SOORT BESTAND

10 11 2019

Bijlage(n): 00

War Resistance during the First World War: Reflections from Beyond the Centenary

Loïs Bibbings

In July 1916 20-year-old Robert Forrester, who had been at University studying Chemistry with the intention of becoming a teacher, found himself in Wandsworth military detention barracks. He had been tortured by his captors and threatened with more brutal treatment should he continue in his refusal to obey all military orders. As a Christian, he coped with his experiences by praying, seeking guidance and strength, but wondered how much more he could take and whether his refusal to cooperate in any way with the military would take too great a toll on him. Should he compromise in order that he might survive?

A few months previously Forrester had been called-up under the Military Service Act 1916, which introduced military conscription for men in Britain – a country which at this point in history had a professional military supplemented by volunteers in times of need and a strong sense that any form of military compulsion was foreign or, more specifically, Prussian. However, this same Military Service Act allowed men to apply for exemption from military service on the grounds that they had a conscientious objection. This Forrester had duly done, basing his stance on his Christian beliefs.

The tribunals which had judged his case recognised that he was genuine in his conscientious objection but they granted him only partial exemption. This meant that he was soldier but one who was not required to fight. However, to be a soldier of any sort was unacceptable to him. So, he did not report to the army. As a result, he was arrested by the civilian police and handed over to the military.

Once in military hands Forrester refused to obey any military orders, was court martialled and sent to Wandsworth military Detention Barracks to serve a 28-day sentence. It was at this point that the brutality began. Writing about one of his experiences of being beaten he described how '[t]hey repeatedly banged my head on the concrete floor and against projecting parts of the walls … they removed my boots and braces, and everything except shirt and trousers, and left me bruised and bleeding on the floor.' Subsequently, as a consequence of this kind of treatment, he said that his 'nervous system was strained to the highest pitch' and he feared that, if the torture continued, he may become suicidal (Peace Pledge Union archive).

When his sentence of 28 days was served, he again refused to obey orders, was court-martialled and sentenced to hard labour, this time in a civilian prison where conditions were hard but far less harsh than his experiences within the military. He was subsequently offered non-military work as an alternative but whilst on release he went absent without leave. He was soon reported to be a deserter in the then united Ireland, where conscription did not apply. It seems he was never caught, so he evaded the authorities for the rest of the war. He was discharged from the army in 1919.

Forrester was one of 20,000 men of military service age who conscientiously objected to military service in Britain during the First World War. Conscientious objectors came from all backgrounds. They objected for political, religious and/or moral reasons. There were those who were pacifists and objected to all war and there were those whose problem lay with capitalism and imperialism and this war. Conscientious objectors, therefore, included deeply religious men who strived to obey the law in as far as their consciences would allow them to do so and their number included anarchists like Guy Aldred whose political activism made him unlikely to countenance any form of cooperation with the authorities.

So, what objectors were and were not prepared to do varied considerably as did their actions. Some undertook alternative work either within or outside the military, others took the absolutist position, refusing to cooperate and spent their time in prison. And a few went on the run, using a network of supporters and hideouts around the country to evade the authorities. Some of these men, like Forrester, crossed to Ireland where they were hunted by the British. Others escaped from the hands of the authorities by travelling undercover to the US via underground routes which were already in existence, having been used by political radicals and Irish Nationalists.

Of the 20,000 British conscientious objectors some fared worse than others. A number died as a result of their wartime experiences. The first to lose his life was Walter Roberts who perishing at Dyce work camp in Scotland in 1916. He was held up as a martyr to the cause. Many more suffered as consequence of their stance which could impact on the health of an objector and it could ostracise men from their friends and communities - because for some they were seen as cowardly, unmanly and unpatriotic. Indeed, objection could result in families being split apart and make employment hard to find long after the war had ended. In addition, by the same measure that gave some women the vote and extended the male franchise, as a form of punishment the Government temporarily removed the vote from objectors who had not cooperated with the war effort.

But these war resisters were by no means entirely ostracised by society, abused or unsupported, nor were they universally seen as cowardly, unpatriotic and unmanly. Indeed, as we shall see, there were communities of resistance who worked alongside them around the country and nationally, with the No-Conscription Fellowship playing a central role in working on their behalf. And there were those who saw them as bravely standing for a truer patriotism, for a greater internationalism, or as a shining example of Christian or socialist masculinity, for example. Moreover, despite the loss of the vote, there were some like Christian Socialist and absolutist objector Walter Ayles who found favour with the electorate, winning back his place on the council in my home city of Bristol in 1919 and, subsequently, becoming a Member of Parliament for the city in 1924.

