Check for updates

Journal of British Studies 62 (July 2023): 739–766. doi:10.1017/jbr.2022.233
© The Author(s), published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the North American Conference on British Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

"Send a Soldier to Parliament": Ex-servicemen, Masculinity, and the Legacies of the Great War in Liberal Electoral and Parliamentary Politics

Matthew Johnson

Abstract The spectacular collapse of the Liberal Party in Britain has often been regarded as the result of a crisis in Liberal values, supposedly provoked by the unprecedented militarization of British society during the Great War. However, this interpretation typically fails to recognize the extent to which the most important and visible legacies of that process of militarization were accommodated within the Liberal Party itself. Between 1918 and 1929, more than a hundred ex-servicemen were elected to Parliament as Liberal MPs, and scores more stood as Liberal candidates. This article examines how these men negotiated, presented, and performed their military identities within the framework of postwar electoral politics; analyzes how they operated in Parliament; and traces the longer-term trajectories of their political careers. It challenges the assumption that Liberals were temperamentally or ideologically incapable of engaging with the war's legacies, demonstrating the ability of Liberal candidates to exploit the iconography and rhetorical tropes of military service when appealing to an electorate that had been profoundly shaped by the experience of war and military mobilization. Liberals sought to contest Conservative Party attempts to monopolize the politics of patriotism after 1918 by constructing gendered electoral appeals that acknowledged the unstable meanings of the Great War and the ambiguous status of the men who had fought in it. However, the inability of Liberal politicians to unite around a shared understanding of what the war had meant ultimately prevented them from exploiting the memory of the conflict as effectively as their Conservative and Labour rivals.

In the voluminous scholarship on the downfall of the British Liberal Party, the effects of the Great War have loomed large. Explanations for the party's political and electoral collapse have often focused on the crisis in Liberal values supposedly provoked by the demands of waging total war after August 1914.[1] While Liberals broadly supported the initial declaration of war against Imperial Germany, the unprecedented militarization of British society during the years that followed—in particular, the introduction of military conscription—has been regarded as posing a challenge to Liberal principles that ultimately wrecked the

Matthew Johnson is associate professor of modern British history at Durham University. He thanks Jennifer Luff, Philip Williamson, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and incisive comments on earlier versions of this article. The research was generously supported by the British Academy. Please direct any correspondence to matthew.johnson@durham.ac.uk.

[1] On the Great War as a total war, see Roger Chickering, "World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections on the British and German Cases, 1914–1915," in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge, 2000), 35–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

party. According to Trevor Wilson, the totalizing logic of industrialized warfare "threatened to eliminate liberalism as a coherent political position."[2] Michael Bentley considered the Liberal admission of conscription in 1916 to be particularly problematic, because it substantially undermined "Liberalism's claim to represent something more than an electoral machine."[3] Michael Freeden took a similar line, arguing that the controversy over compulsory service provoked a profound rupture in Liberal attitudes toward the state and helped to plunge the party into "two decades of ideological crisis."[4] Even Ross McKibbin, who, in a famous article in the *English Historical Review* in 1976, argued that the Liberal decline might more accurately be understood as the result of changes in the structure of British politics—specifically, the democratization of the franchise and the growth of class politics—has more recently placed greater emphasis on the extent to which the militarization of society presented the Liberals with "fundamental ideological problems."[5] The argument that the Great War was destructive to the Liberal Party because it forced Liberals to confront the incompatibility between their essential values and the actions they needed to take to secure military victory is now well entrenched as a historical orthodoxy.[6]

This interpretation is undoubtedly powerful and compelling. But it is also one that, by framing the problem of total war as essentially intractable, has helped foster a perception of the Liberals as incapable of responding to the longer-term legacies of the wartime militarization of British society. These legacies were manifest not only in ideological debates about the proper role and powers of the state but also in the myriad ways in which political values, assumptions, and identities were reshaped by the experience of war and military mobilization during a conflict in which almost a quarter of the adult male population passed through the ranks of the armed forces. What is often missed in conventional accounts of the Liberal collapse is the extent to which this process of militarization was reflected after 1918 within the Liberal Party, and most conspicuously within the Liberal Party in Parliament. During the eleven years following the end of the Great War, no fewer than 115 ex-servicemen who had served in the forces during the conflict were elected to Parliament as Liberal members, and dozens more stood unsuccessfully as Liberal candidates.[7]

[2] Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–1935* (London, 1966), 24.

[3] Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914–1929* (Cambridge, 1977), 35.

[4] Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939* (Oxford, 1986), 1, 18–31.

[5] Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010), at 22. See also H. C. G. Matthew, Ross McKibbin, and J. A. Kay, "The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party," *English Historical Review* 91, no. 361 (1976): 723–52.

[6] Geoffrey R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886–1918* (Oxford, 2004), 832.

[7] These members of Parliament were identified from information in Michael Stenton and Stephen Lees, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament: A Biographical Dictionary of the House of Commons*, vol. 3, *1919–1945* (Sussex, 1979); *Debrett's Illustrated Heraldic and Biographical House of Commons and the Judicial Bench* (London, 1871–1930); local and national press coverage of parliamentary elections; and printed election addresses of parliamentary candidates. The complete list is as follows: M. Alexander, R. W. Allen, R. W. Aske, H. Barnes, A. C. T. Beck, W. W. Benn, R. Berkeley, W. A. Bowdler, C. E. Breese, A. E. Brown, E. L. Burgin, J. Burnie, J. R. M. Butler, W. L. S. Churchill, G. P. Collins, A. Comyns Carr, C. R. Coote, L. W. J. Costello, W. H. Cozens-Hardy, H. E. Crawfurd, D. Davies, J. A. Dawes, J. P. Dickie, C. R. Dudgeon, W. Edge, J. Edwards, A. England, C. F. Entwistle, E. Evans, H. A. Evans, A. C. Farquharson, H. Fildes, V. H. Finney, R. T. H. Fletcher, G. France, G. M. Garro-Jones,

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Among these could be counted men of all ranks, from enlisted privates to senior military commanders.[8] Former servicemen could be found on all wings of the parliamentary party, as followers of either Asquith or Lloyd George, and included backbenchers and front-rank politicians.[9] In 1923 alone, fifty-seven Liberal MPs—more than a third of the party's strength at Westminster—were veterans of the Great War. Far from being discomfited by military issues, these Liberals presented their war service as a badge of honor and an integral part of their political identities. Former servicemen thus constituted one of the largest and most visible groups in the Liberal Party in Parliament during the 1920s. Yet they represent a dimension of postwar Liberal politics that has been almost entirely unconsidered in the scholarship.

In what follows, I examine how these Liberal Great War veterans negotiated, presented, and performed their military identities within the framework of postwar electoral politics; analyze how they operated in Parliament; and trace the longer-term trajectories of their political careers. I challenge the caricature of a Liberal Party fundamentally ill at ease with the legacies of the Great War, demonstrating the willingness of Liberal parliamentary candidates to exploit the iconography and rhetorical tropes of military service when framing appeals to an electorate that had been profoundly shaped by the experience of war. These presentational strategies offered a powerful means of challenging Conservative claims to a monopoly on the politics of khaki patriotism after 1918.[10] But they also formed the basis of a wider and

---

W. Gorman, E. L. Granville, F. Gray, H. Greenwood, J. W. Greig, F. K. Griffith, E. W. M. Grigg, C. H. C. Guest, F. E. Guest, O. M. Guest, T. M. Guthrie, E. Hayward, F. Hindle, A. L. Hobhouse, J. P. Hodge, A. Hopkinson, I. L. Hore-Belisha, G. W. A. Howard, S. G. Howard, R. Hutchison, H. Johnstone, W. A. Jowitt, R. M. Kedward, J. Kenworthy, E. A. Lessing, A. L. Lever, T. A. Lewis, G. Lloyd George, J. F. Loverseed, G. McCrae, E. Macfadyen, G. McMicking, C. J. l'E. Malone, G. Le M. Mander, C. C. Mansel, A. E. Martin, F. Martin, H. M. Meyler, H. L. Mond, A. H. Moreing, H. S. Morris, J. H. Morris-Jones, H. L. F. Moulton, A. C. Murray, H. L. Nathan, H. Norman, G. Owen, G. M. Palmer, T. H. Parry, I. Philipps, H. Philipson, C. B. Ramage, J. T. T. Rees, J. A. de Rothschild, C. M. C. Rudkin, H. M. Seely, J. E. B. Seely, G. H. Shakespeare, A. Shaw, J. A. Simon, A. H. M. Sinclair, E. L. Spears, G. E. Spero, H. K. Stephenson, R. S. Stewart, P. G. Thompson, W. T. Thomson, J. Ward, W. D. Ward, W. Waring, J. B. Watson, H. Webb, J. C. Wedgwood, P. Williams, R. Williams, R. S. A. Williams, M. M. Wood, G. G. Woodwark, and E. H. Young.

[8] Frank Gray, who had served as a private in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, stood unsuccessfully as the Liberal candidate for Watford in 1918 and sat as an MP for Oxford from 1922 to 1924; General Hubert Gough, who had commanded the British Fifth Army on the Western Front, was the Asquithian Liberal candidate in the Chertsey by-election in 1922. The vast majority of former servicemen who were candidates or MPs had served in the army, but the Navy and the Royal Air Force were also represented in the Liberal Party. The 115 Liberal MPs elected between 1918 and 1929 who had served in the Great War included twenty-six captains, thirty majors, twenty-three colonels or lieutenant-colonels, one brigadier-general, and three major-generals. This distribution of ranks is broadly comparable to that found in the Conservative Party in Parliament during this period.

[9] In December 1916, Asquith was effectively forced to resign as prime minister and was replaced by his former ally David Lloyd George, who formed a new coalition government with the support of leading Unionist and Labour politicians. The resulting split in the Liberal Party was formalized in the 1918 election, which saw Asquith's Independent Liberals oppose Lloyd George's Coalition Liberals. The latter fought the 1922 election as the National Liberals. The rival factions reunited in 1923, but the 1924 election saw the Liberals fall to a distant third place behind the Conservative and Labour parties—a defeat from which they never recovered.

[10] Paul Readman, "The Conservative Party, Patriotism, and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 1 (2001): 107–45.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remarkably nuanced range of rhetorical appeals to voters, which acknowledged the unstable meanings of the Great War and the ambiguous status of the men who had fought in it. Liberal politicians sought to present the military victory over the Central Powers as a triumph of Liberal values and to connect their individual service records with their support for popular "Liberal" causes such as the League of Nations.[11] Through an examination of these appeals, I demonstrate that, far from an intractable problem, the legacies of the war and the wartime militarization of British society represented a potential source of political strength for British Liberalism and perhaps even the basis for a Liberal electoral revival.

