

## **The British Empire and the First World War**

(by Ashley Jackson, published in *BBC History Magazine*, 9, 11 (2008) and reprinted in a First World War Special Issue 2012)

Images of the Western Front dominate British popular memory of the First World War, unsurprising given the proximity of the trenches to British homes and the fact that the vast majority of British war dead perished just across the Channel. Britain's 1914-18 war experience, however, was as much about imperial conflict as it was about the trenches of France and Belgium. By virtue of its position as the world's foremost imperial power, Britain's declaration of war in August 1914 brought hundreds of millions of colonial subjects to a state of war with Germany and the Central Powers. Mobilization of the British world gave Britain a massive reserve upon which to draw for military resources, and the corollary of a vast and dispersed estate requiring defence and succour at a time of global dislocation. It also meant that the most unlikely places were affected by conflict; in the Darfur region of the Sudan, for instance, ruler Ali Dinar sided with the Ottoman Sultan against Britain. A relation of the last Fur sultan, who had made a deal with the British to preserve the region's autonomy, his stance led to a British invasion of the region in 1916, which included the use of aircraft to drop propaganda leaflets on the inhabitants, and resulted in the region's formal annexation.

Australians, Egyptians, Indians, Iraqis, Kenyans, Namibians, and Sri Lankans all remember the First World War, though not in the same way as the British. The fact that the First World War means anything at all to people in such disparate lands is testament to the fact that it was a global struggle in the tradition of the Seven Years

War and Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, yet more far reaching and destructive. The ways and the places in which the British fought the war, and the strategic aims of the government in its prosecution, all bore the unmistakable hallmarks of Britain's imperial lineage. Infantry slogging matches in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, or dusty campaigning in the land of Lawrence of Arabia, were far more than exotic and terrible sideshows to slaughter on a European centre stage. Similarly, the naval war was a global vigil on the part of the Royal Navy and its Dominion branches, involving ceaseless patrol and escort work as well as gun duels, though the common image of the Grand Fleet and the High Seas Fleet scowling at each other across the North Sea before and after the brief orgy of violence at Jutland reinforces the focus on the European theatre.

Hundreds of thousands of imperial troops fought in Europe, and much of the First World War's action took place in imperial theatres. Australia and New Zealand conquered German Pacific territories such as German Samoa, Papua New Guinea, and the Bismarck Archipelago. A British Indian army surrendered to Turkish forces at Kut in Mesopotamia as it attempted to capture Baghdad. Indian Army and allied Japanese troops captured the German enclave of Tsingtau on the Chinese coast. Jan Smuts led a South African army of 50,000 men into German South West Africa in 1915, and Trinidadians and Guianans in the British West Indies Regiment fought in Jordan, Mesopotamia, and Palestine. In East Africa, the German guerrilla commander Colonel Paul Von Lettow Vorbeck bogged down a 300,000-strong British imperial force in a debilitating campaign that spanned Kenya, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia, before finally surrendering three days *after* the Armistice had passed. Empire was the only reason that Britain fought extensive campaigns in East Africa

and clashed with the Ottoman empire in the Dardanelles, Mesopotamia, and the Sinai desert. Far from the naval war being confined to European waters, classic big gun actions were fought in the Pacific and the South Atlantic, and the Germans employed tactics designed to expose Britain's dependence upon empire, preying on merchant shipping with surface raiders and submarines in order to sever the trade lifeline that was a defining feature of Britain's global trading community.

The First World War was notably imperial in terms of its higher management. By 1914 a Committee of Imperial Defence existed, and the Dominions had access to the *imperi arcana*, and some input into decision-making. In 1917 Lloyd George formed an Imperial War Cabinet, on which sat the South African prime minister, Jan Smuts, and other Dominions leaders when visiting London, notably the fiery Welsh prime minister of Australia, William Morris Hughes. This was an incredible form of coalition government and an expression of common imperial identity binding British communities from Vancouver to the Tasman Sea. Buttressing the imperial view of the war at the grand strategic level was the presence in the British government of a number of renowned imperial proconsuls, academics, and statesmen. Lloyd George and Churchill were noted for their interest in Britain's imperial status, and a 'who's who' of senior British imperialists were encamped within the Cabinet and on the Downing Street staff, including Arthur Balfour, George Curzon, Alfred Milner, Lionel Curtis, Philip Kerr, Leopold Amery, and the novelist and future High Commissioner to Canada, John Buchan. These guardians of empire were determined that the 'southern world' would be secured as a result of the war, which meant Britain retaining German colonies in the Pacific, East Africa, and Southern Africa, dominating the land bridge between Europe and India, and securing the oil reserves of

the Gulf once and for all. The destruction of the German and Ottoman empires would quite naturally lead to much more red on the map as the premier allied power staked the victor's claim, even if American influence meant that some of the new territories were to appear in atlases and gazetteers as League of Nations 'mandates'.

