
«Ex-servicemen never became a separate, let alone a violent political group as they did in some countries»

Frank Percy Crozier was in some respects a model military freebooter. He had served in the South African war and raised a private army on the Imperial frontier in West Africa. In the months leading up to the First World War he had been at the forefront of the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He re-enlisted in the British Army during the First World War and fought throughout. Despite holding a series of staff jobs he delighted in combat. His memoirs describe cold bloodedly killing men on both sides.

After the war he returned to Ireland to command an ‹auxiliary unit› in the counter-insurgency war against the IRA. So far the picture might be seen as analogous with many a German equivalent; a rather brutal and political soldier.

What happened next is a surprise. Shocked by the atrocities that his own men committed in Cork whilst he was laid up by a road accident, Crozier publicly resigned his commission on 19 February 1921, in a blaze of publicity. Continuing his protest he stood for the Labour Party at the 1923 General Election. He became a convinced pacifist and an admirer of Gandhi. ¹

Crozier was not the only ex-officer to make a substantial protest over post-war ‹black and tan› brutality in Ireland. Oswald Mosley broke with the Conservative Party and joined Labour over the same issue. It is an intriguing, and perhaps revealing point, that the future leader of the British Union of Fascists first entered the political limelight in protest at the use of ‹political› violence. In the same year that Crozier published his memoir, Henry Williamson, who would join Mosley’s movement, published his novel, *A Patriots Progress*, a pacifistic indictment of the

brutality and brutalization of war. It is a book which makes *All Quiet on the Western Front* look positively affectionate about army life.

This poses an intriguing question. If the emergent extreme right of British politics, and those who had the potential to form the extreme right (whilst he was embracing pacifism, Crozier was also advocating a British Mussolini!) had such an apparent rhetorical aversion to war and violence\(^2\), can Britain be compared at all with continental Europe?\(^2\)

### 1. Violence and the English: The Long View

A crude, but useful starting point in any discussion of the propensity to violence is to examine homicide rates. It is well known that the English picture (Scotland and Ireland are rather different) represents an extreme end of the spectrum. Home Office figures for the number of homicides initially reported to the police in England and Wales in the period 1880–1960 show a clear trend.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Homicides/100,000 population/annum.</th>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1.52</td>
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<td>1890</td>
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<td>1900</td>
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<td>1910</td>
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<td>1940</td>
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<td>1950</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>0.62 (Home Office Figures)</td>
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There are two very small ‘post-war’ increases, but the overall trend is steadily down.\(^3\)

Not only was homicide declining, in international comparison, England and Wales consistently had the lowest homicide rate in the world and probably still do. The criminologist Elliot Leyton puts it starkly. «The lowest homicide rates that urbanised human beings anywhere seem able to manage is circa 0.5 per 100,000, the approximate English rate from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s»\(^4\).

By the 1950s, some observers were beginning to see English revulsion towards violence as the central strand in ‘national character’. The psychologist Geoffrey Gorer, in his study, *Exploring English Character*, historicized the problem. Into the eighteenth century the English had been perceived as violent and pugnacious, constitutional». J. Stevenson, «Great Britain» in: M. Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives*, London 1990, 264–282.

\(^2\) John Stevenson remarks of Mosley’s initial stance in 1932, «Mosley went out of his way to repudiate the charge that his movement was organised to promote violence. Organization was required to defend the BUF’s right to free speech and its meetings from systematic disruption. Mosley stressed that the BUF sought to achieve its aims by methods that were both legal and constitutional». J. Stevenson, «Great Britain» in: M. Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives*, London 1990, 264–282.

\(^3\) Part of the explanation of the 1940–1950 increase is doubtless that 1940 was itself a war year, distorting the picture downwards.

by the Twentieth Century they had apparently come to prize ‘gentleness’. Clearly there had been a great pacification.\(^5\)

The expatriate German sociologist Norbert Elias took the case further. Having written on the ‘civilizing process’ in 1939, he went on to write several articles about the relationship between the state and social habitus in England.\(^6\) Elias would ultimately take an even longer view, seeing English ‘pacification’ reaching back until at least the seventeenth century.

