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“The British Soldier is no Bolshevik”. The British Army, Discipline, and the Demobilisation Strikes of 1919

Abstract: This article considers the breakdown in discipline in the British Army which occurred in Britain and on the Western Front during the process of demobilisation at the end of the First World War. Many soldiers, retained in the army immediately after the Armistice, went on strike, and some formed elected committees, demanding their swifter return to civilian life. Their perception was that the existing demobilisation system was unjust, and men were soon organised by those more politically conscious members of the armed forces who had enlisted for the duration of the war. At one stage in January 1919, over 50,000 soldiers were out on strike, a fact that was of great concern to the British civilian and military authorities who miscalculated the risk posed by soldiers. Spurred on by many elements of the press, especially the Daily Mail and Daily Herald, who both fanned and dampened the flames of discontent, soldiers’ discipline broke down, demonstrating that the patriotism which had for so long kept them in line could only extend so far. Though senior members of the government, principally Winston Churchill, and the military, especially Douglas Haig and Henry Wilson, were genuinely concerned that Bolshevism had ‘infected’ the army, or, at the very least, the army had been unionised, their fears were not realised. The article examines the government’s strategy regarding demobilisation, its efforts to assess the risk of politicization and manage the press, and its responses to these waves of strikes, arguing that, essentially, these soldiers were civilians first and simply wanted to return home, though, in the post-war political climate, government fears were very real.

Keywords: demobilisation, Bolshevism, British Army, discipline, strikes

Immediately hostilities cease we must be prepared for a general relaxation of the bonds of discipline; men’s minds, energies and thoughts will no longer be occupied by the task of defeating and destroying the enemy, but will trend naturally towards early return home, the establishment or reconstruction of business or other kindred matters. Hence as soon as demobilisation commences a feeling of jealousy will arise, men will keenly watch the departures of others and will institute comparisons as to their respective claims, there will be generally an unsettled state and as the natural consequences of a prolonged and arduous war, nerves will be in an irritable and an unstable condition. We have, therefore, to realise that

the temper of the troops during this period will be a factor not to be lightly disregarded, but it must equally be recognised that this state of mind is natural and only to be expected.¹

This memorandum was written in October 1917, over a year before the Armistice, by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of forces in France and Belgium, for the consideration of the Secretary of State for War, Lord Derby. He wrote it in response to the draft plans for military demobilisation, which specified that men would leave the army based on their occupation, assessed on the economic needs of the country. While stating that he understood these requirements, he was of the opinion that the disciplinary side of demobilisation had not been given sufficient attention. His thoughts were distributed to both the Army Council and the War Cabinet later in 1917. In a rebuttal letter, he was told that the economy must take precedence, and that 'powerful aid to the maintenance of discipline in France will be afforded by the knowledge that any active indiscipline will, in accordance with the regulations which have been drafted to carry out the Scheme of Demobilisation, entail delay in the man's return to this country'.²

After the turbulent few months of strikes and collective disobedience in the armed forces following the cessation of hostilities, this memorandum resurfaced and was presented once more to the Cabinet by Winston Churchill, the newly appointed Secretary of State for War. As a supplement to it, Churchill stated that 'it will be seen that he [Haig] forecasted accurately the state of indiscipline and disorganisation which would arise in the army if...favouritism were to rule in regard to the discharge of men'. Additionally, that it was 'surprising that the Commander-in-Chief's prescient warnings were utterly ignored, and the army left to be irritated and almost convulsed by a complicated artificial system open at every point to suspicion of jobbery and humbug'.³ There was certainly no doubting

¹ TNA WO32/5241 Memorandum by Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, to the Secretary of State for War, 4 October 1917.

² Ibid. Reply to Sir Douglas Haig, from the Army Council, 5 December 1917.

³ Ibid. Memorandum presented to the War Cabinet by Winston Churchill, 21 February 1917; TNA WO32/5241 Letters between H.J. Creedy, War Office, and J.T. Davies, Private Secretary to Lloyd George, 25 February 1919 and 4 March 1919; CAB23/4/48 Conclusions of the 274th Meeting of the War Cabinet, 15 November 1917.

Haig's knowledge of the army under his command and the risk that demobilisation had on the prospect of a breakdown in discipline.

The initial scheme of demobilisation certainly had a huge impact on the discipline and general conduct of the army. Events at Folkestone, Calais, and many other areas across the United Kingdom confirmed this. Discipline was not a given, and some soldiers' unwillingness to extend their patriotism beyond the end of the conflict, is testament to the limited nature of discipline in the British Army of the First World War. The army's good discipline during the war has broadly been attributed to the unique British regimental system which promoted an inward looking perspective and encouraged pride in the regimental cap badge; as well as the strength of officer-man relations, and a promotion of paternalism through the Edwardian notion of working class deference towards social superiors – a conception which easily extended to the frontline. However, a distinction also emerged between regular (initially, the pre-war professional soldiers) and New Army battalions (those who enlisted in the opening months of the war), which meant that the latter were treated much more leniently. Essentially, officers were less strict, lacked formality, and relied much more heavily on self-discipline.⁴ In the context of the demobilisation strikes this is significant as, essentially, soldiers, as well as the military authorities, ceased to view the men as anything other than civilians. The vast majority of soldiers wished to return to civilian life as quickly as possible because they had no desire to make soldiering their profession.⁵

Nevertheless, this did not mean that there were no disciplinary concerns. After all, the New Armies had been recruited from the mainstream of society, rather than from the margins, as had the professional army until 1914. David Englander has stated that these new soldiers 'seemed confident,

⁴ I. Beckett, T. Bowman, and M. Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017), p.154; T. Bowman, *Irish Regiments in the Great War; Discipline and Morale* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003), p.203; G. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches; Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2000), pp.178-9. For more on the maintenance of discipline and morale in the British Army during the First World War see J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990); C. Gibson, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914-18* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014).

⁵ Beckett, Bowman, Connelly, *The British Army*, p.141.

assertive, and altogether more resistant to the culture and ethos of the fighting services. Citizen-soldiers, though they might be made into efficient troops, remained suspect'.⁶ This ethos, and therefore the foundation of its discipline, relied on the 'soldierly-spirit', and this was most clearly expressed through patriotism and self-sacrifice. It appealed to the spiritual and the intellectual in this respect.⁷ Citizen soldiers, both volunteers and conscripts alike, had been inculcated with the belief that their discipline came from their patriotism, and especially their self-sacrifice – selflessly giving up their families, jobs, and lives. In this context, it is hardly surprising that once the enemy was defeated in November 1918, this notion of self-sacrifice was no longer relevant, that this form of discipline no longer applied. They were civilians once more, and should be able to return to their pre-war lives with the minimum of delay. As Helen B. McCartney has noted regarding the Liverpool Territorials, after the Armistice the men felt that they had completed their task, essentially there was no longer any incentive to endure the discomforts of army life.⁸

If we are to argue that soldiers' discipline came from their patriotism and self-sacrifice it is important to state what is meant by these two terms. Anthony D. Smith's in his definition states that the nation is 'a named and self-defined human community whose members cultivate shared myths, memories, symbols, values, and traditions' and that 'reside in and identify with a historic homeland, create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and common laws'.⁹ This is crucial in the context of First World War propaganda. In his study of patriotism and propaganda, David Monger has argued that the core narrative of wartime propaganda revolved around patriotic duty, including a 'three-pronged' mixture, combining 'civic patriotism', suffused with the rhetoric of 'sacrificial patriotism', with an evocation of what he terms 'conrescent community', growing together

⁶ D. Englander, 'Discipline and morale in the British army, 1917-1918', in J. Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), pp.126-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.126; 131.

⁸ H.B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers; The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p.240.