The First World War was further marked as an imperial war by account of the fact that scores of British territories around the world considered it the most momentous political event of their age, no matter how distant they were from the Kaiser's Germany. Settlers from New Zealand to Canada, from the highlands of Kenya to the streets of Bulawayo, shared the urge to rush to the colours and publicly demonstrate their loyalty to Britain. As importantly, the people over whom the Europeans ruled were told that it was their war, and the elites of colonial society took this as a cue to support the war effort. They did this through raising money and recruiting men, donating sugar and rum to the British government, raising funds to buy military aircraft, and subscribing to the numerous charitable funds for widowed women or wounded seamen that did the imperial rounds beneath the patronage of royal and aristocratic figures. The rhetoric of demonstrative imperial loyalty was spoken as a common language throughout the empire, with a synchronization and 'on message' power that many of today's politicians would envy. British governors and their district officers spoke to their ruling partners – African or Pacific Island chiefs, Indian princes or Chinese community leaders – and the people over whom they ruled, in terms of imperial community, shared identity, common danger, and the universal duty to help the King defeat his enemies.

Many people might well have asked ‘why us?’, or expressed bewilderment or disinterest in a white man’s war in distant lands, but membership of a colonial empire meant that you were subject to powerful global pulses that would bring the war to you even if you did not go to war. This might take the form of a sudden collapse of the economy, as ships failed to appear to load the export crop massing at the docks, or, as in the case of the Gold Coast, the bottom fell out of the cocoa market when trading with Germany ceased. For others, such as Trinidad, the reverse was the case, as the war stoked an insatiable demand for its oil output. War might also come to an imperial outpost in the form of enemy invasion or naval gunfire, as when Fanning Island, a coral atoll in the middle of the Pacific, was visited by the cruiser *Nürnberg*, which landed a raiding party to destroy the telegraph instruments and cut the submarine cable that made Fanning a link in the all-red cable route encircling the globe.

The First World War showed the empire’s capacity to mobilize people on a scale never before witnessed. The global mobilization of manpower was by no means confined to the fighting men of the Dominions and India who made such names for themselves in Europe and the Middle East. Other parts of the empire also provided men trained to kill; Ghanaians invaded German Togoland, West Indians crossed the border from Sierra Leone into German Cameroons, and Jews from soon-to-be-British Palestine (as well as America and Canada) formed battalions for the City of London Regiment. Major J. Hall Brown led 236 men of the Ceylon Planters Rifle Corps to Egypt in October 1914, where they helped guard the Suez Canal before being attached to the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps. They were then sent to Anzac Cove,

Gallipoli, to provide guards for the headquarters staff, including the GOC, Lieutenant-General William Birdwood.

Just as important as the military roles undertaken by imperial soldiers, the war brought labourers from all corners of the world to support British battle fronts. Egyptians were recruited in their hundreds of thousands to serve in the Sinai campaign, as were Africans employed as porters in the East African campaign. Over 150,000 Chinese were brought to the Western Front, capitalizing on Britain's status as the premier imperial power in the Far East. Smaller contingents came from all over the empire – 30,000 men from South Africa, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland formed the South African Native Labour Contingent for service in France, and Fiji also sent a labour battalion to Europe. Four hundred men of the Zion Mule Corps formed the only support available when the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division landed at Gallipoli, and 1,700 Mauritians formed a labour battalion to help work the inland waterways of Mesopotamia.

At sea the Germans did what Britain's enemies had done in previous imperial struggles; attempt to destroy the global movement of merchantmen on which the empire depended for its food and its livelihood, and terrorize the sea lanes upon which secure imperial communications and the transit of troops rested. Commerce raiding disrupted imperial trade, leaving Britain short of vital imports and wreaking havoc in colonial economies that depended upon exports. In some parts of the empire, notably the West Indies, America was able to take advantage of ruptures in the imperial economy and gain a greater market share. In attempting to defeat the enemy's assault upon the imperial system and preserve the Royal Navy's dominance of the trade

routes, Britain fulfilled an important mission on behalf of the Germans by committing fighting resources that might otherwise have been deployed in Europe. The cruise of the *Emden* in late 1914 provides an excellent example of the threat that a solitary surface raider could pose. The *Emden* was detached from the German Pacific Squadron and sent into the Indian Ocean to harry shipping lanes to the Gulf, India, and the Far East. In her brief but swashbuckling career the light cruiser tied down sixteen Allied warships as she captured and sank merchant vessels with abandon, shelled the storage tanks of the Burmah Oil Company at Madras, used Ceylon's own searchlights to target shipping off the port of Colombo, destroyed French and Russian warships in the British harbour of Georgetown in Penang, and audaciously landed on the British island of Diego Garcia to scrape her keel (the islanders not yet knowing that war had broken out). Whilst raiding the British Cocos-Keeling Islands towards the west coast of Australia, however, the *Emden*'s luck ran out, and the cruiser HMAS *Sydney*, escorting a batch of Australian and New Zealand troops bound for Europe, put her permanently out of action.