These works were both revealing and misleading. We now know that English society in the 1950s was probably at the extreme end of the spectrum of ‘non-violence’, even in its own terms. Nevertheless something had been revealed. At mid-century the English were defining themselves as a non-violent people.

2. Countercurrents

The propensity to the most extreme violence in the form of homicide was clearly on the wane over the long run, but England (and certainly not the British Isles) was not a clearly non-violent society before the First World War. Donald Richter has put the counter-case in his provocative book, *Riotous Victorians* claiming that at least until the 1890s, Britain was still a ‘very disorderly society’\(^7\).

Richter has a point. It is clear that in some circumstances disorder and violence were widespread and far from unacceptable amongst a segment of the population. Edwardian industrial disputes were often fiercely confrontational and violent, evidence of this is widespread. Describing strikes in the Northwest in 1911 Robert Roberts wrote:

> «Strike breakers, shielded by police attempted to move coal and food. Pickets determined to stop them. In a dozen places fierce fighting broke out that lasted all day. Five hundred police from other towns poured in at once. [...] Men rushed yelling and cursing into alley ways. A score ran towards us, their clogs clattering over the setts, pursued by mounted police. A child, standing terrified by the door, I saw an officer lean down with his truncheon above the eyes, heard the blow like a thump of wood on a swede turnip [...]». In one day more than a hundred strikers were treated at hospitals for injuries».

This strike ultimately led to the Army being sent to the area to restore order. Roberts is of the opinion that whatever might have been true elsewhere in the country, the police were hated in Salford.

The most complex, and for the purpose of this paper the most important issue, is that of political violence. The socialist Robert Tressel, writing in the *Ragged
Trousered Philanthropists, could describe as a perfectly normal part of electioneering on the eve of the First World War a running street battle between working men supporters of the Conservative and Liberal parties. This persistent aspect of politics in Britain up to the First World War has been downplayed until recently as it cuts across the historiographical assumptions of «social control» and the «triumph of party.»

The recent work of Jon Lawrence should force a reconsideration. For years before the First World War, «Radicals» and «Conservatives» literally fought it out in local political contests. In 1900 the issue was debated in Parliament because so many Liberal «Pro-Boers» had been attacked by Tory «mobs» in the course of the election. In response, the majority of the Tory's speaking in the debate justified this action by the claim that the «Radicals» were simply being repaid in kind. In truth the political elites were remarkably tolerant of violence when they thought they might have the upper hand. Not only that, but culturally institutionalized political violence was part of the game. Lawrence comments:

«If physical force and the threat of physical force, was an ever present feature of popular politics before the First World War, this was in part because professional politicians were frequently mythologised for their acts of bravery and strength in facing down disruption». Lawrence describes the legendary Conservative MP., Fred Burnaby, who on one occasion sorted out a party of roughs in the audience by «singling out» the ringleader and felling him, «with a terrific blow».

Politics prior to 1914 was to a certain extent a blood sport, but it was a sport with rules. In a 1900 election at Southwark, the action of the candidate's son, Harry Newton, in physically expelling a heckler was «legitimate», the retaliation by a «gang of roughs» in «fighting dirty» which involved pushing Newton's head through a glass door was «brutal» and «unmanly». The concept of «Queensberry Rules» seems to apply, just as violence was controlled in boxing, so it was controlled in politics. Killing or maiming an opponent was not simply not «done». Physically contesting the «right to free speech» was part and parcel of political culture prior to 1914, but already there was a «civilising process» of sorts. Voices were already being raised against violence in politics, the violence inflicted on socialists and suffragettes was part and parcel of an emerging political martyrology. The seeds of change were apparent.

10 J. Lawrence, Speaking for the People: Party Language and Popular Politics 1867–1914, Cambridge 1998, 178–193. Dr Lawrence is currently working on the issue of political violence in England and this paper owes him a substantial debt having been in part inspired by a seminar paper he delivered. I am attempting to avoid pre-empting his conclusions.
3. Brutalisation?