Of course, no such revival occurred. Yet, ironically, it was not the process of militarization but the very ambiguities of the war's political meaning that ultimately proved most damaging to Liberal fortunes. While the Labour and Conservative parties successfully integrated the memory of the war and the figure of the ex-serviceman into their broader electoral appeals after 1918, Liberal politicians—especially those who had served in the armed forces—struggled to unite around a shared understanding of what the war had meant. This failure ultimately undermined their ability to harness a compelling narrative of the war and the lessons that might be drawn from it in the service of a distinctly Liberal vision for Britain's political future.

ELECTIONEERING: MILITARY SERVICE, MASCULINITY, AND PATRIOTISM

The lack of attention paid to the involvement of ex-servicemen in Liberal politics after 1918 is in many ways surprising. Recent work on British politics and political culture from the late nineteenth century, exploring attempts by rival parties to construct languages of politics capable of tapping into forms of social identity held by voters, has focused on discourses of class, gender, and place.[12] Yet the great, overwhelming, and recent experience of war—of military service, of physical and psychological trauma, of bereavement, and of commemoration—has often been ignored. Cultural and social historians have examined the legacies of the war in terms of attitudes toward violence, fears of "brutalization," conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and domesticity, and the behavior and treatment of ex-servicemen in postwar society.[13] But the significance of these legacies for electoral and parliamentary politics

[11] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 150.

[12] See, for example, Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language, and Popular Politics in England, 1967–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, eds., *Party, State, and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997); Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990); Kit Good, "'Quit Ye Like Men': Platform Manliness and Electioneering, 1895–1939," in *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Matthew McCormack (Basingstoke, 2007), 143–64; Alex Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London* (Woodbridge, 2007); Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents, and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910* (Woodbridge, 2016).

[13] See Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post–First World War Britain," *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (2003): 557–89; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, 1993); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London, 1996); Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, 2001); Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge,

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has been only imperfectly understood. Those historians who have considered the involvement of the "war generation" in British party politics have tended to focus on the Conservative or Fascist right.[14] The Conservative Party in particular, which had long enjoyed close links with the armed forces, and boasted the largest cohort of former servicemen in Parliament throughout the interwar period, has been regarded as uniquely successful at exploiting martial tropes and "selling" the military service records of its candidates in electoral contests after war. Indeed, it has been suggested that such rhetorical and presentational strategies were largely inaccessible to Liberals and other progressives.[15]

In fact, Liberal parliamentary candidates who had fought in the war went to considerable lengths to embrace and advertise their military identities. Liberals standing in the general election of 1918 identified themselves by their military rank, drew attention to their military decorations, and often provided detailed accounts of their wartime service.[16] Liberal posters urged voters to "Send a Soldier to Parliament."[17] Although members of the armed forces were technically prohibited from wearing their uniforms when canvassing or on the hustings, photographs of Liberal ex-servicemen printed in election addresses and pamphlets almost invariably depicted the candidates in khaki.[18]

Some of these election addresses were published specifically for distribution among members of the armed forces awaiting demobilization.[19] Standing in Leith, for example, Captain William Wedgwood Benn produced a special four-page election leaflet for circulation among absent military voters, fronted with a large photograph of himself in his Royal Air Force uniform and introducing himself as "a brother soldier." Wedgwood Benn expressed resentment at the "gross injustice" of holding a general election while hundreds of thousands of soldiers

2004); Michael Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 343–62; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–31* (Basingstoke, 2009); Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990); Mark Edele and Robert Gerwarth, "The Limits of Demobilization: Global Perspectives on the Aftermath of the Great War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 3–14.

[14] Simon Ball, "Mosley and the Tories in 1930: The Problem of Generations," *Contemporary British History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 445–59, at 445; David Jarvis, "The Conservative Party and the Politics of Gender, 1900–1939," in *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990*, ed. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Cardiff, 1996), 172–93, esp. 183–84; Richard Carr, *Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics in the Aftermath of the Great War: The Memory of All That* (Farnham, 2013); Julie V. Gottlieb, "Britain's New Fascist Men: The Aestheticization of Brutality in British Fascist Propaganda," in *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain*, ed. Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (London, 2004), 83–99.

[15] Carr, *Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics*, 53–60, at 53. Carr identified 157 veterans of the Great War elected as Conservative members of Parliament in 1918 and 200 (many of them the same men, of course) elected in 1922.

[16] See, for example, election address by J. E. B. Seely, Ilkeston, 1918, University of Bristol, Special Collections, DM668/2. (This repository hereafter abbreviated as UB.)

[17] Election poster for Captain H. Higgins, Oxford, 1918, Imperial War Museum, London, PST 12200.

[18] 110 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1918), cols. 2479–80.

[19] Election address, Geoffrey Howard, Westbury division of Wilts, "Letter to Soldiers and Sailors Who Are Absent Voters," 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were still stationed abroad, observing that "many of you will not have the chance to judge the issues or even to Vote. *And yet, you have a better right than any to be heard*."[20] Such a direct appeal for the votes of soldiers might seem extraordinary coming from a candidate standing in the interest of a party that just four years earlier had been denouncing the army's apparent willingness to intrude into the political controversy over Irish Home Rule. However, Liberal opposition to military involvement in politics before 1914 had been rooted in a suspicion of the armed forces as a partisan and reactionary caste, separate from wider British society.[21] During the war, the distinction between the army and society was eroded, as the rapid expansion of the armed forces—and in particular the introduction of compulsory military service—helped to create a genuinely national "citizen" force in place of the old professional army.[22] Any case for excluding members of the armed forces from the political process was therefore much diminished. By 1917, even a radical such as Arthur Ponsonby, a founding member of the Union of Democratic Control, could be found urging the government to fulfil its commitment "to give the soldiers an effective voice in the future government of our country"; doing so meant not merely giving them the vote but also suspending paragraph 451 of King's Regulations, which prohibited soldiers from attending political meetings.[23] In November 1918, the Liberal leader H. H. Asquith declared in a speech to the London Liberal Federation that a House of Commons elected without the full participation of the returning soldiers would "lack moral authority to speak and to act on behalf of the nation as a whole."[24]

Liberals continued to direct special appeals to ex-servicemen in electoral contests throughout the 1920s. Candidates who had fought in the war frequently drew attention to their links with local ex-servicemen's organizations and sometimes adopted labels such as the "Discharged Soldiers' candidate" or "the Liberal and ex-Service Men's candidate."[25] As late as 1929, Captain J. P. Dickie, standing in the Consett division of Durham, published an election address assuring "my Ex-Service comrades" that "their interests will be safer in the hands of one of themselves than in those of any other."[26] The extent to which such appeals reaped electoral reward is difficult to ascertain. Despite going down to a "smashing defeat" in Rotherham in 1918, Commander Joseph Kenworthy, the Liberal candidate and a career naval officer, expressed his firm belief that "the absent voters [that is, the serving soldiers

[20] Election address by Captain Wedgwood Benn, Stansgate Papers, Parliamentary Archives, London, ST/40, fols. 20–21 (emphasis added).

[21] Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902–1914* (Oxford, 2012), 17–75; Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902–1914* (Basingstoke, 2013), 48–49; Peter Keeling, "The Armed Forces and Parliamentary Elections in the United Kingdom, 1885–1914," *English Historical Review* 134, no. 569 (2019): 881–913, at 886, 902.

[22] Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman, and Mark Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2017), 142, 146.

[23] Arthur Ponsonby, "Votes for Soldiers," *Nation*, 15 September 1917. Unless otherwise noted, all newspapers referred to in this article were published in London.

[24] "Mr. Asquith's Campaign," *Liberal Magazine*, December 1918, 588.

[25] See in UB, Special Collections, DM668/2, election addresses by the following: Frank Briant, North Lambert, 1918; George Graham Woodwark, King's Lynn, 1922; Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Hutchison, Uxbridge, 1923; Archibald Sinclair, Caithness and Sutherland, 1923; W. Henry Williams, Aberavon, 1924; Alec Glassey, East Dorset, 1929; L. du Garde Peach, Borough of Derby, 1929.

[26] Election address by J. P. Dickie, Consett div. of Durham, 1929, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and sailors] had plumped for me by a large majority."[27] However, some Liberal agents expressed skepticism that returning soldiers and ex-servicemen constituted a discrete interest within the electorate.[28] In his report on the Asquithian party's disappointing performance in the 1918 general election, F. R. Starling observed that "the soldier vote although very small was fairly evenly divided" between the parties.[29] T. F. Tweed, commenting on the results of the Rusholme by-election in 1919, agreed that "there is no solid soldiers' vote as such." Insofar as any cohesion in the ex-service vote could be discerned, Tweed claimed that "the small proportion of ex-soldier voters who are members of ex-service organizations are largely Labour in tendency, mostly owing to the fact that their principal officials lean in this direction."[30] Even this tendency declined over the course of the 1920s, as the British Legion, motivated in part by concerns about radicalization and unruliness, sought to promote a non-political identity among organized ex-servicemen.[31] In this context, while some Liberal agents urged that "steps must be taken to gain or regain the support of service men," others concluded that any effort expended making "special appeals for the votes of ex-service men is pure waste."[32]

However, parliamentary candidates who invoked their military credentials at election time were not simply appealing for the support of their former comrades-in-arms. They were also engaging in the construction of a political identity that they hoped would appeal to electors of all stripes, including—and perhaps especially—those voters who had not themselves experienced military combat. As David Jarvis observes in a study of the interwar Conservative Party, former military officers seeking election to Parliament often referred to their wartime service in an attempt to elevate commonly accepted "masculine" virtues—physical courage and fighting prowess—into a measure of fitness for political office.[33] Liberal candidates made great use of this rhetorical strategy, often presenting their service records as signifiers not only of manly vitality but also of moral qualities such as honesty and integrity. Contesting the Watford constituency in 1918, Frank Gray—one of the small minority of postwar MPs who had served as a private rather than a commissioned officer—cast himself as "Gray the Soldier: The man who will not barter his conscience for votes."[34]

[27] Joseph Montague Kenworthy, *Sailors, Statesmen, and Others: An Autobiography* (London, 1933), 150.

[28] On the development of efforts by parties to target electoral appeals at distinct subgroups and interests within constituencies after the war, see David Jarvis, "British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s," *English Historical Review* 111, no. 440 (1996): 59–84; Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 37–39, 164; Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), 119–20.

[29] F. R. Starling, "Three-Cornered Contests," *Liberal Agent*, October 1919.

[30] T. F. Tweed, "The Bye-Elections," *Liberal Agent*, January 1920. See also David Englander, "The National Union of Ex-servicemen and the Labour Movement, 1918–1920," *History* 76, no. 246 (1991): 24–42.

