

# Unrestrained jingoism to characterise UK's marking of World War I anniversary

**Julie Hyland****18 November 2013**

Who would believe that anyone, save a sociopath, would propose that the upcoming 100th anniversary of World War I should be cause for national celebration?

That is exactly what Prime Minister David Cameron has suggested, calling for next year's anniversary to be turned into a "commemoration like the Diamond Jubilee".

July 28, 1914 saw the start of a war that was to involve 70 million military personnel worldwide, and was to claim the lives of 16 million people by the time it ended on November 11, 1918.

Yet Cameron proposes it is fitting to mark its outbreak with a commemoration that captures "our national spirit", that "says something about who we are as a people". To this end, some £50 million has been allocated for "national commemorative events", along the lines of this year's Queen's Diamond Jubilee, which was accompanied by bunting, Union flag waving and street parties.

His proposal is extraordinary even by the jingoist standards of Britain's ruling elite. While World War II has long been a patriotic staple in Britain, 1914-1918 has occupied a different position. Unable to cite any democratic or moral imperative in its justification, it is synonymous with the horrors and senselessness of war—made even more poignant by the fact that the "war to end all wars" did nothing of the sort.

This sentiment was encapsulated by the Great War poets, such as Wilfred Owen whose famous verse described as "the old lie" the Latin exhortation *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (How sweet and right it is to die for one's country).

Owen's poem dealt with a chemical gas attack on British soldiers, such as occurred during the Battle of the Somme between July-November 1916. In those few months, over a million troops from all sides were killed or wounded, with more than 50,000 British casualties on a single day, July 1.

His disavowal of patriotism, however, spoke to the experience of every nationality in that war, as underscored by some of the most well-known of the military campaigns.

July 1, 1916 is on record as the bloodiest day in the history

of the British army, and the total number of British or Commonwealth killed at the Somme stands at 419,654. The total dead or wounded German soldiers from the Somme as a whole is estimated as similar, if not greater. The number of French casualties are recorded as 204,253.

The first Battle of Ypres between October and November 1914 claimed an estimated total of 300,000 killed or wounded. It would be followed by a further four battles for control of the same strategic Belgium town by the war's end, with more than a million casualties.

In the Battle of Gallipoli, April 1915-January 1916, the estimated dead or injured stands at 500,000, and in the Battle of Verdun, February-December 1916, the estimated dead or injured was 900,000.

The demand of the Russian masses for an end to the slaughter and for peace, and the inability of the bourgeoisie to provide it, played a central role in the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917.

It is with justification that BBC presenter Jeremy Paxman said he was "troubled" to hear Cameron comparing the anniversary to celebrations for the Diamond Jubilee. Only "a complete idiot would celebrate such a calamity", he said, explaining, "Three quarters of a million men never came back to this country. Millions of men served. Millions of men were wounded mentally and physically. No one would celebrate that. It was just Cameron's clumsy use of language".

Paxman's remarks brought a furious response from Downing Street, with Cameron aide Rob Wilson writing a letter to the BBC Director General to insist that he make the *Newsnight* presenter apologise.

Cameron's remarks were not "clumsy". They were deliberately calculated as part of the efforts by Britain's ruling class to rewrite history.

This was underscored by a comment in the *TES (Times Educational Supplement)* by John Blake, a history teacher in a London school. Timed to coincide with Armistice Day, Blake's article appeared under the disingenuous heading, "The first casualty: truth". Disingenuous because it claims

that previous presentations of World War I are false, and includes as one of the new “truths” now being invented that “many young men serving on the Western Front were happy with their lot”.

Blake describes as “profoundly dangerous” the attitude—held by 84 percent of those surveyed in one poll—that the purpose of “remembering the First World War is to learn about the horrors of war”.

He singles out three “myths” that must now be challenged. “[F]irst, that it was, without question, an unjust and imperialist war; second, that war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen provide a representative response of soldiers to the conflict; and third, that the generals of the First World War were ignorant and callous butchers who had no regard for their men”.

Blake cites how recent historians have “re-evaluate[d] the traditional villains of the piece”—Austria-Hungary and imperial Germany. Far from them acting menacingly against a “tiny, helpless Serbia”, it was they who faced an “aggressive, posturing, expansionist Serbia”.

Blake concedes that such presentations may not be “entirely correct”, but he introduces them in order to argue that the “causes of the war were much more complicated than a narrative of imperialist states seeking expansion suggests”.

He continues by suggesting that the war should be evaluated by the fact that it enabled British imperialism to perfect its techniques. British generals were “instinctively cautious with their men’s lives”, he writes. The waves of soldiers sent over the top together, was so as to “ensure that they arrived at the German lines together and thus were not slaughtered one by one...” (sic)

The Somme is “not the defining example of British tactics and strategy”, he asserts. Rather, by the war’s end, “the British Army was one of most sophisticated war machines ever developed, deploying tanks, aircraft and extraordinarily accurate artillery fire in support of precise infantry advances that smashed German lines. Even on the Somme, more German soldiers were killed or wounded than British ones”.

His comments make clear that the First World War is now up for “reinterpretation” precisely because it was an *imperialist* conflict—one in which, as Lenin explained, the major capitalist powers sought to redivide the globe among them.

By trying to extract the First World War from the blood and filth in which it is covered, the aim is to justify the contemporary reality of new imperialist wars of expansion.

The fact that Blake is the Chairman of Labour Teachers make clear that this is an undertaking agreed on by the British bourgeoisie as a whole.

This is underscored by the planned festivities for next

year’s Armed Forces day. A manufactured celebration of Britain’s military, first initiated in 2006 under the Blair Labour government, it will take place on June 28 in Stirling, Scotland.

That is the same day and place that supporters of Scottish independence in the referendum later that year will celebrate the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn and the victory of Scotland’s King Robert Bruce over King Edward II of England.

Amid the intended competing celebrations of British and Scottish nationalism, entirely ignored, is the fact that June 28 is also the 100th anniversary of the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo by student Gavrilo Princip, which provided the pretext for the outbreak of hostilities.

The recklessness with which the ruling elite and its political representatives now rush to rehabilitate imperialist militarism is in no small part dictated by popular opposition to war.

A November 2012 study by a Ministry of Defence (MoD) think tank, the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), is entitled *Risk: The Implications of Current Attitudes to Risk for the Joint Operational Concept*. In it, the DCDC bewails the lack of public support for military interventions, especially following Afghanistan and Iraq, which has meant that “the need to run military risks has become more difficult”. In response, it proposes greater efforts to mould public opinion to accept further and bloodier military conflicts, combining the already servile efforts of the media to this end with a state war propaganda agency.

Blake’s article in the *TES* is in line with this imperative. Accompanied by a section “Sign up and join the war effort”, it is aimed at influencing how the First World War should be taught in schools in the approach to its 100th anniversary.



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