«You do such things and get praise for them, such as smashing a fellow’s skull, or putting a bullet through him, which if you were to do at home you’d soon be on the run, with a hue and cry and all the police in the country at your heels.»

What impact did the war have on British society and attitudes to violence in general and political violence in particular? Military training is designed and has to be designed in order to break down civilian inhibitions towards violence. Stephen Graham noted of army life, «The real driving power lay in the brutal word and thought and act. I noticed that men who were not in themselves brutal, cultivated brutality to get the Army tone.» The British Army in particular promoted the cult of the bayonet, whose principle prophet, was Major Ronnie Campbell of the Gordon Highlanders, who toured the base camps giving a blood curdling lecture on the correct use of the weapon:

After the lecture students went to the assault course to practice bayoneting straw men while screaming their atavistic hatred for the Boche and adopting the correct «killing face». Blunden called the show «more disgusting than inspiring», while Max Plowman was reminded he had a weak stomach. R. F. Callaway admired it as «extraordinarily good» at the same time as he was personally revolted by it, whereas Colonel Jack found it «cold blooded and rather horrid» and Colonel F. Mitchell found it «at the same time impressive and repellent.»

As these officer’s testimonies indicate, inhibition about face to face killing wasn’t easy to break down. Yet for a proportion of the soldiers it was broken. It is impossible to say with certainty how many men in the British Army knowingly killed an enemy in the First World War and survived the war themselves. The majority of casualties on all sides were inflicted out of sight by artillery and in the nature of combat those who killed face to face ran a high risk of themselves being killed in turn. A substantial majority of those who served in the war probably never saw a living armed enemy, and of the minority who did, most were unable or unwilling to kill.

The men who did the most killing, heavy artillerymen, were to some degree detached from the process. Yet despite all these qualifications, tens of thousands of men in Khaki must knowingly have killed another human being in wartime and lived to remember this.

R. H. Tawney, christian and socialist, was one of the minority to write publicly about the experience:

«Every man I fired at dropped, except one. Him the boldest of the lot, I missed more than once. I was puzzled and angry [...] Not that I wanted to hurt him or anyone else. It was missing I hated. That’s the beastliest thing about war, the damned frivolity. One’s like a merry mischievous ape tearing up the image of God.»

Several hundred thousands more were brought to the point where the idea of killing was conceivable and even more gained substantial familiarity with violent death at the frontline. Did this lead to a relaxation of inhibitions regarding justified violence? Was this in turn transferable to civilian life?

Certainly fantasies of post-war violence towards civilians by soldiers were far from unknown. The pacifist poet Siegfried Sassoon indulged them on several occasions.

_Fight to a finish_

The Boys came back. Bands played and flags were flying,  
And Yellow pressmen thronged the sunlit street  
To cheer the soldiers who refrained from dying [...]  
Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob,  
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel,  
At last the boys had found a cushy job.  
I heard the Yellow Pressmen grunt and squeal;  
And with my trusty bombers turned and went  
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

Sassoon wrote this whilst being treated at Craiglockhart hospital after his anti-war declaration, but the sentiment is more anti-civilian and anti-politician, indeed it could be seen as akin to Nazism. In apparent congruence with Sassoon’s fantasy, the victory parades of 1919 were indeed marked by substantial violence. Eric Leed states:

«[...] in the spring and summer of 1919 the violence of veterans turned increasingly to civilian targets. Carrington describes the civilian-soldier battles that were an unscheduled feature of Victory Day (July 19) parades in Glasgow, Coventry, Epsom and Lutton (sic.).»

In describing the Luton riots, Leed suggests that they were amongst the most serious in modern English history, leading to 100 casualties. The town hall was burnt down and ex-soldiers fought off police and fire fighters from 9 o’clock until dawn.

16 E. Leed, _No Mans Land, Combat and Identity in_  
18 As the citation from Roberts above makes clear, this is obviously not the case.
These events and other serious riots in 1919, including a riot at Epsom where Canadian soldiers killed a policeman are taken as evidence by Leed, not of «expressive» violence produced by brutalisation, but of retaliation for perceived civilian injustice. Whilst this might have been a motivation for some, it is rather lacking in its examination of the specific context.

