or protest the fight. Throughout the First Great War the British public opinion fluctuates to both ends of the spectrum, which will force the government to take drastic steps in order to keep the country united during this time of need.

When World War I was forced upon Britain it was faced with a decision that would affect their country for years to come. As the domino effect of the alliances Britain had with other European countries began to take place there was indifference amongst the British people on whether or not to go to war. Britain was linked to the defense of France once an invasion from Germany seemed to be inevitable, but this would not be enough reasoning to sway the public interest of a world war. The general populace was, in most cases, largely unaware of the imminence of war until the end of the month (First). Toward the end of July, Europe was on the verge of war and there was still a division of opinion not only in the public but in the government as well. Four senior members of the government, Charles Trevelyan, David Lloyd George, John Burns, and John Morley, were opposed to the country becoming involved in a European war and they informed the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, that they intended to resign over the issue (British). The First World War had not even begun and already there was a split in the government and of a nation. It was up to the Prime Minister to now bring together a united government and country in order for Britain to experience the greatest success. Prime Minister Asquith says he “speaks for the country as a whole” and “we made every effort any government could possible make for peace” (Arnstein 321). There was a lot of opposition to Britain entering the war from the beginning, which is why Herbert Asquith felt it was necessary to explain to the people that this is the only option they had. Prime Minister Asquith described what they were
fighting for by saying, “This war has been forced upon us. What is it we are fighting for?
Everyone knows, and no one better than the government, the terrible, incalculable suffering,
economic, social, personal and political, which war, and especially war between the Great
Powers of the world, must entail” (Arnstein 321). Once this statement was released all of the
government officials who promised they would resign did except for Lloyd George who was
convinced to stay by the Prime Minister. Lloyd George then became a top player in the British
government and was the lead man in trying to escalate the war quickly in order to gain a quick
victor (British). After the declaration of war and the statement issue by Asquith there was some
positive reaction from the public who began gearing in support of the war. It was surprising that
there was an excitement spread throughout Britain to the news of war with an overwhelmingly
enthusiastic, far more than expected (First). The main reason for the high support and strong
public opinion of the First World War was due to the fact that many believed it would be over by
Christmas. By going to war the British would be able to restore order in Europe with Britain atop them all, which was very appealing to the public because of a hard life they had been experiencing up to this point in 1914. This World War gave hope to the people in Britain of
becoming the overwhelming power in Europe once the war concluded which helped spread an
excitement amongst the people and created a positive public opinion.

The frontlines of war and public opinion back home in Britain can be closely related because of the stalemate World War I became. At the frontlines the troops who were excited to
go to war and serve their country were quickly turned away from that notion because of trench warfare. Back at home in Britain we also see the general public and government change their attitude of the war when they realize it is not going to be a quick one by any means. It is said that “the trenches symbolized the war” (Clarke). The devastation felt in the trenches by the soldiers
were expressed in poems and letters that were read by the general public. Upon reading these writings the public opinion would shift to a negative outlook on the war because of the horror the young men of Britain were facing on a daily basis. Laurence Binyon a soldier serving for Britain wrote a poem called “For the Fallen” that described life for the soldiers in the trenches. The poem read, “They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn” (Clarke). It was poems such as these that created a negative image of war for the public and caused them to rethink supporting such a devastating event. Along with many other publications by soldiers and media on the horrors of the War helped negatively change public opinion in Britain.

With an increasing negative opinion of the British people the government was forced to take action in order to keep the war efforts strong. It is David Lloyd George who was a big reason for keeping some support from the public throughout the War. Through the use of war propaganda and media usage he was very successful at keeping the army at a manageable number and keeping supplies at the frontlines. It is the public back home who is responsible for these successes because the people of Britain are the ones who must enlist and those who remain home have to stay motivated to work in the factories. One of his greatest accomplishments was his ability to persuade C.P. Scott who was the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* to write in support of the war effort (British). There were two reasons for this being a significant achievement: it helped keep the people of Britain’s public opinion in support of the war and it shifted Scott who was known to be an anti-war leader (British). These were the type of events that shaped the course of the war for Britain because if this had not happened it could have very well led to a public opinion that spiraled out of control toward the negative aspect of things. However propaganda was an important but minor contribution to the public opinion because it
would take much more from the government during the war if they were to keep the nation united.