⁹ A.D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2008), p.25.

through shared sacrifice and acceptance of duty.¹⁰ John Horne has also argued that the remobilisation of society in 1917-18 focussed on the survival of the nation and its essential values depended on military victory.¹¹ Though these studies are primarily concerned with civilian morale, much of this rhetoric also extends to soldiers. Alexander Watson has argued that propaganda that could provide meaning to a soldier's sacrifice was eagerly accepted, especially if it related to a duty to defend one's home community.¹² In a more recent article with Patrick Porter, it has also been noted that for all classes of soldier, but especially middle-class men, the war represented an experience of sacrificial self-improvement and national renewal, and that victory validated this sacrifice.¹³ With an increasingly politically conscious working-class army, these notions surely had limits, with the coming of the Armistice, these notions lost their significance very quickly.

Throughout 1917 and 1918, though reaching the point of mutiny at Etaples, unrest was relatively minor. This does not mean that fears did not exist, especially within the context of the Russian Revolution. Concerns about the fragile nature of discipline, and the potential Bolshevik influence on soldiers, had surfaced when a number of Soldiers and Workers Councils had been formed in 1917.¹⁴ In July of that year, Lord Derby had stated to the War Cabinet that;

In view of the fact that the army of today is by no means as highly disciplined as that in existence before the war, and also that the classes of men serving at the present moment include individuals of every shade of education and opinion, it is probable that the movement to encourage soldiers to take part in political questions will be fanned by certain political factions for their own ends.¹⁵

¹⁰ D. Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain; The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2012), p.86. For the 'language of sacrifice' see A. Gregory, *The Last Great War; British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), Chapters 4-6.

¹¹ J. Horne, 'Remobilizing for 'total war': France and Britain, 1917-1918', in J. Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), pp.204-5.

¹² A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War; Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), pp.82-4.

¹³ P. Porter and A. Watson, 'Bereaved and aggrieved: combat motivation and the ideology of sacrifice in the First World War', *Historical Research*, vol.83, no.219, 2010, pp.156-64.

¹⁴ Beckett, Bowman, Connelly, *The British Army*, p.154.

¹⁵ TNA CAB24/22 Memorandum by Lord Derby to the War Cabinet, 26 July 1917.

As both F.S. Northedge and William L. Langer argued in the late 1960s, the Revolution had a profound impact on Britain domestically, as well as for its armed forces, and led some prominent politicians, such as Winston Churchill, to urge the military destruction of the Bolshevik regime as the only safeguard against communism in Europe.¹⁶ More recently, Chris Wrigley has suggested that it is no surprise that leading members of the government expressed concern about the spread of Bolshevism in Britain, and that the potential for unrest in the armed forces only accentuated these fears.¹⁷ Though unfounded, these fears certainly informed decision making, and were exacerbated by the concerted effort by elements of the labour movement to enlist support from the armed forces once strikes had broken out. As Nick Mansfield has observed, the army even served as a conduit leading people towards labour organisations such as the National Union of Agricultural Workers, and the National Union of Railwaymen.¹⁸ For an establishment suspicious of unionism, this must have been an alarming development.

The historiography that focusses on the strikes themselves has been largely partisan in nature, often tending to play up the Bolshevik or, at a minimum, the trade union influence. The prominent Marxist, Tom Wintringham, wrote of his own role in mutinies in France immediately after the war, stressing the political consciousness of those involved.¹⁹ In his exhaustive work on the strikes, Andrew Rothstein, utilising an impressive array of national and provincial newspapers, detailed the importance of the political landscape in encouraging the unrest. Rothstein, also a participant in strikes on Salisbury Plain in 1919, was in no doubt of their political motivation and significance.²⁰ In his study of British

¹⁶ F.S. Northedge, '1917-1919 The Implications for Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.3, no.4, 1968, p.196; W.L. Langer, 'The Well-Spring of Our Discontents', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.3, no.4, 1968, pp.14-5.

¹⁷ C. Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour; The Post-War Coalition 1918-1922* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1990), p.24; C. Wrigley, 'The state and the challenge of labour in Britain 1917-20', in C. Wrigley (ed.), *Challenges of Labour; Central and west Europe 1917-1920* (Routledge, London, 1993), pp.262-3.

¹⁸ N. Mansfield, 'The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailors, 1917-1921: A View from the Marches', *Family and Community History*, vol.7. no.1, May 2004, p.25.

¹⁹ T. Wintringham, *Mutiny: Being a Survey of Mutinies from Spartacus to Invergordon* (Lindsay Drummond, London, 1936).

²⁰ A. Rothstein, *The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919* (The MacMillan Press, London, 1980).

army mutineers, Julian Putkowski points to the fact that nearly 800 British soldiers were arraigned as mutineers between 1914 and 1922, and suggests that senior officers lacked a consistent application of military law when it came to the demobilisation strikes as so few appear in the registers after the Armistice.²¹ In the most detailed study of unrest during the First World War, Gloden Dallas and Douglas Gill point out that officers lost the power of command and that the stability of British society was placed in doubt in early 1919. Pointing to the alleged gulf between soldiers and the workers movement, they claim that the 'soldiers' dramas' formed but a sideshow to wider demonstrations of unrest.²² This latter point takes it too far. To the authorities, the risk posed by soldiers, and fears of the war's brutalising effect on them and society at large, were of great concern, especially because of the actions of prominent socialists supported by the *Daily Herald*.²³ On the whole, soldiers and institutions such as the press towed the line, as they had done for much of the war, but the system of demobilisation and the consequences of its unjust nature placed the continued good discipline of the British army in doubt for much of 1919.

The objective of this article is to trace the government's actions in response to these demobilisation strikes, how it made an assessment of the risks of politicization, the efforts it made in order to manage the situation, and also the press. Moreover, a discussion will be undertaken about the failure of left-wing soldiers' organisations to recruit men to their cause once strikes broke out. Using a range of official documents, newspaper reports, memoirs, and some accounts given by soldiers of the events in 1919, the article will ultimately argue that the government misread the situation and overestimated the risks of radicalisation, most soldiers simply wishes to return home.

²¹ J. Putkowski, *British Army mutineers 1914-1922* (Francis Boutle Publishers, London, 1998), p.12.

²² G. Dallas and D. Gill, *The Unknown Army; Mutinies in the British Army in World War I* (The Thetford Press, Thetford, 1985), p.138.

²³ The *Daily Herald* had an uneasy relationship with the Labour Party and was much more extreme in its views. See S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of The Political Press in Britain; Volume Two: The Twentieth Century* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984), pp.5; 234-5.

THE ARMISTICE AND THE FIRST SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Plans for demobilisation had been under way since 1916 so it was not as if the authorities were caught unprepared when the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918.²⁴ Many soldiers were caught by surprise though and, in contrast to the scenes at home, reactions were muted. Captain Charles Carrington, future Professor of History at Cambridge University, recalled that ‘victory was sudden and complete and the general sensation was that of awaking from a nightmare.’²⁵ Brigadier General Percy Crozier, Commander of 119th (Welsh) Brigade, 40th Division, stated that though men and women all over the world ‘went mad’, the fighting men fresh from the line thanked God for delivery.²⁶ George Jameson even went as far as to say that once the initial shock had subsided, he had the feeling of having been sacked and kicked out of a job, ‘like being made redundant’.²⁷ Others recalled awe, great relief, bewilderment, and shock at the speed of the German collapse.²⁸ It was claimed that a common view held by soldiers was that ‘we could now live happily ever after in a “land fit for heroes to live in” as the Prime Minister intended’.²⁹ Rapid demobilisation became a rallying cry during the General Election campaign in December.³⁰ Newspapers made the business of demobilisation theirs, the *Daily Mail*, labelling itself for much of the war as “The Soldiers’ Paper”, ran a column entitled “dilly-dally”, which gave exhaustive examples of demobilisation delays. In the days leading up to the election it wrote ‘it seems that no one quite knows what is happening, notwithstanding the official boast that demobilisation plans have been in hand for two years’.³¹

²⁴ For early discussions on plans for demobilisation see *The Problem of Demobilisation; A Statement and some suggestions* (Co-Operative Printing Society, London, 1916); Demobilisation as a whole was an administrative nightmare – fourteen separate departments were involved, initially headed up by Sir Eric Geddes, see C. Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour*, pp.24-9.