Other intriguing naval battles were fought on Africa's Swahili coast, the *Konigsberg* sinking HMS *Pegasus* in Zanzibar harbour before herself being run to ground in the Rufiji Delta by specially commissioned shallow draft gunboats sent out from Britain. In 1915 two wooden motor boats (HMS *Mimi* and *Toutou*), commanded by the eccentric Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Spicer-Simson, were sent overland from the Cape to Lake Tanganyika to hunt German gunboats. Full scale naval actions also took place in imperial settings, such as Coronel in the Pacific and the Battle of the Falklands in the South Atlantic. In the first battle, the Germans sank the cruisers HMS *Monmouth* and *Good Hope* with all hands, though in the latter clash over 2,200

Germans perished when Vice-Admiral Graf von Spee's powerful squadron was all but annihilated by Vice-Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee's battlecruiser force on 8 December 1914 (still a public holiday in the Falklands). This battle sealed the fate of the German Pacific Squadron and secured control of the ocean trade routes for the British, who relied upon the Anglo-Japanese alliance to help police the waters east of the Straits of Malacca (in 1915 Japanese sailors were on hand to help suppress a rebellion in Singapore, when Indian Army soldiers, disturbed by the thought of being at war with the Muslims of the Ottoman empire, mutinied and set 300 German prisoners of war free).

The territories of the British empire were used throughout the war as bases from which to project power and to provide the revictualling, refuelling, and resupply services essential to the operation of a global naval and merchant marine comprising thousands of vessels. The Falklands, used by Admiral Sturdee's battlecruisers whilst hunting for von Spee's force, was home to the shore base HMS *Pursuivant*, and at the time of the battle the Falkland Islands Volunteer Force was mobilized, women and children were evacuated to inland farms, a minefield was laid, and telephone communications established between the warships and observation posts on the hills around Stanley. By 1914 other overseas shore bases included HMS *Cormorant* at Gibraltar, headquarters of the East Atlantic Station, HMS *St Angelo* in Malta, and HMS *Alert* in the Persian Gulf. HMS *Tamar* in Hong Kong was headquarters of the navy's China Station (as she was until British withdrawal in 1997), and the North America and West Indies Station was served by HMS *Terror* in Bermuda, helping to police a region in which British warships and patrol boats protected shipping from the menace of German submarines.



The First World War was a period of political quickening in many parts of the empire, bringing developments that would make the job of imperial governance for more testing in the post-war years. Through the Arab Revolt, the Boer Rebellion, and the Easter Rising, the tightening of Britain's grip on the Egyptian *place d'armes*, the promise of political autonomy to both Arabs and Jews, and the passage of legislation allowing Indians a greater share in their own governance, the war years nurtured nationalism. This was also the case in the 'white' Dominions, where the war was a powerful experience of nationhood, encouraging Australians and Canadians to think regionally as much as they thought imperially, and to demand a greater voice in imperial decision-making in the future (symbolized by their inclusion in the British Empire Delegation at the Versailles Peace Conference).

When peace came, many British ex-servicemen chose to leave Britain and make a new start in the colonies, encouraged by generous soldier settler schemes funded by governments anxious to boost British stock in places such as Australia, Canada, Kenya, and Southern Rhodesia. The Armistice in November 1918 brought an end to deaths military service that had taken their toll on families in New South Wales and Northern Nigeria as well as in Northumberland and Norfolk. The empire's war dead could be counted in the hundreds of thousands, and the empire suffered from the tragic twist in the war's tail as the Spanish influenza stalked demobilized soldiers to their home towns and villages via troopships and railway lines. Approximately seventeen million Indians perished, and Samoa lost twenty-five per cent of its population.

War memorials were constructed by Britons overseas with almost the same degree of energy as they were unveiled at home; the war memorial in Gaborone, capital of Botswana, commemorates the death of an African police trooper killed when German forces from Windhoek raided a police post on the Kalahari border between Bechuanaland and South West Africa (the memorial is yet to remember those who died in France). The war memorial in Hobart, Tasmania joined the pith-helmeted statue commemorating those who had fought in the Boer War, and the memorial in the Falklands commemorates the Islanders who perished with British forces overseas, as well as the lives of those lost in the Battle of the Falklands. British soldiers currently serving in Iraq regularly visit war memorials and war graves for British and empire personnel. Empire had been as defining a feature of Britain's war as had the alliance with France, and had united millions of people around the world in a common cause, with or without their approval. It was to be a most valuable experience, for in 1939 Germany threatened again, as did industrial powers in the Mediterranean and the Far East, and the empire was asked to rally to the imperial cause once more, though this time the cost of victory was to be the survival of the empire itself.