[31] Stephen R. Ward, ed., *The War Generation: Veterans of the First World War* (New York, 1975); Niall Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics, and Society, 1921–1939* (London, 2005); Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *British Army and the First World War*, 163–66.

[32] J. Manus, "The Landslide—And After," *Liberal Agent*, January 1919; T. F. Tweed, "Election Methods, A Paper," *Liberal Agent*, October 1920.

[33] Jarvis, "Conservative Party and the Politics of Gender," 183–84.

[34] Election poster for Frank Gray, Watford, 1918, Imperial War Museum, PST 12185.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, candidates who invoked their war service when addressing electors were not simply framing an idealized martial masculinity as an abstract marker of fitness for entry into Parliament. They were also making an implicit—and often explicit—claim to the gratitude, and the electoral support, of a voting public on whose behalf the soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Great War had fought. The invoking of a debt owed by the public to the armed forces, which might (partially) be repaid by electing military and naval officers to Parliament, was directed in particular at those women voters who had been newly enfranchised in 1918. Typical of such appeals was the election address of Rear-Admiral Guy Gaunt, the Coalition Liberal candidate in the Leek division of Staffordshire: "WOMEN! REMEMBER!! That had it not been for the BRITISH NAVY Germany would have got to England. Your HOMES WOULD HAVE BEEN LAID DESOLATE!! . . . [N]either your lives nor your honor [*sic*], nor the lives of your children would have been safe. But now the danger is passed through the gallant deeds of our SOLDIERS and SAILORS, and you are asked to vote for Gaunt, who is one of them."[35]

Of course, Gaunt's address offered a peculiarly narrow reading of the gendered experience of the war. The contribution made by British women to the war effort —in industry and agriculture, and through the sacrifices of "patriotic motherhood"—had been widely celebrated during the conflict. It was also linked directly with the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women in 1918 (rhetorically, if not fully in practice, for many of the "munitionettes" did not meet the minimum age requirement).[36] However, as Mary Hilson has argued, this wartime contribution was largely marginalized in the patriotic rhetoric of the 1918 general election. Instead of having their own service celebrated, women electors were widely urged to vote as proxies for their male relatives in the forces.[37] Among the seventeen women who stood as parliamentary candidates in 1918, Christabel Pankhurst, contesting the constituency of Smethwick on behalf of the recently formed Women's Party, was unusual in adopting a platform that combined aggressive nationalist patriotism with proposals for radical social reform.[38] More typically, the women seeking election to Parliament justified their candidatures by drawing on traditional gender ideals and presenting themselves not as embodiments of wartime patriotism but as repositories of "special knowledge" about home and family.[39] In doing so, they left the stage largely clear for candidates from the armed forces to claim political authority as representatives of a section of society that had made an exceptional contribution to military victory. In a conscious echo of the recruiting posters produced during the early months of the war, Gaunt concluded his election address by urging: "DON'T WAIT TO BE FETCHED, but go to the poll and VOTE FOR

[35] Election address by Guy Gaunt, Leek, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[36] Nicoletta Gullace, *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (Basingstoke, 2002), 55–59, 145–66, 184–94.

[37] Mary Hilson, "Women Voters and the Rhetoric of Patriotism in the British General Election of 1918," *Women's History Review* 10, no. 2 (2001): 325–47.

[38] Julie V. Gottlieb and Judith Szapor, "Suffrage and Nationalism in Comparative Perspective: Britain, Hungary, Finland and the Transnational Experience of Rosika Schwimmer," in *Women Activists between War and Peace: Europe, 1918–1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (London, 2017), 29–76.

[39] Lisa Berry-Waite, "'The Woman's Point of View': Women Parliamentary Candidates, 1918–1919," in *Electoral Pledges in Britain since 1918: The Politics of Promises*, ed. David Thackeray and Richard Toye (London, 2020), 47–69, at 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ADMIRAL GAUNT."[40] In this fashion, political slogans from the war years were appropriated and repackaged for electoral purposes, and Liberal candidates were just as willing as their Conservative rivals to employ such rhetorical tactics.

Like the targeted attempts to solicit the votes of ex-servicemen, these broader presentational strategies featured prominently not only in the electoral contest of 1918 but also in Liberal campaigns throughout the 1920s. More than a decade after the end of the war, Alec Glassey thought it important to emphasize his credentials as "the ONLY EX-SERVICE CANDIDATE before the electors of East Dorset."[41] Nor was it only at election time that Liberal politicians performed their martial identities before the public. MPs were often involved in public rites of commemoration after the war, including events marking the construction and dedication of war memorials.[42] By choosing to attend such occasions in military uniform, politicians could signal their status both as civic leaders, honoring those members of a local community who had not returned from the war, and as soldiers in their own right, with the authority to "speak in the name of the living and the dead."[43] In these ways, MPs and parliamentary candidates were able to tap into the power of a "national cult of remembrance," marked by the ceremonies of Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, the growth of the British Legion, and the Haig Poppy Appeal, which developed enormous resonance in the civic and religious life of interwar Britain.[44] Some MPs engaged in less conventional publicity stunts. In the summer of 1923, Frank Gray extended a public challenge to any man his own age to participate in a walking race from Banbury to Oxford in full infantry kit, with pack and rifle. The race attracted considerable attention from the press and was recorded on film by Pathé News.[45]

The public reception of these martial performances and slogans is, of course, difficult to judge precisely. Attempts to present wartime military service as a qualification for election to Parliament were not always accepted unquestioningly. For one thing, the service records of candidates varied widely. Some had been professional soldiers before 1914, while others had been swept up in the great military mobilization of the war years. Sixty-six sitting Liberal MPs had held commissions in the armed forces during the war, including Winston Churchill, who spent several months in 1916 on the Western Front as a lieutenant-colonel in the Royal Scots Fusiliers.[46] Liberal

[40] Election address by Guy Gaunt, Leek, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[41] Election address by Alec E. Glassey, East Dorset, 1929, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[42] J. E. B. Seely, who sat as the Liberal member for Ilkeston and then for the Isle of Wight after the war, and served as lord lieutenant of Hampshire from 1918 to 1947, unveiled more than a dozen war memorials during the decade after 1918; Captain Colin Reith Coote, DSO, the Liberal member for the Isle of Ely from 1918 to 1922, unveiled at least half a dozen memorials in Cambridgeshire in 1920 and 1921; Major James Burnie, MC, the Liberal member for Bootle, unveiled that town's memorial in October 1922.

[43] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge 1995), 97.

[44] Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London, 2005), 20; Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994).

[45] *Tamworth Herald*, 1 September 1923. The challenge was accepted by Captain Charles Ainsworth, the Conservative MP for Bury. Gray won the race after Ainsworth was forced to give up a mile from Oxford.

[46] Matthew Johnson, "Leading from the Front: The 'Service Members' in Parliament, the Armed Forces, and British Politics during the Great War," *English Historical Review* 130, no. 544 (2015): 613–45, at 624. Among the Great War veterans who were elected as Liberal MPs after 1918, Maurice

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

candidates and MPs had served in all the major theaters of the war on land, at sea, and in the air; but not all could plausibly claim to have "had a good war." In the election of 1918, Arthur Comyns Carr presented himself to the voters in St. Pancras South-West as "Private Comyns Carr" and adopted the label "The Liberal and Soldiers' Candidate." However, his martial credentials were questioned by his Conservative opponent, who pointed out that Comyns Carr had joined the army only in the closing months of the war and had served in a home-based unit without seeing military action. He failed to take the seat.[47]

The most prominent Liberal ex-serviceman to run into political difficulties over his wartime record was Sir John Simon, the former home secretary, who had resigned from Asquith's cabinet in January 1916 in opposition to the introduction of military conscription. Following his resignation, Simon had joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1917, where he served on General Trenchard's staff. Seeking to retain his parliamentary seat at Walthamstow in 1918, Simon made use of the same rhetorical and presentational strategies employed by other ex-service candidates. He distributed photographs of himself in military uniform and published a letter of endorsement from F. G. Weaver, the secretary of the Walthamstow branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers.[48] However, the publication of this letter was challenged by another local member of the federation, who produced a rival poster insisting that the Walthamstow branch had not endorsed Simon officially, and urging voters to support the Conservative candidate, Sir Stanley Johnson, even though the latter had not served in a military capacity during the war. Simon's patriotism was also impugned by rumors spread through the constituency that he had donated a sum of money to provide comforts for German prisoners of war.[49] Like most of the other leading Asquithian Liberals in 1918, he was soundly defeated.

When Simon attempted to return to Parliament at the Spen Valley by-election the following year, he found his war record openly questioned by critics who made an issue of his service having been on the staff rather than in the trenches. One government minister claimed that Simon's Coalition Liberal opponent, Colonel Fairfax, was "the only candidate who had smelt powder" during the war; another detractor jeered that "Sir John Simon, after a short spell in a non-fighting unit, hurried home to earn £30,000 a year."[50] The *Evening Standard* informed its readers that Simon's service had "consisted of 'inspections,' and the other vague duties assigned to privileged people who are able to wage war in 'an advisory capacity.'"[51] The *Daily Dispatch*

Alexander, William Bowdler, Winston Churchill, Godfrey Collins, George Garro-Jones, James Greig, C. H. C. Guest, F. E. Guest, James Hodge, Austin Hopkinson, Robert Hutchison, Joseph Kenworthy, Eric Macfadyen, and Gilbert McMicking had all served in the armed forces before 1914, many of them in the South African War, 1899–1902.

[47] Election poster for Comyns Carr, S.W. St Pancras, 1918, Imperial War Museum, PST 12179; *Times*, 10 December 1918. Comyns Carr was later elected MP for Islington East in 1923.

[48] John Simon Papers, MS Simon 197, Bodleian Library, Oxford, fols. 42, 53.

[49] Simon Papers, MS Simon 197, Bodleian Library, fol. 58.

[50] "Lord Haig's Letter: Sir John Simon's Services with the R.A.F.," *Westminster Gazette*, 17 December 1919. Simon had established a successful (and well-remunerated) career as a barrister before being elevated to the Cabinet in 1913.