²⁵ C. Carrington, *Soldier From the Wars Returning* (Hutchinson and Co. Ltd, London, 1965), p.250.

²⁶ F.P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man’s Land* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1930), p.232.

²⁷ IWM Sound Archive, Interview with George Brumwell Jameson, Trooper, 1/1st Northumberland Hussars, accession number 7363, 1984. The IWM Sound Archive is collection of over 33,000 recording, compiled throughout the 20th century, relating to conflict since 1914.

²⁸ R. Feilding, *War Letters to a Wife; France and Flanders, 1915-1919* (Medici Society, London, 1929), p.357; IWM, Interview with Albert Birtwhistle, NCO in 1/6th Btn, East Lancashire Regiment, accession number 11970, 1991; Interview with Donald Murray, NCO in 8th Btn, King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, accession number 25548, 1973.

²⁹ Carrington, *Soldier From the Wars Returning*, p.250.

³⁰ *The Times*, 12 December 1918.

³¹ *Daily Mail*, 9 December 1918. See also 5, 7, 10, 11 December 1918.

The authorities had devised a priority system which was driven by the needs of the peacetime economy, akin to the draft plan sent to Haig in late 1917. The first soldiers to be released would be “demobilisers”, those who performed tasks in civilian life that would speed up the demobilisation of others. These would be followed by “pivotal men”, who could provide employment for others. Thirdly, there were so-called “slip men”, labelled as such because of the slips of paper that authorised their demobilisation, who could provide proof that they had a job waiting for them upon their return to civilian life.³² After these groups, a general demobilisation could occur. However, it was the third category of men that was to provide the catalyst for some of the initial unrest in early 1919, for “slip men” were, more often than not, those who had entered the army later on in the war.

The first major trouble occurred at Folkestone on 3rd January. According to some reports, upwards of 10,000 men refused to attend parade, having held a meeting the previous day, and declined to embark on boats bound for France. Instead, the large body of men marched to the Town Hall to pay a visit to the Mayor of Folkestone. Speeches ‘of a moderate tone’ were made, claiming that many applications for demobilisation were being ignored, despite men having jobs waiting for them.³³ Some participants also claimed resentment towards officers, whose conditions were much more favourable compared to those of the men.³⁴ By the evening, the situation had been resolved when military officials, with the approval of the War Office, decided that rather than proceed with disciplinary measures against the men ‘whose discontent seemed to have arisen in the main from genuine misunderstanding’, time should be given for explanations.³⁵ The men were dealt with individually, those with contracts for work were demobilised, those with contracts which were not yet fully in order were permitted an additional weeks’ leave to attend to the necessary paperwork, and those with no prospects of contracts would return to duty at once. Lord Milner, as Secretary of State for War, wrote

³² S.R. Graubard, ‘Military Demobilisation in Great Britain Following the First World War’, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol.19, no.4, December, 1947, pp.297-311.

³³ A fuller account of the Folkestone Strike can be found in Rothstein, *Soldiers Strikes*, pp.37-9. See also newspaper accounts in *The Times*, 6 January 1919; *Daily Express*, 6 January 1919; *Daily Mail*, 6 January 1919; *Western Daily Press*, 6 January 1919.

³⁴ Quoted in Dallas and Gill, *Unknown Army*, p.105.

³⁵ *Western Daily Press*, 6 January 1919.

to David Lloyd George stating that these concessions were ‘the best way out of a bad business’.³⁶ It seemed as if the disturbance was over as quickly as it began, but this leniency would come back to haunt the authorities.

Within twenty-four hours, other strikes swept across the country, beginning in Dover.³⁷ Army Service Corps men stationed at Osterley Park, drove to Whitehall to put their case to the Prime Minister. One participant, a sergeant, told a reporter that ‘we have been informed that our branch of the service would be the last to be demobilised. Most of us have had over two years in France, and have been wounded’.³⁸ In the week following the demonstration at Folkestone, using Rothstein’s thorough accounts of strikes across Great Britain, a very conservative estimate puts the number of soldiers striking as a result of demobilisation delays at over 52,000 (approximately 1.5% of men under arms).³⁹ While only a fraction of the total, it is unsurprising that the authorities were concerned. When men of the Army Service Corps (ASC) descended on Whitehall from camps on the outskirts of London, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Sir Henry Wilson, wrote to Derby stating that;

The heart of the present troubles in the Army lies in the reckless speeches and promises made during the recent elections, and in constant civilian and therefore ignorant and dangerous interference in our demobilisation scheme. Exactly where we are drifting to – for we are drifting – I don’t know. At the present moment there are rows of lorries outside this Office and 1,000 lorrymen up from Kempton with demands of sorts...One thing is certain that unless P[rime] M[Minister] buckles to and makes it clear that he and the Government are solid behind the W[ar] O[ffice] and the officers of the Army we shall lose the Army, and then the Navy and then the Air Force.⁴⁰

³⁶ Quoted in Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour*, p.27.

³⁷ Detailed accounts of the many strikes and disturbances may be found in Rothstein, *Soldiers Strikes*, pp.39-65.

³⁸ Quoted in Dallas and Gill, *Unknown Army*, p.106.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Wilson to Derby, 7 January 1919, quoted in K. Jeffery (ed.), *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson 1918-1922* (Army Records Society, London, 1985), pp.73-4.

The ignorant civilians to which Wilson referred were undoubtedly elements of the press. When reporting the first strikes, the *Daily Mail*, under the heading “Brainless Demobilisation”, stated that Sir Eric Geddes had ‘so far successfully evaded the rope and lamp-post that are said to await the politician who fails in his task’, and that the “Red Tabs” were responsible for the ‘blundering’ at Folkestone and elsewhere. Furthermore, that ‘the lack of brains and of foresight displayed by the War Office is interfering with the restoration of national trade and prosperity’, and that ‘owing to the abundant respect which officials have for one another, and their capacity for taking as long as possible to do nothing, we doubt whether even Folkestone will prove to be a sufficient awakening to them’.⁴¹

Some of this criticism was in itself also unjust. After all, according to official figures, even by the end of 1918, over 330,000 officers and men had been demobilised.⁴² This was despite, as one Demobilisation Officer recalled, demobilisation taking place according to a plan which ‘only a fatuous [sic] on army forms could have invented’.⁴³ An additional 71,210 had left the armed forces by the end of the first week in January, while nearly double that rate, 132,806, had left by 16th January. This represented 5.2% of the officers and 12.6% of the other ranks serving on 11th November.⁴⁴ Even before the unrest, these were fairly impressive figures. The fact that a higher rate of other ranks had been demobilised, leaving a disproportionate number of officers in service, further demonstrates the complex nature of discipline and officer-man relations in the British armed forces immediately after the war. If we are to make the valid assertion that discipline was maintained for much of the war because of good officer-man relations, then how could a higher proportion of officers translate to poor discipline after the war? One way to explain it is to take Churchill’s declaration that many of the most reliable non-commissioned officers had been prematurely demobilised, leading to a breakdown of discipline at a local level.⁴⁵ This certainly has some validity, but only tells half of the story. It is also

⁴¹ *Daily Mail*, 6 January 1919.

⁴² TNA WO32/5242 Memorandum showing the numbers of men demobilised between 11 November 1918 and 2 January 1919, 7 January 1919.