Straightforward rowdiness played a role as well. Far from developing in early 1919, the propensity of ex-soldiers for rioting in the context of victory celebrations was firmly established at the time of the Armistice in 1918. The week of celebration in London became progressively more disorderly.\textsuperscript{18} Vandalism and incendiaryism, albeit of a less severe variety than in Luton had occurred at this time:

«Amazing scenes were witnessed in Trafalgar Square last night in connection with the Armistice rejoicings. At ten o’clock a bonfire was lit and grew to be an enormous size. Flames rose to a great height. Soldiers tore up wooden blocks from the roadways and threw them into the fire. Pandemonium reigned in the square for two hours.»\textsuperscript{19}

By 16 November the popular press was expressing alarm about the «wrong way to rejoice and much wanton damage». The Daily Express noted «The crowds in Trafalgar Square last night were smaller but far rougher and more difficult to manage. [...] Outside the Adelphi Theatre a gang of hooligans fought with sticks and belts until the arrival of the police. [...] Throwing fireworks indiscriminately was one of the dangerous forms of amusement which characterised Trafalgar Square.«\textsuperscript{20}

Nor was the «soldiers riot» in Luton noticeably severe in the context of 1919, indeed it paled into insignificance compared with events in Liverpool. In both these cases post-war riots had significant precedents in wartime riots. This point is of some importance. The middle years of the war had seen substantial rioting, most notably associated with the Lusitania sinking and the Gotha air-raids. The damage compensation figures for London illustrate the trend:

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\textbf{Expenses under Riot Damages Acts} & \\
1914–15 & £ 1,288 \\
1915–16 & £ 35,749 \\
1916–17 & £ 26,502 \\
1917–18 & £ 3,260 \textit{(Source Mepo 5/285, Annual Statistics)} \\
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Soldiers undoubtedly participated in wartime riots. They were notoriously prominent in breaking up pacifist meetings\textsuperscript{21} and occasionally participated in other riots.

\textsuperscript{18} On 19 November the Daily Express published a list of Armistice casualties from the LCC ambulance service amounting to 537 over 7 days.  
\textsuperscript{19} Daily Express, 13 November 1918.  
\textsuperscript{20} Daily Express, 16 November 1918. One measure of the high standard of orderly behaviour expected is that the throwing of fireworks is considered worthy of hostile comment.  
\textsuperscript{21} See report of attack on the Brotherhood Church, Islington Daily Gazette, 30 July 1917 and the attack on a «pacifist meeting» in Trafalgar Square on 9 April 1916, reported by Sylvia Pankhurst in: The Woman’s Dreadnought, 15 April 1916.
But most rioting crowds were predominantly civilian. For example in the severe Anti-German riots that occurred in North London on 7–8 July 1917, the rioters were predominantly adolescents, both male and female and a scattering of middle aged men and women.22

Events in 1919 should therefore be seen in several contexts; post-war rioting was not purely a matter of returning soldiers and those soldiers’ actions were not necessarily anti-civilian. Indeed, in a more general view disorder on the part of soldiers in 1919 might be taken as quite the opposite. The first examples of disorder which occurred after the Armistice began amongst logistic (significantly not frontline) troops in Northern France. They were entirely concerned with the desire of the soldiers for rapid demobilisation. The arrest of Private Pantling of Army Ordnance, turned a simmering ‘strike’ into all out mutiny by 28 January. This was ultimately defused by concession and conciliation. An actual riot, similarly motivated occurred at Le Havre in December. On 3 January 1919, armed soldiers mounted a similar protest on British soil at Folkestone, peaceful on the whole, but distinctly menacing. On 6 January there was a huge march from Shoreham camp to Brighton town hall. On 7 January, 1,000 soldiers from Bromley seized lorries and drove into Whitehall to demand demobilisation. The next day 4,000 men of the Army Service Corps marched on Whitehall. In Maidstone men marched on the town hall. At Purfleet in Essex the troops through snowballs at officers. Far worse incidents occurred in more remote theatres of war, notably Egypt.23

Two features stand out, this discontent was aimed specifically (and fairly successfully) at forcing the government and army to speed demobilization. In fact, instead of defining themselves against civilians, they were demanding the right to return to civilian life. Also revealing in light of the later events at Luton is the frequency with which men directed their attention to the town hall, asserting their status as citizens.