[51] Simon Papers, MS Simon 152, Bodleian Library, fol. 52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

derided him as a "plausible lawyer" and insisted that "he must not take credit for a military career of valour."[52] Stung by these attacks, Simon appealed to Field Marshal Haig to offer some public corroboration of his war service. Somewhat reluctantly, Haig supplied Simon with a letter confirming that "your work during the year you spent with the RAF was very real and very valuable, both to the particular branch of the service to which you were attached and to the Army as a whole."[53] Haig's letter was swiftly published and distributed through the constituency. But if Simon had thought this would close the matter, he was sorely mistaken. Critics now denounced his very solicitation of the letter, describing it as "a curiously *un-soldierly* device of Sir John to ask for a 'chit' from Lord Haig by way of testimony to his military service of one year's duration." Simon was criticized for dragging the name of Britain's most eminent soldier into a political controversy, and some opponents even suggested that "the Field-Marshal's intervention is of the kind that produced the Curragh crisis of 1914, and that consequences of much more than local importance are not unlikely."[54]

More striking still, critics denounced Simon's political career during the war in terms that challenged his claim to precisely those qualities—patriotism, courage, and integrity—conventionally associated with a military service record. Rejecting any suggestion that Simon's resignation from the cabinet over the issue of conscription might be regarded as an act of principle, his detractors framed his action in terms of a failure to do his duty, and even as a mark of cowardice. *John Bull* declared that Simon had "deserted the Government" during the war and "ran away from his duty as a patriotic man." His candidacy was condemned as "an offence to those who lost their dearest and best in this war" and "a challenge to the patriotism of the British people."[55] Sir Charles Sykes (an MP whose most notable contribution to the war effort had been as director of Wool Textile Production) declared at one public meeting that "Sir John Simon is a political funk and a coward. He ran away in the hour of danger," and "when a man showed a streak of yellow of that kind he was simply damned for ever."[56] In the face of this Coalition barrage, Simon failed to gain the seat, which was taken by the Labour candidate, Tom Myers, on a little less than 40 percent of the vote.

The ferocity of the rhetorical onslaught against Simon was exceptional and probably reflected the deep personal animosity felt toward him by leading figures in the Coalition government. Plenty of other ex-servicemen from all parties whose military service had been in administrative rather than front-line combat roles successfully presented themselves to voters as soldiers without having their martial credentials called into question.[57] At the same time, however, a significant number of Liberal candidates with unimpeachable service records, including winners of the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order, experienced defeat at the polls in the

[52] "An Astute Warrior," *Daily Dispatch*, 16 December 1919.

[53] "Lord Haig's Letter," *Westminster Gazette*, 17 December 1919.

[54] "Marshal Haig's Message Creates a Stir," *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 17 December 1919 (emphasis added).

[55] "War Record of a Lawyer-Politician," *John Bull*, 20 December 1919.

[56] "Lady Astor in Spen Valley: Among the Hecklers," *Yorkshire Post*, 19 December 1919.

[57] For example, see election address by Laming Worthington-Evans, 1918, Worthington-Evans Papers, MS Eng. hist. c. 892, Bodleian Library, fols. 55–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decade following the war.[58] If the enthusiasm with which these candidates embraced their identities as soldiers is a testament to the ability of Liberals to engage with martial discourses conventionally seen as the preserve of the political right, the electoral frustrations experienced even by highly decorated war veterans demonstrate that a military service record was not, by itself, a passport to Westminster.

One superficially attractive explanation for these disappointments is that narratives of martial patriotism crafted by individual Liberal candidates sometimes failed to resonate with voters because Liberals collectively (and especially those opposed to the Coalition government from 1918 to 1922) lacked a broader credibility as a party of patriotism. The end of the Great War has often been regarded as a watershed in the "nationalization" of politics in Britain, as local political cultures, and the importance conventionally attached to the character of individual candidates, were subsumed under the "distinctly national rhythm" of general elections.[59] To the extent that these rhythms would be shaped by the politics of patriotism after 1918, it might appear axiomatic that this would present difficulties for the Liberal Party. Historians have often argued that Liberal and radical notions of patriotism lost ground during the nineteenth century to Conservative and right-wing claims on the discourse. Hugh Cunningham claimed that by the end of the Victorian period, "patriotism was firmly identified with Conservatism, militarism, royalism and racialism" and with a political language that was largely inaccessible to Liberals.[60] During the Great War, as Nigel Keohane has observed, the Conservative leadership consistently sought to mobilize patriotism as a political force that might preserve party unity, shape ideological cohesion, and promote Tory electoral fortunes.[61] These efforts reached their apogee in the so-called Coupon Election of 1918, during which the Conservatives operated in alliance not only with the Lloyd George wing of the divided Liberal Party but also with the nationalists and super-patriots of breakaway Labour organizations such as the British Workers' League, standing under the banner of the National Democratic and Labour Party.[62]

However, we should be wary of overstating the success with which Conservative (and Coalition) politicians established a monopoly over the politics of patriotism,

[58] For example, see Lieutenant Ernest Brown, MC (defeated in Salisbury in 1918 and 1922), Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Setton Hutchison, DSO, MC (Uxbridge, 1923), Commander Richard Kirby, DSO (Norwood, 1922; East Dorset, 1923), Major John Neal, MC (Wansbeck, 1922; Barnsley, 1923 and 1924), and Robert Soloman, MC (Mile End, 1922 and 1923). Brown was finally elected MP for Rugby in 1923.

[59] Mike Savage, "Understanding Political Alignments in Contemporary Britain: Do Localities Matter?," *Political Geography Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1987): 53–76 at 54; Jon Lawrence, "The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War," *Past and Present*, no. 190 (2006): 185–216, at 188. For further on the debate over the timing, extent, and linearity of this process, see P. F. Clarke, "Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain," *History* 57, no. 189 (1972): 31–55; Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 96–129; Rix, *Parties, Agents, and Electoral Culture*, 172–98; Luke Blaxill, "Electioneering, the Third Reform Act, and Political Change in the 1880s," *Parliamentary History* 30, no. 3 (2011): 343–73.

[60] Hugh Cunningham, "The Language of Patriotism, 1750–1914," *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (1981): 8–33, at 24.

[61] Nigel Keohane, *The Party of Patriotism: The Conservative Party and the First World War* (Farnham, 2010), 99–109, 164–65.

[62] Roy Douglas, "The National Democratic Party and the British Workers' League," *English Historical Review* 15, no. 3 (1972): 533–52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even in 1918.[63] Anti-Coalition Liberals fiercely resisted Conservative attempts to appropriate patriotism for partisan advantage at the conclusion of the war, often seeking to draw a contrast between the useful and practical wartime contributions of their own ex-service candidates and what they derided as the cynical maneuvering of Coalition party managers and the noisy jingoism of the radical right. The Liberal-leaning *Birmingham Gazette* expressed its indignation at the willingness of local Conservatives to hand one of the city's constituencies to a candidate backed by the British Workers' League in 1918: "The 'patriotic' explanation is unconvincing; for there are thousands of citizens in Birmingham who have done as much to win the war, though with less rhetorical exuberance, as the BWL [British Workers' League] candidate. Some of them—like Sir John Barnsley [the Liberal candidate for Edgbaston], for example—have worn khaki."[64]

The redrawing of constituency boundaries after the war created additional points of friction. When the Whitechapel and St. George's divisions of Tower Hamlets were incorporated into a single new constituency in 1918, the Coalition Coupon was awarded to the Conservative candidate, George Cohen, with the consequence that Wedgwood Benn, the Liberal MP who had represented St. George's for twelve years, was forced to relocate to Leith in search of a new seat. Wedgwood Benn had served at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia, Italy, and the Mediterranean and had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross, as well as French and Italian decorations. The Asquithian Liberal press made much of the Coalition's shabby treatment of such a highly decorated officer, with the *Star* expressing outrage on behalf of this "very gallant soldier who comes home to be pushed on one side in his own division."[65]

Moreover, patriotism itself remained a problematic and contested concept during this period. Despite the ideological challenges of the later Victorian years, oppositional, Liberal, and radical conceptions of patriotism survived well into the twentieth century. As Paul Readman has noted, Edwardian Liberals made extensive use of the language of popular patriotism when defending—and connecting—their support for free trade, land reform, and educational reform.[66] The patriotism promoted in Britain during the Great War by official and semi-official organizations such as the National War Aims Committee was, similarly, a more multifaceted phenomenon than is often assumed. As David Monger has observed, self-regarding themes of English exceptionalism and "adversarial" patriotism in the committee's propaganda

[63] Cunningham himself later acknowledged that the politics of patriotism were "not unproblematic" and did not always "so obviously work to the Conservatives' advantage as it is easy to assume"; see Hugh Cunningham, "The Conservative Party and Patriotism," in *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920*, ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, 2nd ed. (London, 2014), 307–30, at 325. See also Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols. (London, 1989).

[64] "A Birmingham Footnote," *Birmingham Gazette*, 15 November 1918. Brigadier-General Barnsley had served as Birmingham's chief recruiting officer during the war. Eldred Hallas of the National Democratic Party was returned unopposed for the nearby Duddeston seat, having received the Coalition coupon; unlike Barnsley, Hallas had no formal connection with the armed forces.

[65] Stansgate Papers, Parliamentary Archives, ST/40/1, fol. 5; *Star*, 22 November 1918.

[66] Paul Readman, "The Liberal Party and Patriotism in Early Twentieth Century Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 12, no. 3 (2001): 269–302. See also Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Woodbridge, 1998); Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party* (London, 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existed alongside "supranational" forms of patriotism that celebrated British participation in a wider struggle in defense of "civilization," and with civic, spiritual, and "aspirational" forms of patriotism that promised a better future after the war. These placed a heavy emphasis on social reconstruction, class and gender harmonization, the eradication of militarism, and the establishment of new mechanisms of international cooperation in order to create "a world without war."[67] It is difficult to regard such themes as exclusively or peculiarly Conservative; most echoed concerns that had animated different elements within the Edwardian Liberal Party. Indeed, given that British propaganda typically presented the Great War as an ideological struggle to uphold so-called civilized values and the international rule of law against "Prussian barbarism" (and not withstanding Liberal qualms over the *means* of prosecuting the conflict), wartime patriotism could plausibly be framed as a distinctly Liberal cause, with "the victory over Kaiserism" in 1918 as "Liberalism's greatest triumph."[68]

Complicating the picture further is the fact that the Great War was not simply a patriotic experience for the British people but also a deeply traumatic one.[69] What George Mosse called the "myth of the war experience," which had already begun to establish itself by 1918, was always a protean and contested construct. A romanticized reimagining of the "spirit of 1914," blended with an idealized vision of the camaraderie of the trenches and the cult of the fallen soldier, existed in tension with memories of the boredom, numbness, cynicism, and unrest that had marked the lives of many members of the forces.[70] The immense cost of the conflict, the ambiguous and qualified nature of the military victory in 1918 (an armistice agreed while the German line was almost entirely still in France and Belgium), the publication of mutually recriminatory accounts of the conduct of the war by Britain's political and military leaders, and, ultimately, the outbreak of a second world war, seemingly confirming the futility of the sacrifices of 1914–1918, all combined to render the politics of patriotism after 1918 profoundly problematic.[71]

The ambiguous and traumatic nature of the war, in turn, had important consequences for the ways in which ex-servicemen were regarded in its aftermath. As has been noted, parliamentary candidates who had served in the forces often sought electoral advantage by adopting the persona of the soldier-hero. However, the Great War soldier existed in the postwar British public imagination not simply as a hero but also, variously and in shifting representations, as a victim—the frightened youth, the victim of shell-shock or physical injury—or even as a disruptive social element and a threat to public order, as evident in the public alarm provoked by the

[67] David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool, 2012), 102–3, 107, 199.