⁴³ Feilding, *War Letter to a Wife*, p.372.

⁴⁴ TNA WO32/5248 Letter from the Adjutant General, France, to the Secretary of State for War, 18 January 1919; War Cabinet Report on the Weekly Appreciation of Numbers Demobilised, 21 January 1919.

⁴⁵ TNA WO32/5242 Memorandum on Demobilisation, 14 January 1919.

possible to point to the fact that a soldiers' sense of patriotism and self-sacrifice was no longer applicable in this post-war environment.

DAMAGE CONTROL

Immediately after the wave of strikes, military censors put a stop to most reporting of the disturbances across the country, and this clearly had an effect on the stance of the *Daily Mail*. The day after its vitriolic article about demobilisation a more moderate article commented, under the headline "Steady!", that;

Aroused at last by the protests of the newspapers and the public, the authorities are taking action to remedy the delays and individual injustices of demobilisation. They have met with good-humoured demonstrations of the soldiers tactfully and in the right spirit. The men will gain nothing further by organised unrest. Their common sense will tell them that any indiscipline will only prejudice the efforts to improve and speed-up the machinery.⁴⁶

While not condemning the men for striking, the tone was clearly one of conciliation, urging men to respect authority. For the Sir George Lansbury-owned *Herald*, however, the tone remained belligerent. The strikes were in fact what its front page described as "The Great Mutiny": 'it was sheer, flat, brazen, open and successful mutiny. They [the soldiers] knew it, and they did it'. For the newspapers' special correspondent, apparently in Folkestone, this was born as a result of incomprehensible forms and red tape. Trade unionists had been elected as officials for a new Soldiers' Union, a point stressed by the paper 'because of the attempts in some organs of the Press to show the whole movement as one of jealousy towards the organised workers at home', and, ultimately, the whole movement was a victory for democracy.⁴⁷ Now was not a time for conciliation, it was time for action. During the following week, the paper noted how a 'great silence' had descended upon the

⁴⁶ *Daily Mail*, 7 January 1919.

⁴⁷ *The Herald; The National Labour Weekly*, 11 January 1919 (*The Daily Herald from March 1919*).

'Capitalist Press'. Rather insightfully, articles stated that the troubles had come from the government, and that the government press had only themselves to thank. A month previous, they had been 'vociferously denouncing "Dilly" and "Dally"; the Prime Minister was promising that things should be speeded up', and that now they were 'solemnly lecturing the troops on the virtues of "keeping steady"'.⁴⁸ The *Herald's* rather farfetched solution was for soldiers to organise demobilisation themselves.

Despite claims made by the *Herald*, feelings of jealousy and frustration do appear to have existed. In his memoir, John Jackson stated that the thought of so many old companions 'gradually dwindling away from the regiment made the remainder of us feel restless'.⁴⁹ George Ashurst claimed that the vast majority of soldiers got the army out of their minds and simply wished to leave, the thought of staying was not favourable.⁵⁰ Rowland Feilding wrote to his wife in early February that 'the raging desire still continues to be demobilised quickly. Nevertheless, I feel pretty sure that, for many, there will be pathetic disillusionment'.⁵¹ Even as early as December 1918, William Andrews wrote that it was a 'great grievance with us that munition workers were at once freed to get what jobs were now going, whilst we were kept in the Army'. Furthermore, that 'one feels a little suspicious of the Army authorities. They seem in no hurry to give up their power over the millions of soldiers who have not the slightest intention of serving again once they get out of khaki'. Concluding that 'thousands of officers have had the time of their lives and are sorry it is nearing an end'.⁵²

Ministers also began to express their dismay at the attitude of the press, in terms not dissimilar to those in the *Herald*. Winston Churchill, having taken over as Secretary of State for War on 10 January, wrote a memorandum on demobilisation and presented it to the War Cabinet four days later. In it he indicated that the press had been allowed to 'run wild on the subject of demobilisation' and that

⁴⁸ Ibid. 18 January 1919; 8 February 1919.

⁴⁹ J. Jackson, *Private 12768; Memoir of a Tommy*, (Tempus, Stroud, 2005), p.248.

⁵⁰ IWM Sound Archive, Interview with George Ashurst, Officers Training Camp, accession number 9875, 1987.

⁵¹ Feilding, *War Letters to a Wife*, p.373.

⁵² W.L. Andrews, *Haunting Years; The Commentaries of a War Territorial* (Hutchinson and Co. Ltd, London, 1930), pp.284-5.

statements had been made with no foundation in fact. In actuality, he believed that 'an influential part of the press – notably the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and other cheap papers, which circulate widely in the Army' had published articles abusing the military authorities and had specifically undermined discipline as a result.⁵³ Clearly, now that the Armistice had been signed, the press was no longer playing to the fiddle of Lloyd George and his government, as they had for most of the war. The press barons, Lords Beaverbrook and Northcliffe, who had directed propaganda for much of the war, would have to come back into line and support the government until a new plan could be devised.⁵⁴ In a speech at a meeting of the Advisory Committee for the City of London Tribunals, Sir Auckland Geddes, the Minister for Reconstruction, even went as far as to urge the press publicly to give the work of demobilisation the same consideration and assistance it had extended to the military recruiting campaign in 1914-15.⁵⁵

According to Churchill, in addition to the abuse levelled at the authorities by the press, there were at least six reasons for the disturbing factors which had affected the process of demobilisation. Most seriously was the fact that he believed that demobilisation had begun without a final policy or with a working machinery. Seemingly, though the civilian authorities had been preparing for demobilisation, the military authorities were understandably too preoccupied with the enemy which had lay in front of it. Moreover, these two elements, the disorganised system and the hostility from the press, had meant that trust had been broken which had led to the disturbances at home, and those which had now begun to spread abroad.⁵⁶ The authorities were required to take action as quickly as possible, otherwise a complete disintegration of discipline in the armed forces would occur.

Within days of his Cabinet memorandum, Churchill presented a new scheme, one which he had devised with the help of Wilson and Haig. In fact, he had met with Wilson two days' before his Cabinet memorandum and the two had discussed the possibility of holding up demobilisation of all men who

⁵³ TNA WO32/5242 Memorandum on Demobilisation, 14 January 1919.

⁵⁴ M. Sanders and P.M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-18* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 1982), p.33; G. Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002), pp.112-3.

⁵⁵ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 11 January 1919

⁵⁶ TNA WO32/5242 Memorandum on Demobilisation, 14 January 1919.

had served less than two years in France. This would essentially mean that those who had served the longest would be released first.⁵⁷ On 17 January the decision was made: all men who had enlisted in 1914 and 1915 would be demobilised as soon as transport was available to bring them home – a total of 2.2 million men. Furthermore, all men who had joined the army after 1 January 1916 would be retained as part of the Armies of Occupation. Importantly, all those retained would be given a pay increase and extra leave.⁵⁸

In explaining the new scheme to Lloyd George, who was in Paris, Churchill stated that ‘under the existing scheme the discipline of the whole army is being rotted...I am very anxious about the state of the army, both in France and at home’. He believed that statements made by Lloyd George had done much to calm the situation, and that newspapers had ‘seen the red light and have been trying to help as much as possible instead of exciting discontent’.⁵⁹ Both Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law initially rejected the scheme, especially because so many men would be retained and that conscription would remain in place – a thorny issue, and one which would need work in order to convince the public of its necessity. Lloyd George was also unhappy that such a major decision had been taken without his consultation. Churchill, Wilson, and Haig travelled to Paris on 23rd January and finally managed to convince him.⁶⁰ The next hurdle was to convince the public that this was the correct course of action.