****

Mabel Tothill, a woman in her 40s, was also in Bristol during the war. Tothill was a Quaker who had worked for women's suffrage and against poverty. When war was declared her activities focused on peace and reconciliation and she campaigned against conscription. With the introduction of conscription her attention focused on supporting conscientious objectors and their families. This task fell increasingly on women as more and more men found themselves subject to conscription. Tothill took on a leading role in this work in the Bristol area. As well as being a pacifist she was a civil libertarian, believing that 'it is for us to see that the civil and religious liberties of our country are not further infringed, that her standards of right and wrong are not lowered, and that the God implanted guide in man which men call conscience is not scorned and put to shame' (Tothill, Tolerance or Persecution, National Labour Press, Manchester, 1916). In addition, for her those who refused to fight were patriots because objectors and their like were 'animated by a no less deep love of country than those whose courage and self-sacrifice on the battlefield we are proud to record' (Tothill, 'War and Social Order', The Friend, 9 October 1914 - and see June Hannam, Mabel Tothill: Feminist, Socialist, Pacifist, Bristol Radical History Group, Bristol, 2019).

The conscientious objector support operation in Bristol was well-organised and sophisticated and it tied into similar activity around the country as well as with national efforts. The No-Conscription Fellowship and its shadow national committee, made up again mainly of women, was at the centre of these labours. Amongst other things, in Bristol Tothill (and others like her working around the country) collected and disseminated information about the treatment and movement of objectors and kept careful records. Observers were sent to attend courts and tribunals and report on legal proceedings. 'Watchers' stood outside prisons, paying close attention to comings and goings. Prison visiting allowed further information to be gathered and intelligence to be exchanged. Communications with objectors' families added to the knowledge base. There was also fund-raising work and the production of anti-conscription propaganda at both the national and the local level. Such publications, along with anti-war and anti-Government literature produced by other organisations, continued to be published throughout the war, despite the fact that doing so was a criminal offence and resulted in some activists serving time in prison. In addition, objectors' families were cared for with financial help and food packages. Some of the objectors' children were even taken on holidays in order to bring some relief and joy into their lives.

Women like Mabel Tothill played a key role in terms of the wider context of war resistance in Britain. Women's efforts for peace throughout the war were considerable, including international as well as local and national activism. For example, in spring 1915 campaigners for female enfranchisement who opposed the war held an international Women's Peace Congress in the Hague which was attended by a delegation from Britain. From 1916 the Women's Peace Crusade sought to bring about a similar goal by influencing opinion at home. The Crusade had its beginnings in socialism and focused on working class women's suffering during the war. It worked to end the war by negotiation and led mass demonstrations. It operated from 1916 until 1918, starting in Scotland and gradually spreading into the North of England and Wales.

What then of Tothill? Once able to vote and be elected, she, like Ayles, saw favour amongst voters in the immediate aftermath of the war, becoming the first woman on Bristol City Council in 1920. So, despite her opposition to conscription and the war, she too was far from unpopular with local residents.

****

Born in 1883 Max Plowman was a writer. In 1914 he was far from enthusiastic about the war but felt he should join up. This he did at Christmas. He became an officer in the West Yorkshire Regiment of the army and served at the Front in France. He was 'knocked out by a shell' and sent back to England suffering from concussion and shell-shock in 1917. Back in England he revisited his views about war and came to a different conclusion, finding that 'organised warfare of any kind is always organised murder'. As a consequence, he tried to resign and leave the army on grounds of conscientious objection. In his resignation letter he explained: 'I am resigning my commission because I no longer believe that war can end war. War is disorder & disorder cannot breed order. Doing evil that good may come is apparent folly … virtue cannot be imposed; it can only be encouraged by those who practice it' (Plowman, Bridge into the Future, Andrew Dakers, London, 1944).

Because he was an officer Plowman could, in theory, resign but the position during a time of war and when conscription was in force was less clear. The army hoped he would be found physically unfit or insane, so they would not need to deal with a tricky situation which might gain wide publicity and encourage others to copy him. However, he was found to be fit for fighting, meaning the army court-martialled and dismissed him for disobeying his superior officer. He was not, however, punished. Once a civilian, as a man of military age, he became liable for conscription and caused yet more difficulties for the authorities by seeking exemption as a conscience objector. The army, of course, was unlikely to want him back but it was difficult to know what to do with him. In the end a final decision as to his fate was continually postponed until the Armistice came and the use of the Military Service Act ended, meaning he was a free man.

Unlike the other war resisters mentioned here, who for various reasons stood against the war from the outset, Plowman changed his mind and moved in an entirely different direction. Plowman though was an officer. What he achieved in leaving the army was not a route that was available for ordinary soldiers. There were, however, other ways for soldiers to show resistance.