[68] Election address by Edmund Thruston, Weston-super-Mare, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[69] Kent, *Aftershocks*, 1–9.

[70] George L. Mosse, "Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience," *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 4 (1986): 491–513, at 492; see also Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990); Rosa Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919–1939* (Providence, 1993); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), 266–76.

[71] David Reynolds, "Britain, the Two World Wars, and the Problem of Narrative," *Historical Journal* 60, no. 1 (2017): 197–231, esp. 198–207.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

involvement of demobilized soldiers in urban riots during 1919–20.[72] The image of the ex-serviceman in Britain never settled into a single, universal, or stable form after 1918. Some veterans—for example, returning prisoners of war—found their experiences marginalized or silenced within the collective memory of the war.[73] Others could find themselves treated as figures deserving of particular public sympathy because their plight was perceived to speak to wider concerns in postwar society. Ex-officers in particular—many of them "temporary gentlemen" drawn from outside the traditional officer class, whose return to civilian life raised anxieties about declining status and a loss of gentility—were often seen to be symbolic of the "new poor" among the middle classes, struggling in a postwar society seemingly controlled by hard-faced profiteers and trade union bosses.[74] However, the ex-officer could also become the object of satirical criticism if he were perceived to have developed inflated social aspirations while in the forces, leaving him reluctant to resume his "proper station" in the peacetime class hierarchy.[75] Indeed, rather than enjoying the elevated social esteem afforded to heroes in the aftermath of the war, ex-officers often expressed resentment at what they regarded as civilian indifference to their difficulties—particularly over the provision of pensions, care for the disabled, and the broader struggle to find respectable and adequately remunerated peacetime employment. Tensions also developed between ex-servicemen and the bereaved civilian relatives of the fallen, over the form and content of ceremonial commemorations of the war—which many veterans regarded as focusing on the "honoured dead" to the exclusion of the "neglected living."[76]

At the same time, many of those who had passed through the ranks of the British army during the war were themselves ambivalent about their identity as soldiers, and about the extent to which this separated them from wider civilian society. The myth of the Great War generation, bound together by the shared experience of the trenches, has often obscured the multiplicity of soldiers' wartime experiences, which in practice could vary widely—not least between officers and men, volunteers and conscripts, members of different services, and those serving in different theaters.[77] This diversity of experience was well represented during the 1920s in the publishing boom in war memoirs, a genre to which several ex-service MPs contributed.[78] While wartime propaganda celebrated the soldier, sailor, or airman as the epitome of British manhood and the embodiment of bravery and patriotism, the

[72] Hynes, *War Imagined*, 213–15; Zoe Alker and Barry Godfrey, "Soldiers and Victims: Conceptions of Military Service and Victimhood, 1914–1945," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and War*, ed. Rose McGarry and Sandra Walklate (London, 2016), 133–49; Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom," 562–71; Jacqueline Jenkinson, "The 1919 Riots," in *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Panikos Panayi (Leicester, 1996), 92–111.

[73] Oliver Wilkinson, "A Fate Worse than Death? Lamenting First World War Captivity," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 24–40.

[74] Martin Petter, "'Temporary Gentlemen' in the Aftermath of the Great War: Rank, Status, and the Ex-officer Problem," *Historical Journal* 37, no. 1 (1994): 127–52; Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 272–73, at 298.

[75] Petter, "'Temporary Gentlemen' in the Aftermath of the Great War," at 135.

[76] Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *British Army and the First World War*, at 163–64; Gregory, *Silence of Memory*.

[77] Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *British Army and the First World War*, 135–41.

[78] Ian Isherwood, "The British Publishing Industry and Commercial Memories of the First World War," *War in History* 23, no. 3 (2016): 323–40. Examples of war memoirs published by members of Parliament

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

encounter with an unprecedented form of industrialized warfare put considerable strain on conventional codes and expectations of manliness and the heroic ideal.[79] As Jessica Meyer has observed, soldiers responded to these pressures by constructing their own understandings of masculinity and martial identity, defining themselves in relation both to other men and to women, and articulating these variegated understandings in different types of personal narrative, including letters home from the front, wartime diaries, and postwar memoirs.[80]

In the febrile atmosphere of the war years, even basic visual signifiers of a soldier's identity, such as military uniforms, developed ambiguous, unstable meanings. Khaki was widely regarded as the essential marker of the "physicality, masculinity and military modernity" of the soldier—so much so that new recruits who were temporarily issued with substitute clothing in grey or "Kitchener blue" sometimes found themselves ridiculed as looking like postmen, tram guards, or convicts.[81] However, as the war progressed, many soldiers came to resent the fetishization of khaki by civilians who, removed from the realities of life at the Front, often seemed blind to more meaningful markers of masculinity and martial sacrifice such as battle wounds, which could be hidden by mufti as easily as by military attire. This resentment was readily apparent in the trope of the frivolous young women who ignorantly bestowed white feathers as a mark of cowardice on wounded soldiers encountered while convalescing and out of uniform.[82] Yet despite the tensions between front line and home front, wartime soldiers never felt themselves completely disconnected from civilian life; recent scholarship has placed considerable emphasis on the extent to which family life and class, local, and regional identities continued to matter to the men in the trenches, and on the speed with which soldiers redefined themselves as civilians when the fighting ended.[83]

The nature and meaning of the Great War and the self-identity and social status of the men who had fought in it were therefore fraught and complex questions after 1918. The more politically astute among the cohort of Liberal ex-servicemen seeking election to Parliament after the war recognized this problem. These candidates framed their appeals to voters accordingly, blending themes of patriotism

include Henry Page Croft, *Twenty-Two Months under Fire* (London, 1917); Aubrey Herbert, *Mons, Anzac, and Kut* (London, 1919); Joseph Kenworthy, *Sailors, Statesmen, and Others*.

[79] Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*; George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York, 1996); Gullace, *Blood of Our Sons*, 35–51; Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago, 2004); Roper, "Between Manliness and Masculinity," 343–62.

[80] Meyer, *Men of War*.

[81] Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *British Army and the First World War*, at 145–46.

[82] Nicoletta F. Gullace, "White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War," *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (1997): 178–206; Gregory, *Last Great War*, 70–77.

[83] This tendency was particularly evident in (but not limited to) Territorial units that had boasted a strong local or class character before the war. See Helen B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge, 2005); Beckett, Bowman, and Connelly, *British Army and the First World War*, 139–42, 155–56; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*; Gregory, *Last Great War*, 267; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2010); John Horne, "Beyond Cultures of Victory and Cultures of Defeat? Inter-war Veterans' Internationalism," in *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, ed. Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (New York, 2013), 207–22, at 210.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and martial service with forms of self-presentation that candidly acknowledged the protean character of the ex-serviceman and his ambiguous place in postwar society. The printed election address of Frank Gray in Watford, for example, artfully addressed the dual character of the Great War citizen-soldier as a "civilian in uniform" by juxtaposing two matching photographic portraits of the candidate—one in khaki, the other in civilian dress—on its front page.[84] The eagerness of returning soldiers to resume their civilian lives with as little delay as possible was acknowledged by Liberal candidates who simultaneously emphasized their personal contributions to the military struggle and their fierce opposition to any continuation of conscription in peacetime.[85] Many candidates were careful to present their wartime military service not only as a marker of martial masculinity but as a demonstration of their roots within a constituency, emphasizing service in a local regiment as a means of tapping into the politics of place—one of the more potent sources of resistance to the nationalization of politics after 1918.[86] The sense that soldiers might be seen as victims of the war as much as heroes was also addressed by Liberal politicians who had served in the fighting. A number of candidates who had been wounded in action drew attention to this fact in their election addresses. In 1918, battle wounds were typically invoked as evidence of a candidate's patriotism—physical proof that they had "done their bit" when the nation called.[87] As the postwar decade progressed, however, would-be MPs increasingly used their wounds not simply as markers of patriotism or individual courage but as a means of signaling their firsthand knowledge of the hardships facing the least fortunate veterans of the trenches.[88] Captain James Henderson-Stuart informed the electors of Derby in 1924 that as "a wounded ex-serviceman myself, I claim to understand something of the feelings and needs of my comrades," and could therefore be relied upon to champion their interests in Parliament.[89]

VIOLENCE, CLASS POLITICS, AND THE ADVANCE OF SOCIALISM

As I have argued, Liberal ex-servicemen seeking election to Parliament after the Great War were able not only to contest Conservative attempts to monopolize the themes of patriotism and martial heroism but also to construct alternative political narratives about the war and its legacies that drew both inspiration and legitimacy from their personal military service. These narratives were nuanced, intellectually credible,

[84] Election address by Frank Gray, Watford division of Hertfordshire, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[85] For example, see election addresses by Herbert Fordham in West Fulham, 1918, Richard Reiss in South East St. Pancras, 1918, Guy Gaunt in Leek, 1918, Sir John Simon in East Walthamstow, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2; election poster for Albert Martin, Romford, 1918, Imperial War Museum, PST 12172; election poster for Comyns Carr, S.W. St. Pancras, 1918, Imperial War Museum, PST 12180.

[86] For example, see election addresses by Maxwell Anderson, Balham and Tooting, 1918, and Henry Webb, Forest of Dean, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2; Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 118; Rix, *Parties, Agents, and Electoral Culture*, 174–84.

[87] Election address by Richard Reiss in South East St. Pancras, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[88] For example, see election address by Charles Rudkin, South Portsmouth, 1929, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[89] Election address by James Henderson Stewart, Derby, 1924, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and plausibly framed, and their existence exposes the fallacy in the assumption that Liberals were incapable of engaging with the legacies of the wartime militarization of British society. Indeed, given the importance that many Liberal politicians attached to their war service, the confidence with which they sought to exploit that service politically, and the plausibility of their attempts to associate the victory of 1918 with the triumph of Liberal values, it is easy to imagine that these legacies, rather than posing an intractable problem for the party, might have offered a potential source of Liberal strength and perhaps even the basis for a Liberal electoral revival.

Over the course of the postwar decade, it became clear that this potential would not be realized. Yet this was not because Liberal politicians were unduly troubled by or unwilling to discuss their experiences of war and military mobilization. Paradoxically, the problem lay with the very mutability of the war's meaning. While it granted individual parliamentary candidates considerable freedom in how they chose to present their war records to voters, the failure of Liberal politicians to unite around a single, coherent understanding of what the war had meant ultimately undermined the party's efforts to harness the memory of the war in support of a distinctly Liberal vision for Britain's political future. Liberal disagreements over the war's meaning were damaging because they exacerbated—and cut across—existing fault lines within the party, even as it struggled to repair and move beyond the divisions of the war years. This division fatally damaged the party's attempts to formulate an ideologically coherent response to the challenges of the postwar years and contributed directly to the Liberals' failure to establish and maintain a core constituency in the expanded electorate after 1918.