The best way to achieve this aim was to obtain the support of the press. On the same day that the scheme was presented to the Cabinet, under a pledge of secrecy, Churchill sent full details of it to Lord Northcliffe. In explaining it, he stated that he did not fear the course of such a policy ‘provided that a strong lead is given and that the reasons which make each step necessary are fully and frankly

⁵⁷ Churchill Papers (Churchill College, Cambridge) CHAR16/3 Correspondence between Churchill and various important figures regarding demobilisation, January 1919. Quoted extensively in M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, vol. IV, 1916-1922* (William Heinemann Ltd, London, 1975), p.182.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.183-4; R. Blake (ed.), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919; being selections from the private diary and correspondence of Field-Marshal the Earl Haig of Bemersyde, KT, GCB, OM, etc.* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1952), p.350.

⁵⁹ Gilbert, *World in Torment*, 184.

⁶⁰ Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, pp.184-191; P. Rowland, *Lloyd George* (Barrie and Jenkins Ltd, London, 1975), p.497.

explained'. Upon receiving these details, Northcliffe instructed his editors to publicise and to support the scheme, stating that 'all my newspapers will do exactly what you wish on the subject'.⁶¹ Churchill also met with other correspondents in the last days of January. After the meeting he wrote to Lloyd George on 29 January: 'The newspaper men took it all like lambs. A.P. Nicholson [correspondent for the *Daily News*] said he was surprised at the moderation of the figure and that we could get through with so few...Everything is to be launched tomorrow and we must await the result'.⁶²

The new scheme was indeed launched on 30 January and, true to the word of Northcliffe, the *Daily Mail* wholeheartedly supported it, describing it as a date of great importance in the history of the army. It went on, 'nothing has been more honourable to our soldiers than the way in which they have received the new scheme and the evidence of patience and patriotism which they are giving after their magnificent conduct on the battlefield'. Moreover, that the new priority scheme based on length of service 'satisfies the soldier's instinctive respect for fairness'.⁶³ If soldiers were happy with the scheme then how could the public complain? The news, however, had come too late for some soldiers, especially those based abroad and, on the day of the announcement, serious trouble broke out in Calais.

THE STRIKES SPREAD

As early as 13 January, a report warned of the serious effect of recent demonstrations in France. Once more, the trouble was ascribed to the activities of a few newspapers, principally the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*, which was readily available for troops to read. The author was of the opinion that, coupled with the recent Police Strike, the latest demonstrations 'show how a determined minority of extremists can stampede the quiet men into insubordination', and, interestingly, that the unrest had

⁶¹ Churchill Papers (Churchill College, Cambridge), CHAR28/117/139-142 Letter from Churchill to Lord Northcliffe, 27 January 1919; Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, p.191; Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p.698; For more on Lord Northcliffe and his role during the war see; J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, the Press and Propaganda: Lord Northcliffe and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Kent State University Press, Ohio), pp.219-237.

⁶² Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, p.191.

⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 1 February 1919; see also *Daily Express*, 30 January 1919; *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1919.

meant that the demonstrators had forfeited the sympathy of the public.⁶⁴ This certainly did not dampen the proceedings, and on Monday 27 January, a major incident occurred at Calais, involving the ASC and Army Ordnance Corps (AOC). These men organised a strike, complaining about their long working hours and the poor conditions in the camps. This had merged with the frustrations over the slow pace of demobilisation, essentially the 'agitation and indiscipline had led, quite quickly, to organised unrest'.⁶⁵ A 'seditious speech' was made by a private, urging them to do something about their working conditions. He was arrested, and from then on things spiralled out of control.⁶⁶ The men went out on parade and when the sergeant major gave the order to move, not a single soldier did as there were rumours that the arrested private had been shot.⁶⁷ These rumours were unfounded and the soldier was requisitioned by the striking men who, despite numerous discussions with high-ranking officers, did not waver in their position.

The location of the disturbance was significant because thousands of men passed through the camps en route to and from the front after periods of leave in Britain, and these men were thus brought face to face with the demands of the strikers. Many soon joined them, and some even attempted to commandeer boats back to England. The men elected a committee, headed mainly by trade unionists and continued their collective disobedience. Haig, now anxious that things did not get any further out of control, directed General Byng, the Commander at Calais, to quell the disturbances at all costs if they spread to the town itself, 'discipline must be maintained, and rioters if they cannot be arrested must be shot. Those men who have returned from leave have no ground for complaint and appear to have been led astray by Bolshevik agitators'.⁶⁸

Eventually, on the morning of 30th January, men of the 105th Brigade, 35th Division, entered the camp and surrounded the tents and huts. The men were told that those who wished to break off the

⁶⁴ TNA CAB24/73/54 Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, Report No.30, 13 January 1919.

⁶⁵ Dallas and Gill, *Unknown Army*, p.112.

⁶⁶ Rothstein, *Soldiers Strikes*, p.69.

⁶⁷ IWM Emily Maud Victoria Rumbold, NCO in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, accession number 576, 1975.

⁶⁸ G. De Groot, *Douglas Haig, 1861-1928* (Unwin Hyman Limited, London, 1988), pp.401-2.

strike could do so with no repercussions. The four-man committee then addressed the men and urged them to continue, but they were ignored. They were arrested as they tried to discourage defectors.⁶⁹ The strike was over, relatively quickly, and without having to resort to violence – machine gun companies had been brought up to surround the camp, and were even located in the camp offices ready to fire upon the strikers. It is clear that there was a mismatch here between the politics of the ringleaders and the mass of the men involved, but what the strike demonstrates is how quickly discipline could break down when men were removed from their units. Unrest at Etaples in 1917 had partially been attributed to this, along with the poor quality of food and accommodation on offer.⁷⁰

The ringleaders of the Calais unrest were imprisoned for various terms, this despite the insistence by Haig that they should be shot. Churchill was adamant that the death penalty should not be resorted to unless there was serious bloodshed. Haig wrote in his diary that he had ‘power, by Warrant, to try by Court Martial and shoot in accordance with [the] Army Act; and no telegram from the Secretary of State can affect my right to do what I think is necessary for the Army’.⁷¹ The military authorities were shaken by the events, especially because they occurred at the same time as major strikes in Belfast and on the Clyde, but Churchill remained of the opinion that the unrest had occurred as a hangover from the previous demobilisation scheme.⁷² No unrest occurred on this scale again, but it did not mean that it ceased completely, especially amongst service units, whose men were more class conscious in their outlook.

Using the General Courts Martial Registers, Julian Putkowski has argued that the majority of prosecutions seem to have been made against men in infantry units.⁷³ This assessment is problematic, however, as it does not correspond with the number of incidents reported both in the press and by Military Intelligence, and indicates a seeming inability or unwillingness by the authorities to formally

⁶⁹ TNA WO95/2486 War Diary of 105th Brigade, Headquarters, 28-30 January 1919; Dallas and Gill, *Unknown Army*, pp.115-7.

⁷⁰ Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *The British Army*, p.151.

⁷¹ Blake (ed.), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, p.353; G. De Groot, *Douglas Haig*, p.402.

⁷² Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour*, p.31.