Once in the military in order to evade service there were men who, for example, failed to report, went absent without leave when in the UK, or deserted when at the Front, risking severe punishment including the possibility of execution. Tens of thousands of men acted in these ways – in 1917 alone around 80,000 men were listed by the police in Britain as being sought by the military. And there were other ways of resisting for a soldier – he might feign illness or acquire an injury, for instance. Or there was the live and let live approach which was been described by soldiers who spent time in the trenches, whereby men deliberately avoided harming others by refusing to fire or aiming away from the enemy.

Objectors too could change their minds and leave the fighting Front. Thomas Pettifor Corder Catchpool was 31 and working as an engineer when war was declared. He rushed to join up but did not become a soldier. As a Quaker he became a member of the Friends Ambulance Unit and served time assisting the injured in France and in Belgium near this very city. He was awarded the Mons Star for this work. Following the introduction of conscription in Britain, he decided that in order to follow his conscience he now needed to make a stand against conscription and for peace. He left the Ambulance Unit, returned to Britain and spent the rest of the war as an absolutist conscientious objector in prison.

****

These three stories and the wider picture I have begun to connect them with represent some of the lesser-known or hidden histories of the First World War in relation to the UK. There is far more that could be said. I have only fleetingly referred to Ireland, for example, where support for and opposition to the war was complicated by political and religious divides, where the mere possibility of introducing conscription caused a crisis in 1918 and where bloody conflict was to lead to partition after the war.

Back in Britain, where military compulsion did apply, some men sought to avoid conscription by purchasing a fake medical certificate in order to claim they were unfit to fight, or a forged certificate of exemption from the Military Service Act. Within the military there were mutinies and strikes - both at home and abroad. For example, after the truce of November 1918 unrest in the military was widespread, with complaints about delays to demobilisation, conditions, work and pay key issues for soldiers. On the home front there was concern about the possibility of revolution, with soldiers protesting around the country, refusing to obey orders, turning up at local headquarters or the town hall or heading for the War Office in London to make their demands known.

But in order to study British soldier strikes, mutinies and refusals we need travel further afield, to Belfast, the Western Front and Russia, for example. And we need to look to the experiences and actions of the vast numbers of soldiers and labourers from around the world who fought and worked for Britain during the war. The British West Indies Regiment, for instance. Having patriotically volunteered for service these men were treated appallingly and, deemed not fit to fight, they were left unarmed and given the most filthy and hazardous jobs. And they were paid less than the white soldiers. The Regiment mutinied in Taranto, Italy in 1918

There was also industrial unrest on British shores and again talk of revolution, with one hive of activity centring upon 'Red' Clydeside in Scotland. There in Glasgow the Clyde Workers' Committee campaigned against the Government and the industrial conscription imposed by the Munitions Acts which removed engineers' freedom to choose who they worked for. Alongside this anti-war propaganda was produced and disseminated by Marxist and socialist activists, resulting in a number of criminal convictions and the imprisonment of key local figures.

In Wales too there was dissention, with mass rallies against conscription. Here the town of Merthyr Tydfil was considered a centre for anti-war feeling. Indeed, the word 'Merthyrism' was invented by The Times newspaper to describe the context. There were concerns about the stability of area, leading intelligence officers to be deployed in order to monitor and report back on the situation. The Olympia Rink in Merthyr, which was more commonly used for roller skating, was the site for the largest anti-war demonstrations in South Wales, with several thousand attending meetings there.

Large-scale demonstrations were also seen elsewhere in Britain. For example, on 9 April 1916 a demonstration organised by one of the women's suffrage organisations was held in Trafalgar Square in protest against, amongst other things, conscription.

Beyond such hidden histories in relation to the UK, I could range further and tell stories from other countries. There were conscientious objectors in New Zealand and Canada, for instance, and they were treated very differently from men who made a similar claim in, for example, Germany. There were strikes within the militaries of other states – and desertions and mutinies. Moreover, unease and unrest amongst the populous at home was not limited to the UK. But these are stories for others to tell. I have chosen to concentrate upon what I know best.

****

As a lawyer and historian, a teacher and communicator, a great deal of my work is about telling stories. Stories about murders, manslaughters, assaults, thefts and joint unlawful enterprises, for instance. All these accounts, of course, are told with particular purposes in mind. Today I have chosen to take the same approach, focusing upon the wartime experiences of two men and a woman. Robert Forrester the conscientious objector, Mabel Tothill the peace and anti-conscription activist, and Max Plowman the soldier who changed his mind. One of my purposes here is to give a sense of the personal reality of standing out against or questioning the First World War, perhaps encouraging an emotional connection with these individuals. But I also wanted to use these stories to tell of the wider context of dissention, of disillusion and of a lack of enthusiasm in relation to the war.