Of course, all political parties were to some extent ambivalent about the meaning of the Great War, and this ambivalence surfaced in some of the most highly charged political controversies of the postwar decade. But it proved especially problematic for the Liberal Party, and was particularly acute among those Liberal politicians who had themselves served in the war. This trend can be observed in the fraught debates concerning the violent tactics employed by agents of the British state attempting to suppress nationalist unrest in Ireland, India, Egypt, and Mesopotamia after 1918. This violence was problematic, in part because it complicated the story of Britishness that had been fashioned during the Great War, by seeming to challenge the ideals of democracy and civilization for which Britain had ostensibly fought.[90] As Jon Lawrence has observed, one of the striking aspects of these debates is the extent to which they cut across party lines; those expressing concern about British colonial violence included not only long-standing radicals and anti-imperialists but also Conservatives and even government ministers.[91] However, if we focus specifically on those MPs who had served in the armed forces, a more peculiar pattern emerges. Former servicemen sitting as Conservative MPs after 1918 tended to act as a sort of professional interest group in Parliament, defending the honor and reputation of the armed forces—auxiliary as well as regular—against any perceived attack. Liberal ex-

[90] Kent, *Aftershocks*, 85–87; Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom," 574–76, 583; Derek Sayer, "British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre, 1919–1920," *Past and Present*, no. 131 (1991): 130–64; Kim A. Wagner, "'Calculated to Strike Terror': The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence," *Past and Present*, no. 233 (2016): 185–225.

[91] Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom," 576.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

servicemen, by contrast, already divided between the Lloyd George government and the Asquithian opposition, appeared more acutely aware of the tension between loyalty to their former comrades in the forces and fidelity to the values for which Britain had supposedly been fighting. In October 1920, following the notorious sacking of the town of Balbriggan, Labour's Arthur Henderson moved a vote of censure in the House of Commons, condemning the policy of military reprisals in Ireland and the "lack of discipline in the armed forces of the Crown."[92] Conservative ex-service MPs expressed outrage at this attack on the "gallant men" of the forces, and more than one hundred voted against the motion, with none voting in support.[93] The Liberal ex-servicemen, by contrast, were badly divided, with eight supporting the motion and nineteen opposing it.[94]

This pattern was repeated a month later, when Asquith introduced a motion criticizing the government's apparent willingness to respond to Republican attacks with "methods of terrorism."[95] The most outspoken supporter of the motion was the Liberal naval officer Joseph Kenworthy, who inveighed against the "irregular and indiscriminate" acts of "frightfulness" committed by British forces in Ireland.[96] However, Kenworthy was then attacked by his fellow Liberal, Lieutenant-Colonel John Ward, who denounced the "vindictive speeches" that had been made against "the honour and chivalry of our soldiers." Ward moved an amendment, removing any reproach of the forces of the crown and substituting language praising the "courage and devotion" of the military and police.[97] The Conservative ex-service cohort overwhelmingly supported Ward's amendment by 108 votes to two, while the Liberal ex-servicemen were divided, with seven against and twenty in favor.[98]

These divisions were particularly problematic because, in other respects, international affairs appeared to offer promising ground on which the Liberal Party might confront the legacies of the Great War. It was widely believed in Britain that, if the victory of 1918 were to have lasting meaning, it would be found in the maintenance of international peace.[99] Many hoped that the new League of Nations would act as the instrument to guarantee this peace, and the League of Nations Union, established with the mission of educating and rallying public opinion behind the league, grew into one of the largest and most vibrant voluntary associations of the interwar years. In many respects, the league appeared to represent

[92] 113 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) col. 1034.

[93] 113 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) col. 925 (Rear-Admiral Adair).

[94] The eight Liberal supporters of the motion were not all perennial critics of the government; they included David Davies and Gerald France, who had both been awarded the Coalition coupon in 1918, and Trevelyan Thomson and Penry Williams, who were occasionally described in the press as Coalition Liberals but appear not to have accepted the coupon.

[95] The phrase echoed Campbell-Bannerman's famous attack on British "methods of barbarism" in South Africa two decades earlier. See 135 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) col. 487.

[96] 35 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) cols. 572–73.

[97] 35 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) col. 582.

[98] The most notable exception to this pattern came with the response to the Amritsar massacre of 1919, which divided both Liberal and Conservative ex-servicemen in Parliament. But Amritsar was unusual, in part because the professional military establishment was itself divided over General Dyer's conduct. In the aftermath of the massacre, Dyer's immediate superiors approved his actions, but the Army Council ultimately recommended that he be retired from the service. The corporate military interest was thus harder than usual to discern. See 131 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1920) cols. 1747, 1778.

[99] Gregory, *Last Great War*, 275.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the practical expression of long-established Liberal values of internationalism, respect for the rule of law, and democratic accountability.[100] Liberal intellectuals and politicians—the latter including a number of ex-servicemen, such as Reginald Berkeley, David Davies, and Geoffrey Mander—occupied prominent positions in the leadership of the League of Nations Union. Many of these ex-servicemen framed their support for the league not only in terms of their adherence to philosophical Liberalism but as a result of their experiences during the war. The Bermondsey MP Roderick Kedward, for example, described himself as "one who has seen War in all its sorrows" and was now prepared "to devote all my energies to the promotion of peace"; Walter Meakin, the Liberal candidate in King's Norton in 1922, called for the league to be expanded and strengthened in order to avoid any repetition of the "horrors which I personally saw as a soldier."[101]

However, the popularity of the League of Nations Union did little to enhance Liberal electoral prospects during the 1920s. On the contrary, the union increasingly came to be regarded as a surrogate vehicle for progressive and internationalist values, in place of the moribund Liberal Party. Part of the problem, from the Liberal perspective, was that the union consistently sought to emphasize its nonpartisan character, presenting itself as a body operating above the "maelstrom of party politics," and one which could bring together men and women "of all parties and of none."[102] In turn, the union received at least a measure of political support from all political parties in Britain, reducing the distinctiveness of any Liberal claim to champion the League of Nation's principles and values. At the same time, even those Liberals who were enthusiastic supporters of the league often found themselves divided over issues such as the timing and scale of international disarmament and proposals for the creation of an international military force to preserve peace and enforce sanctions imposed by the league.[103]

In any case, the controversies that ultimately defined British politics during the 1920s revolved not around colonial violence or international relations but around the problem of class and the struggle between "socialism" and "anti-socialism."[104] The sharpening of class antagonisms and the emergence of Labour as an avowedly socialist party were to a considerable extent direct consequences of the war.[105] But these also represented problems in relation to which Liberal divisions over the meaning of the war were particularly pronounced. A comparison between the

[100] Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship, and Internationalism, c. 1918–45* (Manchester, 2011), 53–55; Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 150–51, 166–72.

[101] Election address by Walter Meaking, King's Norton, 1922, Bodleian Library, PUB 229/2/3 fol. 35; see the election address by the following at UB, Special Collections, DM668/2: Roderick Kedward, Bermondsey West, 1924; also Charles Du Cann, Greenwich, 1923; Victor Duval, South West Norfolk, 1929; Alec Glassey, East Dorset, 1929.

[102] McCarthy, *British People and the League of Nations*, 46–78, at 46; see also Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford, 2000), 251–55, 272.

[103] Brian Porter, "David Davies and the Enforcement of Peace," in *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-war Idealism Reassessed*, ed. David Long and Peter Wilson (Oxford, 1995), 58–75; Michael Pugh, "Policing the World: Lord Davies and the Quest for Order in the 1930s," *International Relations* 16, no. 1 (2002): 97–115.

[104] McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 61.

[105] McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 35–36. On the wartime homogenization of classes, see Bernard Waites, *A Class Society at War: England, 1914*–1918 (Leamington Spa, 1987), 271–80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Liberal and Labour parties here is illuminating. Like the Liberals, Labour had been torn during the war between internationalist and patriotic impulses; the party was broadly willing to support the war effort but expressed deep unease about the introduction of compulsory military service that, it was feared, might pave the way for industrial conscription.[106] Labour ambivalence about the war was reflected after 1918 in the presence of both combat veterans and conscientious objectors among the party's parliamentary candidates. However, this ambivalence ultimately did little damage to Labour's electoral fortunes, in part because the party was able to integrate the most visible legacies of the war and the wartime militarization of society into a broader narrative of what postwar politics should be about. It did this, in particular, by incorporating the figure of the ex-serviceman into a wider conceptualization of the "working man," the improvement of whose life chances was Labour's principal raison d'être.[107] As early as 1918, Labour was staking a claim to the loyalty of returning soldiers on the grounds that the party was "for the working-man; against unemployment; and for the abolition of want."[108] This strategy was most memorably expressed in the twin posters produced by the party in 1923, decrying the unfortunate lot of many former soldiers: "Yesterday—the Trenches . . . To-day —Unemployed."[109] By focusing on the figure of the ex-serviceman in this fashion, Labour was able to frame the economic hardships of the 1920s not simply as a story of avoidable human suffering but as a betrayal of the sacrifices of the men who had fought in the war.

A potential problem with this appeal, of course, was the fact that not all ex-servicemen belonged to the working class; indeed, relative to wider British society, the wartime British army was disproportionately middle-class in composition—a result of differential enlistment rates during the first half of the war and of the exclusion of workers in key war industries from military conscription from 1916.[110] Nevertheless—and even accounting for the difficulty of recovering the reception of this discourse among the wider electorate—Labour's rhetorical conflation of the interests of the common soldier and the ordinary working man had considerable political purchase. It offered a bold, simple, and easily intelligible electoral message. But it also represented political ground on which both "pacifists" and "patriots" in Labour could comfortably operate, since both supporters and critics of the war could agree on the importance of securing a fair deal for those who had fought and concur that Labour's social program offered the best means of meeting this obligation.[111]

Interestingly, however, the party that most successfully integrated the figure of the ex-serviceman—and with him, the problematic legacy of the wartime militarization of British society—into its vision for Britain's political future was arguably not Labour but the Conservatives. To a far greater extent than their rivals, the

[106] McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 28–29.

[107] Election address by William Devenay, Mile End, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2; McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 30.

[108] Beers, *Your Britain*, 39–41.

[109] Labour Party Election Posters (1923), People's History Museum, Manchester, NMLH.1995.39.41, 1995.39.42.

[110] Gregory, *Last Great War*, 81, 116, 289.