Since the Britain public opinion of World War I was constantly shifting the government had to take another step in ensuring they did not lose the interest of winning this devastating war. The use of war propaganda was an essential tool in doing so because it not only helped in the recruitment of more soldiers as the war dragged on, but kept the idea of a unified nation instilled in its people. It was the British government that took the approach of projecting into the future with propaganda campaigns. A specific propaganda ad is shown asking women: “When the War is over and someone asks your husband or son what he did in the great War, is he to hang his head because you would not let him go?” (Clarke 77). Another propaganda poster shows a pensive father dandling his young son who asks: “Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?” (Clarke 78). These ads were done in a way that showed an idea of the Great War imagined at the start, not a reflection of the immediate experience of the trenches the soldiers were faced with. By using propaganda like these the public is given a message that serving for your country in the war is a privilege and an honor. The idea that the trenches and public opinion were aligned throughout the war made it tough for the government to portray a positive message to the people, but by the use of propaganda it was made possible. Public opinion during the war can also be linked to the enrollment of men in the army. Before the war began there were just four hundred-thousand men in the army compared to two and a half million by 1915. It was the use of this propaganda that provided a positive message to the public and a strong public opinion helped enroll a few million men (Clarke 79). However with the enactment of conscription in 1916 due to lack of volunteers enlisting in the army we see an increase to three and a half million troops serving (Clarke 79). This could be attributed to the trench warfare and the increased awareness of
the British public of how deadly this war actually was. This is the point in the war where it is evident the public opinion has shifted for good and the sooner this war came to an end the better life would be for everyone in Britain. No longer was there any excitement for the war but only eagerness to draw it to a close. The trench warfare which had made the war a stalemate also took a toll on the public opinion back in Britain by this point in the war. There were many of the men away serving for their country while the women were forced to work those jobs left vacant while still trying to provide care for their family. Here is where Britain hit its low point of the war as the public opinion had dropped significantly from where it was at the beginning of the war.

By the end of World War I we come across an exhausted Europe and a sickening number of casualties produced by the war. Throughout the entire second half of the war the public opinion of Britain was against the war, hoping for an end that did not come until 1918. “Upon the end of the war vast crowds and small groups gathered in city street, in market place, in cathedral close, at cottage gate. Each individual had his own thoughts but scarcely anyone was unmoved. For all it was a solemn moment in history” (Havighurst 148). This demonstrates the suffering the war had brought on the people of Britain and how negative the war had actually shaped their public opinion. Of Armistice Day, in striking contrast to Counter-Attack, Sassoon wrote: “Everyone suddenly burst out singing; Everyone’s voice was suddenly lifted; And beauty came like the setting sun; My heart was with tears; and horror; Drifted away (Havighurst 149). For the first time in many years the British people are rejoicing even if just for a few minutes because they are no longer faced with the Great War. The public opinion may still be very poor but it was as positive as it ever was during that short period of time after the war had finally ended. When the war finally ended in November of 1918 there were few who did not hope that the losses and sufferings it had brought might be redeemed in a better world (Mowat 1). It was
now time for there to be some gains or progress made in Britain because of all the pain and suffering the people had just faced during the war. Even though the war had come to an end there was still an overall negative public opinion amongst the people because of the little gains that came out of it. Britain had just experienced its highest casualties of any other previous war so the people were angered by the fact they had little to show for it.

After the war the people were not satisfied with just winning and starting the rebuilding process for a hurt nation, they wanted results for their struggles. All the hurt, pain and suffering faced by the British people must be reinforced with some punishment of Germany or promises made by the government. Even though the war was now over, the general public was still not in a positive state with all that had happened. In response to the people’s demands, Prime Minister, Lloyd George pledged of a “fit country for heroes to live in” (Mowat 4). This was referring to the rebuilding of Britain back up to being the superpower of Europe and the entire world. However this was not enough for the British people who wanted more to come out of the war and Lloyd George had no choice but to push for greater consequences. They were demanding Germany to pay reparations and take full responsibility for World War I. Prime Minister George commented on this demand by saying, “Germany is going to pay restitution, reparation, and indemnity, and I have personally no doubt that we will get everything out of her that you can squeeze out of a lemon and a bit more” (Mowat 4). Although, there was little left of Germany by the end of World War I this statement was important for Lloyd George to make to the British people because it showed promise that the war was not a complete waste. With public opinion of the war very low by this point it was important for the government to say whatever they could in order to please the people so they did not grow frustrated. It was because 745,000 of the country’s younger men, and about nine percent of all men under the age of 45 were killed during
the war that makes these statements by Lloyd George important (Marwick 62). The high number of casualties due to this war would make it impossible to not ask anything out of Germany or make promises to a nation on the road to recovery. These strategic moves by the Prime Minister and the British government helped give the people a sense of accomplishment and improve the public opinion of the result of World War I.

The First World War was full of propaganda, struggle, sorrow, and strategy which helped shape the British public opinion throughout. It was the British public opinion that went from a positive stance full of excitement and wonder, to a negative stance where everyone was simply wishing for an end to the war. Through the use of government the people were able to be swayed to keep a positive outlook of the war, but through poems and stories from soldiers they were given a negative one. The public opinion of any country including Britain will never be the same from one day to the next, especially when you are partaking in a world war. This is why we are able to see the shaping of the British public opinion from one side of the fence to the other during World War I.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