It is also interesting that the worst break downs of discipline occurred amongst non-combatant troops, precisely those whose war experience was least separate from that of the civilians.

This desire to get out of the army, to return to civilian normality, probably goes some way towards explaining why the Dominion troops were often perceived as the worst and most violent troublemakers, they were the furthest from home and the most isolated from their normal civilian experience.

In retrospect what is very striking about the British case was the intense compartmentalization of wartime life and its inherent. Indeed in some respects it bordered on the extreme. The British Legion, which came to have a near monopoly amongst veterans organisations was, in comparative terms, notable for its

numerical weakness. Less than 10 percent of British war veterans joined. In many respects this is precisely because it was too reminiscent of the army. Its leadership and ethos was drawn from the Regular Army and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was precisely why it was rejected by the majority of ex-servicemen. At the very end of his novel/memoir *Combed Out*, first published in 1920 and practically the first memoir of an «ordinary soldier», F. A.Voight places the following sentiment in the voice of one of his characters, «I don’t call myself a soldier, it’s a bloody insult to be called a soldier.» and Voight claims that his own first reaction to the Armistice was, «I thought of home and freedom. It was almost as if army life had been a dream.»

4. Re-integration?

«Should conditions arise in the life of the masses that either make it in their interest to murder, or else create a common feeling in favour of class terrorism, they might realise how easy it is to take another man’s life, and what a delight there is in doing it.»

(Henry de Man, *The Remaking of a Mind* (1920)).

The situation was never as straightforward as de Man thought and many feared. Immediately after the war there were a few «crime passionelle» of returning soldiers killing unfaithful spouses, but there was certainly no homicide epidemic. Nor was there much evident increase in societal violence in the medium term after the rioting surrounding demobilization and a series of (traditionally) violent industrial disturbances.

The compartmentalization of wartime violence was nearly total. Indeed the characteristic post-war response to wartime killing, amongst the small minority who had done so, was one of guilt. This may well not be straightforward. Joanna Bourke has suggested, and incurred a degree of controversy in doing so, that many men actually enjoyed killing in wartime. Guilt functioned as a coping mechanism, an assertion that one was «still» human despite this. This could be true, but if it is the case, it was a very mixed and secret pleasure. Veterans would not readily and publicly admit to it, precisely because it would incur serious social disapprobation. To a very large degree they could not admit it to themselves. As the quote from Tawney above shows, the guilt reaction set in very fast, perhaps particularly if killing had been done with pleasure.

Perhaps significantly guilt is closely associated with civilian homicide in contemporary England. Unrepentant killers are very rare. Fully a third of English murderers successfully commit suicide and about half attempt it.

Furthermore in cultural terms the legacy of the war in England did not particularly glorify killers. There is room for a great deal of work on this, but the English construction of a metaphoric pantheon of ‘heroes of the war’ would probably be striking in this respect. For example, the most decorated figure, Captain Chavasse, twice winner of the Victoria Cross, was a ‘non-combatant’ medical officer. The greatest English cultural icon was the executed nurse, Edith Cavell. Successful killers were distinctly subordinate, ‘Mick’ Mannock, the leading British air ace was nothing like the popular icon that Manfred von Richthofen became in wartime and post-war Germany. Indeed, Mannock’s unabashed desire to kill Germans was seen as a flaw.

Nevertheless, it would probably be a mistake to conclude that there were no ‘violent’ veterans in British life. The significant difference is precisely in the context. English self-congratulation over the lack of a post-war Freikorps mentality needs to be heavily qualified by the observation, ‘except in Ireland.’ As the IRA campaign escalated the nature of policing in Ireland changed. The violence of the IRA was met by counter-violence.