[111] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 170; McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 29–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conservatives were ideologically comfortable with the war.[112] The party's efforts to exploit the rhetoric and imagery of martial patriotism in postwar electoral contests have already been noted. Yet what is striking about Conservative representations of the ex-serviceman after 1918 is how carefully they were incorporated into the party's central electoral message of anti-socialism. In Conservative discourse, the ex-serviceman was typically presented as an exemplar of self-restraint and a bulwark of orderly and peaceable politics—a figure whose masculinity was both domestic and martial and whose interests and values were fundamentally opposed to the fiscal recklessness and rowdyism associated with socialism (the latter frequently conflated with Bolshevism).[113] Rather than standing apart from wider civilian society, the ex-serviceman was imagined by Conservatives as a vital part of the "public" whose interests were framed in contradistinction to the "sectional" appeal of Labour.[114] This political appropriation of the figure of the ex-serviceman resonated strongly in Britain, in part because it echoed a less overtly partisan and more widely shared postwar rhetoric of commemoration that placed a premium on social unity and often framed class conflict as an insult to the sacrifice of the fallen—a rhetoric that, as Adrian Gregory notes, was itself "in many respects a continuation of the wartime appeal not to betray the men at the front with industrial militancy at home."[115]

Liberal attempts to formulate a response to the challenges of class politics and socialism that incorporated a coherent understanding of the war and its domestic legacies were far less assured. The question of class had, of course, long been a cause for Liberal anxiety. The party's Edwardian electoral successes had rested on a highly contingent coalition of middle- and working-class interests, the viability of which could only be imperiled by the wartime hardening of class antagonisms. The advance of socialism, and its increasing importance to the parliamentary and electoral contests of the 1920s were, if anything, still more problematic for Liberals. The old Progressive Alliance with the Labour Party had broken down by 1918. Asquith was to play an important role in paving the way for the first Labour government to take office in 1924, but many Liberals remained deeply skeptical of socialism. Indeed, Ross McKibbin has suggested that fusion between the Conservative and Liberal parties against the rising Labour tide would have been a logical response to the pressures shaping British politics after 1918.[116] Faced with these pressures, the problem was not that Liberals were incapable of relating their understanding of the war and its legacies to the challenges of postwar politics. Rather, it was that, when it came to the question of class or the problem of socialism, Liberal politicians—and especially those who had served in the armed forces—attempted to deploy multiple,

[112] There was some Conservative anxiety over the inviolability of property rights during the war; see Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, 197–201.

[113] David Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth Century England* (Manchester, 2013), 134–41.

[114] McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, 259–93, at 284–85, 289.

[115] Gregory, *Last Great War*, at 269; see also Bob Bushaway, "Name upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance," in *Myths of the English*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge, 1992), 136–61.

[116] McKibbin, *Parties and People*, 33–41; Peter Sloman, "Partners in Progress? British Liberals and the Labour Party since 1918," *Political Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2014): 41–50, esp. 41–43.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contradictory narratives about the war in the service of divergent and ultimately irreconcilable visions for Britain's political future.

As has been noted, many Liberal candidates had close links with ex-servicemen's associations and sought to present themselves as political champions of the men who had fought.[117] Those who advocated a generous settlement for returning soldiers, and for the widows and dependents of the men who would never return, often deployed a rhetoric that framed the war in explicitly democratic and egalitarian terms. The wartime mobilization of the nation, these Liberals argued, not only legitimized but demanded collective action to create a more just and equal society. Contesting Hackney North in 1918, Lieutenant Wright Burrows declared "this has been a People's War, it is a People's Victory, and the People must see to it that they now reap the fruits of their sacrifice."[118] Election leaflets promised that the Liberal program would "destroy the Hindenburg lines of privilege and class legislation."[119]

This essentially egalitarian discourse, with its insistence that "the victory bought by the blood of the people" must not be exploited by narrow and selfish vested interests, had much in common with that advanced by the Labour Party.[120] However, it existed in tension with another Liberal narrative of the war. Those Liberals who regarded the advance of socialism as the principal danger of the 1920s drew very different political lessons from the conflict. Rather than focusing on the equality of sacrifice that had supposedly characterized the wartime mobilization of British society, they emphasized a particular understanding of the war as a struggle for liberty. Many drew parallels between the military struggle against Prussianism and the political fight against socialism at home. Captain Arthur Evans, the National Liberal candidate for Leicester East in 1922, described socialism as "the greatest TYRANNY the world has ever known" and declared that "it is for these *same principles* of DEMOCRACY and LIBERTY for which we men of the Leicestershire Regiment faced death that I am fighting to-day."[121] Liberal ex-servicemen also drew on their war experiences when attacking Bolshevism (and by implication, socialism) as incompatible with British patriotism. In October 1924—the same month as the publication of the infamous Zinoviev letter—Jack Seely went so far as to blame the partial British military collapse in the face of the German Spring offensive of 1918 on the activities of communist agitators who, he claimed, had deliberately set out to sap the morale of the troops. As he argued in a letter to the *Daily Post*, "seditious propaganda and the cry of the capitalist war was the direct cause of the death of thousands of brave and loyal British soldiers during those fateful days."[122]

The tension between the different political lessons that might be drawn from the war was readily apparent in the Liberal response to the industrial unrest of the

[117] The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers was led in its early years by the (civilian) Liberal MPs James Hogge and William Pringle.

[118] Election address by Wright Burrows, Hackney North, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[119] "A Message to Voters at the Front," 1918, Leaflet No. 2522, UB, Special Collections, DM668/3.

[120] Election address by Wright Burrows, Hackney North, 1918, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2.

[121] Election address by Arthur Evans, East Leicester, 1922, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2 (emphasis added).

[122] Letter to the editor, *Daily Post* (Liverpool), 22 October 1924. The Zinoviev letter was a forgery, purportedly from Grigory Zinoview, the chairman of the Communist International, encouraging seditious activities by British communists. Its publication in the *Daily Mail* just days before the general election of 1924 caused significant political embarrassment to Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postwar years, in particular the miners' strike of 1921 and the general strike of 1926. The language of war permeated public discourse on this unrest, but its meaning was fiercely contested.[123] In a parliamentary speech on 11 May 1926, Sir John Simon appeared to compare striking workers to the Germans who had launched zeppelin raids on London, provoking protests from Labour MPs and those Liberals who were more sympathetic to the strike.[124] Several Liberal ex-servicemen, including Kenworthy and Wedgwood Benn, had earlier taken strong exception to the government's efforts to present the civil and military forces deployed against strikers as heirs to the volunteers of 1914—a comparison that Kenworthy criticized as an insult to the fallen of the Great War.[125]

The conflicting meanings ascribed to the war both reflected and exacerbated the fundamental problem facing the Liberal Party after 1918: in a political landscape now seemingly polarized by a struggle between socialism and anti-socialism, the Liberals proved unable to establish themselves as a positive party of the center, but equally incapable of agreeing whether their future therefore lay on the left or the right.[126] In the face of this dilemma, it is striking that the shared experience of military service did so little to forge common ground between those Liberals who had fought in the war. Nor should these divisions be seen simply as a lingering manifestation of the 1916 split in the party between supporters of Asquith and Lloyd George; more than half the ex-servicemen to sit as Liberal MPs during the postwar decade were first elected in 1922 or later, and a third were first elected in or after the general election of 1923, when the rival Liberal factions had reunited. The inability of Liberal politicians—even those who had worn the same uniform—to unite around a shared political understanding of the war demonstrates how the contested memory of the conflict continued to blight the Liberal Party even after the formal divisions of the war years had (nominally) been resolved.

The party's failure to accommodate the competing interpretations of the conflict expounded by these men was reflected in the number who ultimately ceased to define themselves as Liberals at all. Of the 115 ex-servicemen elected as Liberal MPs between 1918 and 1929, no fewer than thirty-eight ultimately left the party.[127] Yet what is most striking is not merely the number of Liberal ex-servicemen who ended their political careers in other parties but how widely their political trajectories diverged. Those who had understood the Great War as a People's War tended to drift into the Labour Party. Josiah Wedgwood made the transition within a year of the Armistice. At the next general election, he attacked the record of the Coalition as a "class government," under whom "the landed interest, the monied interest, the trusts, have all been well served," while "my comrades who helped to win the war are being forgotten." He now advocated a capital levy as a

[123] Hynes, *War Imagined*, 407–22; Kent, *Aftershocks*, 122–48.

[124] 195 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1926) col. 868.

[125] These organizations included the Defence Force in 1921 and the Civil Constabulary Reserve in 1926. See "The New Hundred Thousand," *Daily News*, 19 April 1921; "Not In Vain," *New Statesman*, 23 April 1921; 141 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1921) cols. 7–8, 187–88, 658–59.

[126] See Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 94, 119–59; McKibbin, "Class and Conventional Wisdom," 276–81; Michael Hart, "The Liberals, the War, and the Franchise," *English Historical Review* 97, no. 385 (1982): 820–32.

[127] Two of these, George Garro-Jones and Henry Morris-Jones, would later rejoin the Liberals.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continuation of the "equality of sacrifice" that had made possible the victory over Germany, arguing that "we conscripted life during the war; we ought to conscript wealth to pay for it."[128]

By contrast, Arthur Evans carried his anti-socialism into the Conservative Party, defecting to it in 1923 and going on to serve as a Conservative MP for two decades; he was one of almost two dozen Liberal ex-service MPs to move in this direction.[129] Some moved still further to the right; Major Cecil Dudgeon, who sat as Liberal MP for Galloway in 1922–1924 and 1929–1931, chose to contest the seat in 1931 as the candidate of Oswald Mosley's New Party. Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Hutchison, a career army officer who stood unsuccessfully as the Liberal candidate for Uxbridge in 1923, went on to found the short-lived British Empire Fascist Party in the 1930s. Cecil John L'Estrange Malone, a Royal Naval Air Service Pilot who was elected as the Coalition Liberal MP for East Leyton in 1918, moved in a rather different direction. After visiting Russia in 1919, where he met Trotsky, Malone joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. In 1920 he was charged with sedition under Regulation 42 of the Defence of the Realm Act, for an Albert Hall speech in which in which he defended recourse to revolutionary violence and expressed indifference to the prospect of "a few Churchills or Curzons on lamp posts."[130]

CONCLUSIONS

An understanding of the electoral and parliamentary careers of these ex-servicemen offers an important and substantial challenge to conventional interpretations of the role of the Great War in the downfall of the British Liberal Party. This is not to suggest that the war did not do serious harm to the Liberals. It fractured the party in Parliament and in the constituencies; it significantly weakened Nonconformity —Liberalism's "indispensable social base"—and, by disrupting patterns of landholding, wages, employment, and home-building, it removed the conditions that might have enabled the Liberals' prewar land campaign to develop as a means of building a stable urban or rural electoral base.[131] However, the very existence of a sizeable

[128] Election address by Josiah Wedgwood, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 1922, UB, Special Collections, DM668/2. Other Liberal ex-service MPs who joined Labour included Maurice Alexander, Harry Barnes, William Wedgwood Benn, Reginald Fletcher, Edgar Granville, William Jowitt, Joseph Kenworthy, Frederick Martin, Harry Nathan, and Ernest Spero; George Garro-Jones joined the Labour Party in 1929 and sat as Labour MP for North Aberdeen from 1935 to 1945 but rejoined the Liberals in 1958, two years before his death.