⁷³ J. Putkowski, *British Army Mutineers 1914-1922* (Francis Boutle Publishers, London, 1998), p.15.

prosecute many of those involved in unrest. This discontent in early 1919 continued to manifest itself through collective action, but also through the actions of individuals. At a meeting at the YMCA Club in Ecclestone Square, London, attended by 600 soldiers, a sergeant of the ASC made a speech of a 'very inflammatory' nature, stating that 'if you men in uniform will combine with the workers, we will then be the strongest party in the country'.⁷⁴ Soldier mechanics at a depot in Bristol went on strike complaining about their retention in the armed forces.⁷⁵ Royal Engineers who had been employed as telegraphists and seconded to the Post Office, threatened a strike at having been kept under military discipline and in poor accommodation.⁷⁶ These examples, though seemingly minor, caused a great deal of concern, especially because of their apparent left wing character. All of these incidents, however, are missing from the General Courts Martial Registers. When looking at the increase in educational provision in the British Army immediate after the war, S.P. Mackenzie has argued that this concern over men's attitudes 'the patent fear that Bolshevism and radicalism generally were permeating the soldier's consciousness to bad effect, can best be understood if note is taken of the apparently volatile socio-political climate after the war'.⁷⁷ Therefore, strikes in the army could not be viewed in isolation. There was widespread industrial unrest across the country, and fears of Bolshevism's spread across Europe held much weight among certain politicians. Though easy to dismiss as an exaggerated fear a century later, to the establishment, a breakdown in military discipline was a potential symptom of Bolshevism, and it was treated as such.

UNREST CONTINUES

It has been claimed that, with Churchill's new demobilisation scheme, unrest in the army came to a halt, but it certainly continued. Much of the blame was attributed to the Herald League, its political

⁷⁴ TNA CAB24/75/16 Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, report no.33, 10 February 1919.

⁷⁵ *Dundee Courier*, 13 January 1919.

⁷⁶ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 22 January 1919.

⁷⁷ S.P. Mackenzie, *Politics and Military Morale: Current-Affairs and Citizenship Education in the British Army, 1914-1950* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), p.24.

organ, the *Daily Herald*, and the soldiers' union most associated with the latter, the Sailors', Soldiers, and Airmen's Union (SSAU). The *Daily Herald* remained most aloof of the establishment, and continued to print articles critical of the authorities in their demobilisation plans. In February, it launched a personal attack on Churchill, stating that;

Winston Churchill is at it again, Antwerp did not teach him his lesson; Gallipoli did not teach him his lesson; and now the great unrest in the army and the demonstrations it has caused are apparently leaving him untaught and unrepentant...Things seemed to quieten down. But indeed it was not more than seeming. Churchill did not remedy the grievances of the men; but someone saw to it that the press was muzzled. The Churchill way of curing a toothache is not to let the child's cry be heard.⁷⁸

The article went on to describe various examples of continued unrest, the majority undertaken by skilled men and trade unionists, citing a demonstration by mechanics at Kempton Park as the largest example. It also mentioned the soldiers' many demands, including faster demobilisation, no conscription, a recognition of soldiers' committees, and a promise not to use soldiers for strike breaking. Finally, it asked: 'And what is Churchill's answer? Fixed bayonets in Whitehall; the arrest of "ringleaders"; threats to defer demobilisation and to stop the "great privilege" of leave.'⁷⁹

In particular, the *Daily Herald* sponsored SSAU was viewed upon with great concern. In one report it was referred to as a 'very active and mischievous body' which, by March 1919, was becoming bolder in its actions. Most troubling for those in charge was the fact that it had invited serving soldiers to become honorary members. Service regulations had prevented soldiers from joining veterans' organisations during the war. However, the Comrades of the Great War, an organisation formed under Lord Derby in 1917, had permitted honorary membership, setting a precedent. The SSAU had also

⁷⁸ *Daily Herald*, 15 February 1919.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

issued leaflets urging soldiers not to interfere in Labour disturbances.⁸⁰ By the beginning of April, Sylvia Pankhurst was reported to have made a number of speeches regarding serving soldiers, some of which were so inflammatory that calls were made for her arrest. In one such speech, made to the Labour Club in Rugby, she said 'it is hopeful that the soldiers and sailors are beginning to feel the spirit of revolt, because if we get the soldiers, sailors and policemen with us we shall be able to take control of the country very quickly and without bloodshed'.⁸¹ In the same report, it was conveyed that the SSAU had established itself as a definite branch of the Herald League and that it would be used as cover for tampering with the loyalty of sailors and soldiers.⁸² Its demands were circulated widely in the *Daily Herald*, and it even published its own periodical, *The Forces*, which lasted for three editions. Its demands were simple: an increase in military pensions; the recognition of unions in the army and navy; and a pledge not to use servicemen as strike-breakers.⁸³

The government response to its threat was swift and decisive. A 'dirty tricks' campaign, using counter-propaganda, was instigated by the intelligence services which aimed at discouraging servicemen from joining its ranks.⁸⁴ Very quickly reports circulated which indicated a decline in the threat of the SSAU, as well as of other 'extreme' organisations, such as the National Union of Ex-Servicemen, and the International Union of Ex-Servicemen.⁸⁵ By the end of April, it was reported that the SSAU was not prospering financially, nor was it winning members amongst serving soldiers and sailors.⁸⁶ In home intelligence summaries, officers had been specifically asked about the spread of unionism in the army, such was the concern. By the end of May, in the London District, an area which

⁸⁰ TNA CAB24/76/77 Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 10 March 1919. It should be noted that these summaries should be read with caution. Often, they were susceptible to overstating threats and subversion.

⁸¹ TNA CAB24/77/93 Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 7 April 1919.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ S.R. Ward, 'Intelligence Surveillance of British Ex-Servicemen, 1918-1920', *The Historical Journal*, vol.16, no.1, 1973, p.184.

⁸⁴ D. Englander, 'The National Union of Ex-Servicemen and the Labour Movement, 1918-1920', *History*, vol.76, 1991, pp.31-2.

⁸⁵ For more on other soldier's unions see D. Englander, 'Troops and Trade Unions, 1919', *History Today*, vol.37, no.3, 1987.

⁸⁶ TNA CAB24/78/95 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 30 April 1919.

had seen much union activity, it was reported that unionism in the army 'is not considered to be gaining any appreciable ground among serving soldiers'.⁸⁷

Naturally, the 'dirty tricks' campaign had an adverse effect on whether serving and former soldiers joined certain unions. However, the left's relationship and historical uneasiness with the armed forces must also be recognised, and for a number of reasons. First, prior to the outbreak of war in 1914, many British socialists formulated their socialism within a construct of the nation, i.e. that national identity meant the acceptance of the belief that English history was a long struggle for liberty – the British had a distinct national character and, therefore, British socialism was evolutionary, non-violent, and above all parliamentary. This required a more conservative view of the 'nation', but it also meant, according to Paul Ward, that the left's version of Britishness and, therefore, patriotism, was at odds with the bellicose, jingoistic version of imperialism, an element so important to many when choosing to serve in the armed forces once war had been declared.⁸⁸ In contrast, David Swift has recently argued that socialism and patriotism could also sit together, stating that 'in the climate of 1914-18 they could be unapologetically patriotic, and use that patriotism to indict the government'.⁸⁹ Though Ward has argued that the left's use of the language of patriotism immediately *after* the war had been damaged since such language had been devalued by its use in wartime by employers, politicians and trade union leaders in order to discourage industrial action.⁹⁰ Some had to realign themselves to a more radical stance, which increasingly took on a Bolshevik character. This element sat uneasily with those such as Ramsay MacDonald, and more moderate elements of the Labour Party. It is unsurprising, then, that as the left's ability to utilise patriotism as a way to further their cause diminished, soldiers and sailors began to reject it, choosing instead to continue to think of patriotism in their own terms, espousing

⁸⁷ TNA AIR1/556/16/15/50 Intelligence Summary Part II, London District, 28 May 1919.

⁸⁸ P. Ward, 'Socialists and 'True' Patriotism in Britain in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries', *National Identities*, vol.1, no.2, 1999, pp.185-190.

⁸⁹ D. Swift, *For Class and Country; The Patriotic Left and the First World War* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2017), p.201.