These histories serve other purposes too. They pose a challenge to dominant representations of the First World War within the UK. For example, although there were exceptions, during the years of the centenary most of the attention has been on stories of volunteers (even though over half of the men who joined the army during the war were conscripts so had no choice) and of battles and fighting. There has been a particular focus on a few spheres of military activity, in particular the Western Front (even though this was a World War). The depiction of those involved in (and affected by) the conflict has been overwhelmingly focused upon white western men and (sometimes) women. Whilst the home front has been considered, including women's roles, it is the activities in support of the war which have been centred upon. Whilst conscientious objectors have not been entirely forgotten, the wider complexities of dissention, disillusionment and anger have played little, if any, role.

These stories need to be told and remembered. They are of the past but they are crucial for the present and the future. They reveal a rich and complex history, where there was not only the fighting involved in warfare but also fighting against militarism and (in the case of some activists) for peace. A history that should be told. A history that complicates dominant present-day ideas of the First World War and challenges by posing questions about that conflict and about how we remember and memorialise it, suggesting that there are more people to be commemorated than much commemoration currently encompasses. These lesser-known histories, along with other histories of internationalism, peace and anti-militarism, of questioning the need for war in general and for particular wars, of a lack of enthusiasm for war, of disillusion, dissention, protest and of anger, are also of crucial importance now and in looking to the future. They are important because they can encourage more nuanced and more critical thinking about present day wars and about the threat of future wars. In short, telling and remembering these stories about the past can become a form of war resistance.

****

I want to pause at this point, with just one final section of my lecture yet to deliver, in order to thank, in particular, the Flemish Peace Institute, Ypres, the City of Peace, and the In Flanders Fields Museum for making this lecture possible. It is a huge honour to be asked to deliver this lecture. I am grateful and deeply moved to be here, in this city at Armistice.

I also need to thank the organisations and individuals I research with and whose expertise, knowledge and research I draw upon along with my own here. In the UK this research into hidden stories of World War One, with its focus on peace and anti-militarist histories, has been very much a collaborative effort and an endeavour which is by no means at an end despite the closing of centenary activities. There is a great deal of work to be done.

I do not propose citing a full credit and reference list and will, I am sure, forget to include some significant contributors, for which I apologise. So, thanks and acknowledgement go to Cyril Pearce, Julian Putkowski, the Remembering the Real World War One Group of which I am a member, the Everyday Lives in War Centre at the University of Hertfordshire, the Peace Pledge Union, and participants in the Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience Festival 2019. Thanks also go to the Shot at Dawn campaigners who worked in the UK for the pardoning of men executed by the military during the First World War – this is not a story that (directly) figures here but is it one which is of crucial importance when it comes to complicating thinking about the First World War and about militarism more generally.

****

In concluding, I want to return to the importance of telling and remembering the kind of hidden histories of war which I have highlighted today as a form of war resistance. For example, in the UK this might entail the construction of a longer history of conscientious objection to military service which takes in the Second World War, the period of National Service which followed and, with the end of any form of military compulsion almost 60 years ago, the rights of military personnel who develop a conscientious objection whilst serving in the Forces today. My own work has sought to begin this task. It is with this idea of developing hidden histories which join the First World War with other time periods in mind that we move to a final story for today.

Having joined up in 2004 at the age of 22, in 2007 Joe Glenton, a Lance Corporal in the Royal Logistic Corps, went absent without leave when he found he was to be deployed to Afghanistan for a second tour. Glenton did so because he had conscience-based concerns about the UK's involvement in Afghanistan. He would have applied to leave the Forces had he known that this was possible – today conscientious objection is recognised in the military but this tends not to be publicised to soldiers. Glenton was charged, tried by court martial and convicted. He was sentenced to nine months of military detention and reduced to the ranks. He subsequently left the military and now works against militarism, amongst other things using his history to explain and educate. I leave the closing words of this lecture to him:

In recent years I have fallen in with a band of former veterans who are unlike anything this country has ever seen. Dynamic, rebellious and now 170-strong, Veterans for Peace UK has representatives from every branch of the UK forces and a few from foreign militaries, some with service records that extend as far back as D-day. Our pledge actually means something of value to the world. It is an oath to resist war, militarism and empire, and we take it as men and women who have taken part in these things.
Britain has had plenty of rebel soldiers, but Veterans for Peace is by my reckoning the only group of its kind in British history. The promise we make is to educate young people on the realities of military service and war, to resist war and militarism, and to support others who do the same. We hope to convince people that war is not the answer to the problems of the 21st century.

No Queens, no heirs or officers involved. No daft ceremonies, no patriotism or propaganda needed. Just a pledge made by each of us to ourselves, to one another and to the generations who will follow to make the world a less violent place (Glenton, Guardian, 24 September 2015).

****