[129] Winston Churchill, Cyril Entwistle, Harry Evans, Hamar Greenwood, Edward Grigg, Frederick Guest, Henry Guest, Oscar Guest, Leslie Hore-Belisha, Courtenay Mansel, Albert Martin, Henry Mond, Algernon Moreing, Hilton Philipson, Edward Spears, Walter Waring, Rhys Williams, and Hilton Young all joined the Conservative Party. Many candidates adopted the label of "Constitutionalist" as an intermediate step. This label was also used by Abraham England and John Ward during the 1920s. Gwilym Lloyd-George stood as a National Liberal and Conservative candidate during the 1950s.

[130] Home Office, Registered Papers, Sedition: Colonel Malone, National Archives, London, HO 144/3576; Records of the Security Service, Personal File: Cecil L'Estrange Malone, National Archives, KV/1905. Malone later joined the Independent Labour Party and in 1928 was elected Labour MP for Northampton; he was appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister for Pensions in 1931.

[131] McKibbin, *Parties and People*, at 23–24; Barry M. Doyle, "Urban Liberalism and the 'Lost Generation': Politics and Middle Class Culture in Norwich, 1900–1935," *Historical Journal* 38, no. 3 (1995):

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cohort of former servicemen among the party's MPs and parliamentary candidates forces us to reconsider the extent to which the wartime militarization of British society posed an existential challenge to Liberal values. The Liberals were never an anti-military party, and the ex-servicemen who sought election to Parliament as Liberal candidates after the Great War clearly regarded their status as soldiers to be integral to their political identity and an important electoral asset. These men deployed the imagery and rhetorical tropes of war and military service—both in electoral contests and in parliamentary debate—with no less confidence than their Conservative rivals. In doing so they demonstrated that, even in their divided state, Liberals retained the ability to mount a robust challenge to Conservative efforts to monopolize the politics of patriotism after 1918.

The careers of these candidates and MPs also reveal much about the war's impact on British politics and political culture more broadly. Given the significance often attached to the 1918 general election as a watershed in the nationalization of British politics, it is striking that candidates continued to place such emphasis on their personal biographies—and in particular on their military service records—when framing appeals to voters over the postwar decade. The old Victorian emphasis on the character and local reputation of parliamentary candidates thus persisted well into the twentieth century, albeit it in modified form.[132] A performative masculinity retained much of its importance to electoral contests, even after women formally joined the electorate. But while the rituals of prewar popular politics had placed a premium on acts of platform bravado and the ability of candidates to face down the "politics of disruption" at rowdy public meetings, in the years after 1918 masculinity could often be demonstrated simply through reference to a candidate's service record—a legacy of the wartime moral economy of patriotic service and sacrifice.[133] If, as Jon Lawrence has argued, concerns about the brutalization of society rendered earlier forms of masculine politics problematic after 1918, an emphasis on the gallantry of the armed forces—expressed in the terms in which Admiral Gaunt, for example, appealed to the women voters of Leek—offered a representation of manliness potentially better suited to the new democratic age.[134] Indeed, while military uniforms, ranks, and rhetoric continued to feature in election materials throughout the 1920s, the representational politics of the ex-serviceman as parliamentary candidate proved remarkably nuanced. Ex-service candidates were more than willing to present their martial credentials as evidence of their fitness for political office. But they were also sensitive to the protean identity of the citizen-soldier, the ambiguous status of the ex-serviceman in British society, and the usefulness of regimental connections to would-be members of Parliament seeking to tap into the politics of place.

At the same time, the electoral experiences of Liberal ex-servicemen after 1918 demonstrate that this form of performative politics had limitations. Candidates who invoked their war records at election time in the hope that this would help

617–34; Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (Woodbridge, 2001), 178–93.

[132] Rix, *Parties, Agents, and Electoral Culture*, 212; Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 51.

[133] Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 123–28, at 128. The politics of disruption certainly persisted in postwar electoral contests, but levels of violence and disorder appeared substantially reduced compared with Edwardian elections.

[134] Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 188–93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them capture the ex-service vote in their constituency were frequently disappointed because, as Liberal election agents recognized, ex-servicemen never really constituted a coherent and discrete interest within the wider electorate. In this regard, Britain was typical of other belligerent societies after 1918. For most former soldiers, the role of the veteran or ex-serviceman was only one among a number of identities available to them, and did not necessarily take precedence over other determinants of their lives, such as class or place.[135] Only in France did as many as half of all returned military personnel even join veterans' associations; in Britain, as in other nations, the proportion was lower.[136] Attempts to organize ex-servicemen on the basis of a shared identity depended on the reframing of a wartime military hierarchy as an "idealized and egalitarian post-war comradeship" within the nation.[137] Such a comradeship, by its very nature, proved difficult to mobilize for partisan political ends.[138] Indeed, it was more difficult in Britain than in many other nations. As Mark Edele and Robert Gerwarth have observed, the successful reintegration of returning servicemen into civilian life depended not only on their experience of combat but on the *process* of demobilization and the strength of the state to which the former combatants returned.[139] In Britain, despite some initial anxiety over the pace of demobilization, economic uncertainty, and political disenchantment after 1918, this social reintegration was achieved remarkably smoothly.[140] In a similar vein, the electoral experiences of Liberal ex-servicemen in Britain also demonstrate that, contrary to the expectations of many candidates, a distinguished service record was not necessarily sufficient to mobilize substantial support from the wider, civilian electorate. Even those candidates who did secure entry into the House of Commons could find their war records,

[135] Horne, "Beyond Cultures of Victory and Cultures of Defeat," 210.

[136] Antoine Prost, *In the Wake of War: "Les Anciens Combattants" and French Society, 1914–1939* (Oxford, 1992); Barr, *Lion and the Poppy*; Robert Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939* (London, 1984); Stephen R. Ortiz, "Well-Armed Internationalism: American Veteran Organizations and the Crafting of an 'Associated Veterans' Internationalism, 1919–1939," in Eichenberg and Newman, *Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, 53–74; Julia Eichenberg, "Polish Eagles and Peace Doves: Polish Veterans between Nationalism and Internationalism," in Eichenberg and Newman, *Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, 77–96.

[137] Horne, "Beyond Cultures of Victory and Cultures of Defeat," 212.

[138] For example, see John Paul Newman, "Allied Yugoslavia: Serbian Great War Veterans and their Internationalist Ties," in Eichenberg and Newman, *Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, 97–117; William Mulligan, "German Veterans' Associations and the Culture of Peace: The Case of the Reichsbanner," in Eichenberg and Newman, *Great War and Veterans Internationalism*, 139–61.

[139] Edele and Gerwarth, "Limits of Demobilization," 7.

[140] A similar pattern was evident in France, the United States, and the white British settler societies, but a very different one played out in the Central and Eastern European shatter zone created by the defeat and disintegration of the German, Austrian, and Russian empires. See Edele and Gerwarth, 7–8; Dietrich Beyrau, "Brutalization Revisited: The Case of Russia," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 15–37; Tomáš Balkelis, "Demobilization and Remobilization of German and Lithuanian Paramilitaries after the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 38–57; Jochen Böhler, "Enduring Violence: The Postwar Struggles in East-Central Europe, 1917–21," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 58–77; Jennifer Keene, "A Brutalizing War? The USA after the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 78–99; Richard S. Fogarty and David Killingray, "Demobilization in British and French Africa at the End of the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 100–23; Stephen Garton, "Demobilization and Empire: Empire Nationalism and Soldier Citizenship in Australia after the First World War—in Dominion Context," *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 124–43.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and their moral character, challenged by opponents anxious to deny them credit for their military service.

While the shadow of the Great War loomed large over the politics of the postwar decade, its significance as a touchstone for the electorate was decidedly ambiguous. Contemporaries often regarded the war as a prism through which postwar political questions might be understood and confronted. Yet the way in which the public thought about the war after 1918 was heavily conditioned by contemporary circumstances. Narratives of disillusionment competed with more affirmatory accounts of the conflict and the British and Allied victory. The broad discursive parameters for talking about the war were, as Adrian Gregory notes, constantly "being appropriated for specific purposes, leading to a memory that was continually contested and developing."[141] The mutability of the war's meaning mattered in the realm of electoral politics. The political parties in Britain who most successfully appropriated and exploited the memory of war and military mobilization were not simply those whose candidates looked most comfortable in khaki but those who most skillfully incorporated a coherent interpretation of the war into a vision for the future that resonated with voters.

In this context, the problem for the Liberal Party was not that the wartime militarization of British society had dealt a fatal blow to Liberal values. Rather, it was that Liberals failed to unite around a shared understanding of the war that might be used to mobilize electoral support behind their party's response to the defining challenges of the postwar years—the hardening of class tensions and the increasing centrality to electoral politics of the contest between socialism and anti-socialism. Both the Labour Party and the Conservatives proved capable of formulating a response to these challenges that drew legitimacy from a particular understanding of the war and its legacies—Labour by identifying the interests of ex-servicemen with the broader aspirations of the working class which the party sought to promote, and the Conservatives by framing the ex-serviceman as an exemplar of a rhetorically constructed public whose interests were threatened by socialist disruption and the sectional demands of the unionized working class. The Liberals, in contrast, were bitterly divided over the political meaning of the war and the lessons to be drawn from it. Unable to agree whether the conflict should be understood as a People's War or as a struggle for liberty against bureaucratic tyranny, Liberal politicians—especially those who had served in the armed forces—invoked competing interpretations of the Great War to legitimize a range of irreconcilable political positions. This ambiguity and division posed profound problems for the party, even after its wartime divisions were ostensibly repaired in 1923. The rise of class politics and the challenge of socialism would undoubtedly have posed problems for the Liberal Party during the twentieth century even had the Great War not broken out. But the war simultaneously intensified these problems and weakened the ability of Liberals to mount an effective political response. Ironically, the very enthusiasm with which Liberal politicians invoked their service records and their memories of the Great War served to exacerbate the party's ideological incoherence and contributed directly to the Liberals' failure to establish a cohesive electoral base in the new democratic politics of the postwar years.

[141] Gregory, *Last Great War*, 273.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.233 Published online by Cambridge University Press