Increasingly the Roman Catholic Irishmen of the Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C) isolated, intimidated and picked off, resigned from the force. They were being replaced by the ‘Black and Tans’. The ‘Tans’ began arriving at the Gormanstown constabulary base from January 1920. Initially, ex-soldiers were specifically recruited. Unemployment doubtless drove many to join, but a minority must have been motivated by a desire to ‘prolong’ the war experience. Peter Hart in his work on the IRA war in Cork suggests:

«Their brutality was a direct consequence of their alienation and their wartime experience and their arrival frequently acted as the catalyst for violence. (‘from the minute the Black and Tans came on the scene, all the shutters went up on the windows and things like that.’)»

Hart quotes one ‘Tan’: «There was a comradeship there that you wouldn’t get anywhere else […] we were all ex-servicemen except three or four old R.I.C. men […] you had no real contact with the community at all. We were all young men you see, and I suppose in a sense it was quite natural when someone starts ambushing you the rest reply.»

In Cork in 1920–21, ‘Crown Forces’ killed 135 IRA men and 53 civilians. Strikingly, as Hart points out, the ratio of killed to wounded in the case of IRA men was a majority of dead (135/57) and in the case of civilians a very high proportion of killed to wounded (53/85). Compare this with a normal ‘combat’ ratio of about 3 wounded to 1 killed. The implication was clear, this wasn’t combat, this was cold

blooded political murder. (The ratios were just as bad, if not worse, on the other side).

Not just the ‹Tans› of the R.I.C, but the ‹Auxiliaries› (paramilitary police drawn from ex-officers) and the British Army were involved in the escalating reprisal killings. When twelve unarmed British soldiers were shot, retaliation was swift, six unarmed IRA volunteers were tracked down:

« [...] the officer who found them told them that he would give them a sporting chance, there was a hedge on the side of the hill, and he told them that his men would open fire when they got there. 4 of them were killed, the fifth got away, but ran into another of our pickets, and they shot him, this saved the time and trouble of Court Martial.»

The majority of kills were carried out by a minority of ‹hard men› on either side, one policeman in Cork was said to have killed 37 times before his transfer, Hart comments, «as time went on these political serial killers became virtually indistinguishable, their ‹stunts›, ‹jobs›, ‹operations›, a blur of masked men in trench coats, ‹attempted escapes› and disfigured bodies.»

Political violence in Ireland had long been worse than in ‹mainland› Britain, but generally this was an issue of degree rather than kind. From Easter 1916 the two islands began to follow diverging trajectories regarding political violence, it was to some degree legitimised on one whilst it was being even more delegitimised on the other. The two were intimately related, as indicated at the start of the paper, the escalation of violence in Ireland caused a fierce counter-reaction against political violence in Britain. Ireland, even more than usually, was becoming in every sense, the ‹other› island. Soon it would be defined out of the characterization of ‹British› politics altogether.

5. Britain after 1922  
To write of political violence in inter-war Britain, is in any normal terms, to discuss a striking absence. It is sharp visual rhetoric of Mark Mazower to use a photograph of a British Fascist rally as the frontispiece to his book Dark Continent, but most British people of the period would have had enormous difficulty in the inter-war period sensing any kinship with the ‹Dark Continent› of Europe that Mazower describes. Indeed they carried on and intensified the process of despising the political violence of Europe as characteristic of ‹lesser breeds without the law›. The most damning thing about Fascism was that it was foreign, British fascists were probably less representative than British vegetarians and certainly less representative than pacifists (even when they weren’t both!).

28 Hart, IRA, 99.
29 Hart, IRA, 100.
Of course political violence was not totally absent in the inter-war period. There was violence associated with the General Strike in 1926, the activities of the Communist Party, particularly when associated with the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), could be violent and met by violence. In 1931, as the slump bit home, a crowd of 20,000 was attacked by police in Manchester:

«In a section the cross roads were a welter of fighting men, of horses pushing through, the struggling confusion, of policemen hitting right and left with batons, of marchers retaliating with the stout sticks to which their banners had been nailed, with stones, bricks, lumps of coke.»