⁹⁰ P. Ward, *Red Flag and the Union Jack; Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1998), pp.148-55.

self-sacrifice and defence of one's home, elements which had been advocated by propaganda throughout the First World War.⁹¹

Secondly, and, perhaps more simply, the left's historical dislike for the armed forces must be taken into account. David Swift has suggested that disdain for the soldier was not apparent in the language of the labour movement during the war.⁹² Conversely, as David Englander and James Osborne have argued, before the First World War, the left viewed the soldier with traditional contempt, 'soldiering remained a dead-end occupation, and the army a colonial gendarmerie unfit for any role in collective security except against a minor power'.⁹³ Furthermore, even during the war, the labour movement failed to project itself as the soldier's friend. Englander has argued that this was a reflection of an almost congenital inability to differentiate the old from the new armies, and that it was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had been most active in promoting soldier's rights throughout the war, that suffered from this problem most acutely. In 1915, a proposal was made at the annual conference to push for the formation of military trade unions, and was rejected on the grounds that it might make soldiering a respectable profession. Labour had implied that servicemen were contemptible outcasts, for whom they held no brief.⁹⁴ This lay at the root of soldier's inability to trust the trade union movement in 1919, why would they trust organisations which historically held such distasteful views of them?

Throughout the middle of 1919 there are many examples of a backlash towards the trade union movement's attempts to enlist support from serving soldiers. Intelligence reports from across the country consistently point to the fact that, despite their best attempts, ex-servicemen unions had no success in attracting honorary members.⁹⁵ A man in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) had visited

⁹¹ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain*, pp.89-91.

⁹² Swift, *For Class and Country*, p.96. See also N. Mansfield, *English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900-1930* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001), pp.107-9.

⁹³ D. Englander and J. Osborne, 'Jack, Tommy, and Henry Dubb: the Armed Forces and the Working Class', *The Historical Journal*, vol.23, no.3, 1978, p.620.

⁹⁴ Englander, 'The National Union of Ex-Servicemen and the Labour Movement', p.26.

⁹⁵ TNA AIR1/556/16/15/50 Intelligence Summary Part II, Tyne Garrison, 26 May to 1 June 1919; Intelligence Summary Part II, Northern Command, 2 to 8 June 1919; Intelligence Summary Part II, Nottingham Garrison, June 1919; Intelligence Summary Part II, Scottish Command, 1 to 7 June 1919.

a camp to enlist support in the SSAU in late May, but was forced to retire as a result of the reception he had met.⁹⁶ Even those who had already been discharged and were active members of soldier's unions appear to have been resolute in their attitude towards the labour movement. Though a less extreme organisation, members of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers, which had even put up candidates in the 1918 General Election, rejected calls at its conference to ally itself to a socialist political body. The intelligence summary indicated that 'it is satisfactory that the results...of the conference point to the fact that the ex-servicemen desire to stand alone and, by a majority in every case, have testified their determination to refuse to become the tools of unprincipled and professional agitators'. It went on to conclude that 'the attitude of the soldier is improving every day. Despite the attempt by agitators to cajole and flatter him to become disloyal to his sovereign and the tool of revolutionaries as represented by the Herald League, the soldier is realising that these people are not his friends but rather his enemies'.⁹⁷ Soldier's discontent was ever present, but it was not easily politicised.

THE HERALD LEAGUE CAMPAIGN FAILS

It was the Herald League, and its political organ the *Daily Herald* which, once more, had been responsible for a number of serious attempts to undermine discipline and promote its cause in the spring and early summer of 1919. The 11th May was a significant date for men who had agreed, under the Derby scheme enacted before the introduction of conscription, to serve in the armed forces for the duration of the war, and for no longer than six months after its cessation. The authorities had been made aware of a SSAU plan for soldiers to demobilise themselves at this point, six months after the signing of the Armistice. What began as a rumour amongst soldiers in Paris, had spiralled into 'agitators' advising men who had enlisted under the scheme to take off their buttons, shoulder straps

⁹⁶ Ibid. Sothern Command, 3 June 1919.

⁹⁷ Ibid. London District, 11 June 1919. Though Nick Mansfield has suggested that members of the Comrades of the Great War used their 'considerable wealth' to bribe whole branches to defect. See Mansfield, 'The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailors, p.23.

and badges, and declare that they had automatically become civilians. It was hoped, it was reported, that the government would resort to force and so precipitate a revolution.⁹⁸ However, the authorities were on top of things, and the SSAU's advocacy for such an issue gave an excuse to take action. As Chris Wrigley has argued, the encouragement of the SSAU gave the government the opportunity to discredit and disorganise a body which was not felt to be strong but which was deemed to contain a 'Bolshevik element'.⁹⁹ Its offices, located in the same premises as the *Daily Herald*, were raided and paperwork confiscated. In its publication, the newspaper claimed that the remedy for any grievance should be 'ordered, constitutional agitation', and this is exactly what the Derby men should be doing, ultimately because men were being kept in the armed forces against the terms of their contract.¹⁰⁰

Three days after the raid on SSAU and the *Daily Herald* offices, the Cabinet were told that evidence suggested that the plot was widespread, that H.T. McDonald, a leading figure in the SSAU, intended to go with Eden Paul, the 'notorious revolutionary speaker', to Grove Park and bring a disorderly demonstration to Whitehall. Although 800 men of the RASC had threatened to demobilise themselves on the 12th, owing to the effective steps taken by the military authorities, and the fact that publicity had been given to the movement in the press, it collapsed. Additionally, despite claiming that the plan was a 'carefully planned and cleverly executed manoeuvre', the *Daily Herald* had gone quiet on the subject for fear that its connection with the movement might damage its circulation.¹⁰¹ The press, once more, undoubtedly aided the authorities in disrupting the movement. The plans had been published in newspapers on 9th May, while the *Daily Mail*, still towing the line on demobilisation, stated that articles in the press had had a 'cooling effect upon the hotheads who have been trying to stir up the Derby men to demobilise themselves'.¹⁰²

Within days, the *Daily Herald* resumed its fight, this time publishing details of an official circular sent from the War Office to all Commanding Officers (COs) under the title "Trade Unionism and the

⁹⁸ TNA CAB24/79/18 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 7 May 1919.

⁹⁹ Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour*, pp.34-5.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Herald*, 12 May 1919.

¹⁰¹ TNA CAB24/79/54 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 14 May 1919.

¹⁰² *Daily Mail*, 9-12 May 1919. For details of the plot see also *Nottingham Evening Post*, 9 May 1919.

Army". The document asked COs whether they believed their troops would be loyal enough to assist in strike-breaking, they would be willing to serve in Russia, and if there had been a growth in trade unionism among them.¹⁰³ The disclosure of this circular increased the circulation of the newspaper and had undone 'much of the good work which has been done by propaganda'. It was believed that the working man and soldiers were to be used to break strikes and that the government was hostile to trade unions.¹⁰⁴ The fact that the Guards Division had been brought back and paraded in London in March, potentially as a warning that seditious actions would be met by force, did little to appease fears.¹⁰⁵ It was later discovered that the confidential circular had been stolen on 13th March, and that the *Daily Herald* was offering inducements to persons employed in the War Office to steal other documents.¹⁰⁶ Military intelligence were confident about the future;

The outlook is certainly growing brighter, in spite of the continual effort of the *Daily Herald* and the Herald League to increase the spread of their dangerous dogmas in the army, there is daily less and less interest shown in them by the servicemen. One cause...is that with the gradual elimination of the temporary soldier by demobilisation and discharge, men who are largely imbued with unionism tinged with socialism, and who enlisted not from liking for the life of a soldier but from a sense of duty; naturally carried with them into the service the cult of trade unionism, and in some cases the propaganda of class warfare, and of course naturally spread their belief in the Barrack Room. Certainly it is encouraging to find that it is an undoubted fact that the influence of the union is a waning one.¹⁰⁷

It was discovered that the newspaper was also supplied to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), free of charge, and was known derisively as "The Bolshevik Bull".¹⁰⁸ It was found that the newspaper was sold across northern France, including at Dunkirk, Etaples, Calais, Amiens, Paris, and Boulogne.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ *Daily Herald*, 13 May 1919.