In 1932 a NUWM member was killed in Castleford by a police charge and there was a massive riot in Birkenhead. The National Hunger March of that year was also met by police violence, culminating in a series of fights in and around Hyde Park.

Most notably, of course the BUF (British Union of Fascists) did take a violent turn in the mid-1930s, leading to the infamous incidents at Olympia and the «Battle of Cable Street» in 1936.

But the reaction to political violence was now becoming unambiguously hostile. The two main political parties strove to take the moral high ground on the issue; Conservatives denounced Labour as «macho-bully boys» whilst Labour asserted that theirs was the politics of rationality against the violent instincts of the mob. True, the Conservatives might be willing to use «fascisti» as stewards for their meetings in the 1920s and Captain Robert Gee might still be willing to challenge hecklers to a fist fight on the platform, but the «old style» was clearly waning.

The response of three Conservative observers at the BUF Olympia rally in 1934 to the violence of the Blackshirted stewards indicate the changing scene.

«We were involuntary witnesses of wholly unnecessary violence inflicted by uniformed Blackshirts on interrupters. Men and women were knocked senseless and were still assaulted and kicked to the floor. It will be a matter of surprise to us if there were no fatal injuries. These methods of securing freedom of speech may have been effective, but they are happily unusual in England and constituted in our opinion a deplorable outrage of public order.»

In the year of the «Night of the Long Knives» and the start of Stalin’s purges this is a pretty tough definition of unacceptable violence. Indeed it was the resort to violence which destroyed British Fascism. The Olympia events were precisely what scared off the Daily Mail, which had tentatively backed the movement. Whilst the events at Olympia were well beyond the normal rules of pre-1914 British politics,
the outrage generated was far greater than the outrage produced by similar violence prior to 1914.

The collapse came with the «Battle of Cable Street». On 4 October the BUF, now becoming openly anti-Semitic, undertook to march through a Jewish area of East London. It was met by Jewish and socialist opposition in what degenerated into a running fight, with 70 people injured and 88 arrested (83 of them anti-fascists, the police having perceived it as their responsibility to protect the march.) The BUF tried to present this as a result of left-wing and Jewish thuggery, neither the Government nor the public seemed to have been convinced. The 1908 Public Meetings Act, designed to allow the organizers of political meetings to call upon Police Assistance in the event of rowdyism (in itself an interesting indication of pre-war normality), was clearly no use against an organisation which was using its meetings and marches to provoke violence. The result in 1936 was the first Public Order Act. It was a major increase of state control over political activity, and as some noted at the time a potentially large infringement on «political liberty». Order was being put ahead of free speech. The main plank was the absolute banning of «political uniforms» and subsidiary to it strong restrictions on deliberate provocation. On all sides the Bill was presented as a crucial step in crushing «private armies», but some felt that public opinion would do that itself, the Labour MP, J. R. Clynes remarked that the country would not be impressed by «alien» practices, whilst the Conservative, Maurice Petherick suggested, «is it not better to allow the good sense of the people to destroy these foreign fanatics than try to supress them by the force of law.»

In fact, characteristically of the country, British fascism was destroyed simultaneously by both.

Conclusion

Those Peculiarities Reconsidered Is it conceivable that one result of the First World War was ultimately to make British politics significantly less violent? There are a series of plausible explanations as to why this was probably the case.

Political change The massive change in the composition of the electorate as a result of the 1918 Representation of the People Act probably contributed a great deal. The feminization of the electorate beginning with that act weighed against machismo politics. More subtly the enfranchisement of young males meant that their political opinions could be expressed at the ballot box rather than as rowdies storming the platform. Furthermore platform politics was declining.

Increased newspaper readership and increasingly radio broadcasting meant that platform oratory was losing its significance. The theatre of political violence was in decline.

**Social integration** War had deeply ambiguous effects on this, but on the whole Britain came out well from the First World War. In the short term the middle classes suffered a higher burden, to some extent this was restored in the post-war period. The working class made definite gains during the war and were able to hold on to quite a few. True the inter-war period saw mass unemployment, but it should be remembered that even the unemployed in inter-war Britain were probably objectively better off than many of the pre-war employed. Class division was persistent, but in some ways less ferocious than pre-1914. Symbolically the nation’s institutions had not only held together, but had been gained ground, the Monarchy came out of the war with more prestige than it had gone in and Parliamentary democracy had not only survived but was ultimately strengthened.

The social tensions which had riven the home fronts in Central Europe during the last years of the war were largely avoided in Britain, there was no breakdown of law and order similar to that caused by economic pressure in Germany. Even the «alienated» veterans, were in truth, not particularly alienated from civil life.

**The Construction of English Character** The most subtle effect was in the foregrounding of non-violence as a particularly English characteristic. I say English, not British, because the interwar discourse centred on this in particular.

Ireland became paradoxically important in the process. The political violence in Ireland was increasingly defined as «alien» even when committed by the English. In the construction of the image of the enemy during the war, the British press and state propaganda had laid great stress on the defence of civilised values against the violence and brutality of the barbarian enemy. In Ireland, the image came back to haunt the nation. The atrocities and reprisals carried out by British forces in the guerrilla war were simply not British, they were as Liberal and Left wing critics pointed out, the very image of the behaviour of the Hun.

Ireland had been the great wartime failure in integration, the logical conclusion was to get rid of it, to define it out of the national self-image. Conservatives who had advocated armed rebellion in the cause of Union before 1914, were happy to grant Home Rule and more in 1922. Thus began the long tradition of British doublethink over «Irish» political violence, that it had nothing to do with «Englishness», even when carried out on the part of British Governments. It was not only detached it was in fact the opposite, the «other».

In the wake of a world war, the «national character» was being defined as peculiarly peaceable. The «other» wasn’t just Ireland, amused (occasionally concerned) contempt was the general view of political turmoil sweeping Europe.
Of course these non-violent people had an Achilles heel. When hundreds of demonstrators were brutally gunned down by the Army at Amritsar, this self image took a blow, as it would do on many an occasion in the future in colonial «dirty wars». But even in the colonies the blatant use of violence to maintain control came under increasing scrutiny. In certain respects the widespread admiration for Gandhi’s tactics of non-violent confrontation amongst his British opponents shows just how clever he was in catching wind of the new self-definition.

Although it drew on deep roots, the non-violent image of politics was also a specific construct. It’s heyday, roughly from 1922 to the time of Margaret Thatcher, now seems passed. In 2000, the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, speculated, to much outrage, about the violence inherent in the English character. He pointed out that a people doesn’t create the largest Empire in history without a propensity to violence. This certainly will not be news to anyone who has watched the activities of English football hooligans or is aware of the large numbers of racial attacks that occur every year, but it is a long way from how the English have perceived themselves for much of the century.
Particularités anglaises?

Guerre, violence et politique: 1900–1933

Avant la Première Guerre mondiale, la violence était un phénomène qui apparaît fréquemment au cours de grèves et au cours de luttes électorales, mais la plupart du temps les bagarres restaient sans conséquences graves. Cette violence fut de plus en plus rejetée après 1918. Si d’anciens soldats du front fondèrent les « Black and Tans » et essayèrent par la force de devenir maître du mouvement d’indépendance irlandais, ils ne représentaient qu’une petite minorité d’anciens combattants du front britanniques et furent désapprouvés, sans équivoque, par l’opinion britannique à cause de leurs méthodes. La flagrante diminution de la violence politique en Grande-Bretagne avait ses origines d’une part dans la démocratisation et la « féminisation » de la politique à la suite des réformes du droit de vote à la fin de la guerre, d’autre part grâce à la perception de sa propre identité qui permit à l’Angleterre de délimiter un caractère national pacifique face aux violents sujets irlandais et face à ceux des colonies.

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