¹⁰⁴ TNA CAB24/80/5 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 21 May 1919.

¹⁰⁵ Carrington, *Soldier From the Wars Returning*, p.256.

¹⁰⁶ TNA CAB24/93/99 Confidential Special Report on the "Daily Herald", 25 November 1919.

¹⁰⁷ TNA AIR1/556/16/15/50 Intelligence Summary Part II, No. 5 Area, Woolwich, 24 May 1919.

¹⁰⁸ TNA CAB24/80/5 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 21 May 1919.

¹⁰⁹ TNA CAB24/81/17 Ibid. 4 June 1919.

It also transpired that the War Office was itself purchasing up to 60,000 copies using canteen funds. By the middle of June, the paper had modified its position, claiming that it played no part in persuading Derby men to demobilise, appearing to show that it had lost much ground within the forces. Notwithstanding, it was maintained that 'there is undoubted evidence that the *Daily Herald* is doing mischief to the morale of the troops serving in France, not only on the Lines of Communication but in the Army of Occupation. If possible, the export of this paper should be prevented'.¹¹⁰ Finally, on 8th July, Churchill announced in Parliament that circulation of the paper would be stopped, though it would not be banned. Formal representations had been received from the GOC, the Army on the Rhine, and Douglas Haig, which asserted that the circulation of the *Daily Herald* had done much harm to the discipline of the army and that many incidents of unrest could be directly attributed to it. By this time, there was considerable opposition to the paper on the part of the majority of soldiers serving both at home and abroad.¹¹¹ The trade union element of the armed forces had clearly subsided, but it did not entirely stop strikes and unrest.

Throughout the summer, incidents continued to take place which risked the improving state of discipline. Once again, soldiers refused to embark for overseas at Dover, and over 1,800 men mutinied at the Eastern Command Labour Centre at Sutton. The latter were also concerned that they were to be sent overseas. In both of these cases, it would seem that there was still concern that they would be sent to Russia.¹¹² In August, seventeen men of the 3rd West Yorkshire Regiment were sentenced by court martial to nine months' imprisonment with hard labour. In July, they had refused to obey an order to parade in fighting equipment. They claimed that they had taken heart at an expression used by the company sergeant major in passing the order, and that now peace was declared, they considered themselves as civilians. When questioned about the incident, the sergeant major denied

¹¹⁰ TNA CAB24/81/63 Ibid. 12 June 1919.

¹¹¹ Parl. Debs. (HC), vol.117, col.1580-3, 8 July 1919; TNA CAB24/83/71 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 10 July 1919.

¹¹² *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 June 1919; *Dundee Courier*, 23 June 1919.

using certain expressions, stating that he had not called them “bastards”, but had in actual fact said that they were a lot of Bolsheviks.¹¹³

An increase in unrest was recorded because Derby men feared that they were to be sent east, either to India or Russia – and the *Daily Herald* continued its campaign in support of these men, formed more widely as part of their “Hands off Russia” campaign. The War Office moved quickly to declare that it would not be going back on its word and that demobilisation would occur without them being sent east. This latest spate of unrest prompted one newspaper editorial to declare;

The recurrence of incidents that indicate the presence in the army of a good deal of unrest is much to be regretted...I think there is a tendency to exaggerate the bulk, as well as to misrepresent the character, of the grievances which have led some soldiers to demonstrate in a manner not consistent with discipline. The British soldier is no Bolshevik, and now that he has every reason to believe that there is no intention to treat him other than fairly in the matters as to which he has felt uneasy.¹¹⁴

Clearly, both the authorities and the public continued to fear the possibility of unrest. This is hardly surprising, as we have already seen, the fear of Bolshevism is crucial in this context. As Walter Kendall has argued, if the socialist influence had existed more widely in the armed forces, and that there had been the ability to launch a coordinated movement, or they had established closer links with trade unions, the whole future of the state might well have been called into balance.¹¹⁵ Soldiers’ willingness to join with trade unions is doubtful, but was a real threat in the minds of the authorities. Furthermore, the brutalising effect of the war itself must not be discounted. As George Mosse has argued, the post-war world contained a certain brutalisation in politics, a heightened indifference to human life, and though the victorious nations of Britain and France were able to keep this largely under control, it too

¹¹³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 6 August 1919; *Taunton Courier*, and *Western Advertiser*, 3 September 1919.

¹¹⁴ *Bellshill Speaker*, 4 July 1919.

¹¹⁵ W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (Littlehampton Books Ltd, London, 1969), p.179.

was a significant threat.¹¹⁶ Jon Lawrence has argued that Britain after the First World War was ‘a nation haunted by the fear that violence had slipped its chains.’¹¹⁷ Charles Carrington recalled that ‘the schism in the nation was between the fighting soldiers and the civilians, a psychological cleavage far too wide to be bridged by any political agitation in the back areas, and the question still to be answered was, how would the fighting troops behave after they were demobilised?’¹¹⁸ With these things considered, it is unsurprising that such paranoia existed about indiscipline.

CONCLUSION

In August Lloyd George complained to Churchill that demobilisation had slowed down. In reply, Churchill agreed and detailed thirteen reasons why this was the case, but that it was ‘necessary to observe that the army was in a state of general incipient mutiny in January and February’ and had ‘been restored to a condition of good discipline and contentment by following the main principle of releasing the men with the longest service before the newcomers’. He concluded, ‘how foolish to suppose that the armies which took more than four years to spread about all over the world could be brought home again by a wave of the wand’.¹¹⁹ By this time, it was becoming clear that Bolshevism was no threat in the armed forces. Though discipline broke down, it had more to do with the perceived unjust nature of the demobilisation scheme, and the fact that for some the notions of self-sacrifice and patriotism no longer held relevance as a means to maintain order. Swift, quoting Peter Reese, has made the point that the strikes were not a representation of military radicalism, although the experience of war had served to anger and alienate many hundreds of thousands of men, they were ‘not angry enough at their fellow citizens to court the unrest that bayonets brought’, they did not wish to bring down the state.¹²⁰ On 17th October 1919, Churchill finally declared that demobilisation was

¹¹⁶ G.L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers; Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp.160-1.

¹¹⁷ J. Lawrence, ‘Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and the Fear of Brutalization on Post-First World War Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol.75, no.3, 2003, p.557.

¹¹⁸ Carrington, *Soldier From the Wars Returning*, p.256.

¹¹⁹ Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, p.195.

¹²⁰ Swift, *For Class and Country*, p.96; P. Reese, *Homecoming Heroes* (Leo Cooper, London, 1992), p.59.

complete. He reported that in the eleven months since the Armistice, an average of 10,000 men had been discharged every day. It was true to say, he said, 'that the army had melted away'.¹²¹

As 1919 progressed, a perceived threat from the extreme left, and fears over Bolshevism also melted away. Though soldiers were unhappy, their discontent was only rarely political in nature. This was despite concerted attempts by the Herald League, *Daily Herald*, and the SSAU to foment dissatisfaction. Their actions after the unrest at Folkestone and beyond in January meant that this threat had to be taken seriously, and great efforts were made to stifle their activities, including the reining in of the established press, an action which had also been so important during wartime. The perceptions of individuals in government, and the unrest across Europe certainly did much to heighten concerns, while this was coupled with an anxiety that the war had brutalised soldiers. Ultimately though, many soldiers had reached the end of their resilience and respect for military discipline. They had based much of their obedience on notions of patriotism and self-sacrifice, but this had terminated with the signing of the Armistice. The majority of men simply wanted to go home.

¹²¹ Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, p.196.