

Report on Norman Angell's Letter to *The Times* Concerning the Dominance of Russia over Germany (Appeared on the 1st of August 1914).

This report will examine a letter written by Norman Angell in 1914. The letter contained his concerns over the dominance and control Russia had over Germany. To understand the political position and opinions of Angell's, we must look at who he was, what was happening during this period, and why he sent it to the newspaper, *The Times*.

Born on the 26th of December 1872, in Holbeach, England, Norman Angell was a well accomplished author, journalist, and politician. In his lifetime, Angell was the Paris editor for *The Daily Mail* from 1905 to 1912; he helped found the Union of Democratic Control, became an executive committee member of the League of Nations Union, and became the Labour MP for Bradford North from 1929 to 1931.¹ Angell also achieved the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933, as well as being knighted the same year.² It can be said that Angell was a successful individual, who was interested and involved in the politics of Britain and other countries, giving him experience and history within the political world. His letter to *The Times* was published only a few days before the announcement that Britain would be at war with Germany.

Angell begins with "A Nation's first duty is to its own people"³, making a clear statement that his interests are focused on Britain and its inhabitants. He expresses that he does not think that the United Kingdom should be involved in the war unless the country becomes "isolated".⁴ It can be said Angell simply wanted to protect the nation in which he resided, pushing the idea that "other nations are torn, and weakened by war, we shall not be".⁵ He continues in his letter to the newspaper, "If we allow Germany to be victorious, she would be so powerful as to threaten our existence as to the occupation of Belgium, Holland and possibly the North of France",⁶ suggesting that although Germany could dominate these countries, she could never defeat Britain, or dare to attempt it. Within the first part of Angell's letter, he has made his opinion very clear. He does not agree with the possibility of Britain going to war with Germany.

A huge part of Angell's unwillingness to believe in the war was "the object and effect of our entering into this war would be to ensure the victory of Russia and her Slavonic allies",⁷ demonstrating the fear of communism and the power Russia held at the time. Angell continues, asking, "Will a dominant Slavic federation of, say, 200,000,000, autocratically governed people, with a very rudimentary civilization, but heavily equipped for military aggression, be a less dangerous factor in Europe than a dominant Germany of 65,000,000 highly civilized and mainly given to the arts of trade and commerce?"⁸ Here, Angell is saying that Russia is more of a threat to the future of Europe, and Britain, than Germany is,

¹ Weinroth, Howard, 'Norman Angell and the Great Illusion: An Episode in Pre-War Pacifism', *The Historical Journal*, xvii, No. 3, (1974), p.551-574.

² Weinroth, *The Historical Journal*, p.551-574.

³ Angell, Norman, 'Concerning the Dominance of Russia over Germany', *The Times*, (London: The Times, 1914).

⁴ Angell, *The Times*.

⁵ Angell, *The Times*.

⁶ Angell, *The Times*.

⁷ Angell, *The Times*.

⁸ Angell, *The Times*.

explaining that he believes communist Russia has more forces and is far more aggressive than Germany, and that the German people are civilized friends of the United Kingdom. Norman Angell's focus was on the power of Russia, explaining that the "Last war we fought on the continent was for the purpose of preventing the growth of Russia".⁹ The intent of this letter is to express the concern for the ever-growing influence of Russia, rather than a country such as Germany, that can be said, in some ways was very similar to Britain.

To end his letter, Angell mentions the Crimean War, explaining, "the last continental war was a monstrous error and miscalculation".¹⁰ The Crimean War started in October of 1853 and ended in February 1856, where Russia lost her alliance with France, the Ottoman Empire, Piedmont-Sardinia, and the United Kingdom.¹¹ Russia became interested in occupying Turkey for territorial, strategic, economic, and religious reasons.¹² This resulted in a war over the control and domination of the Middle-East. Norman Angell uses the Crimean War as an example due to the fact the British army went into chaos and was disorganised for some time, with many soldiers dying from illnesses, and thus reforms were introduced.¹³ To support his view, Angell mentions Sir Edward Grey, a member of the Liberal party and who was the foreign secretary from 1905 to 1916.¹⁴ He states that "Sir Edward Grey has solemnly declared we are not bound by any agreement to support France, and there is certainly no moral obligation on the part of the English people to do so".¹⁵ This demonstrates that many were against the participation of Britain within the Great War, including the foreign secretary at the time. The argument that Britain should not involve itself in other European affairs was backed by past wars, the fear of communism, and it can be said the fear of failure. After the failure of the First Boer War, which could be argued was caused by poor communication and the unconventional tactics of the Boers, Britain was faced with the shock that their forces, considered among one of the greatest of its time, could fail.¹⁶ Britain also discovered from the Second Boer War that there was a public health crisis after losing only 35% of their soldiers in battle and the other remaining 65% to illnesses such as typhoid fever.¹⁷ Around 40% of British recruits were deemed as unfit for army services, suffering from diseases like rickets.¹⁸ Angell could be suggesting that all of these problems had arisen due to war, calling for reforms and drawing attention to the countless British lives lost. Angell continues by explaining, "We can best serve civilization, Europe, and ourselves by remaining the one power in Europe that has not yielded to war madness".¹⁹ Here, he is suggesting that Britain stay away from the conflict with Germany, in order to both continue recovering from

⁹ Angell, *The Times*.

¹⁰ Angell, *The Times*.

¹¹ Angell, *The Times*.

¹² Baumgart, Winfried, *The Crimean War: 1853-1856*, second edition, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p.7.

¹³ Baumgart, *The Crimean War*, p.82-83.

¹⁴ Finn, Margot C., "The Reform League, Union, and International", *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics 1848-1874*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993). p.259.

¹⁵ Angell, *The Times*.

¹⁶ Raugh, Harold E., *The Victorians at War, 1815-1914: An Encyclopedia of British Military History*, (California: ABC Clio, 2004), p. 267.

¹⁷ *Boer War Casualties Records*, (forces-war-records.co.uk), (Clever Digit Media Ltd, 2008).

¹⁸ *Boer War Casualties Records*, (forces-war-records.co.uk), (Clever Digit Media Ltd, 2008).

¹⁹ Angell, *The Times*.

previous wars, and to remain one of the largest powers in Europe, holding onto influence and control.

In conclusion, Norman Angell's letter to *The Times* newspaper expresses what many people of Britain could have been feeling at the time. He demonstrates fear towards the communist power of Russia, rather than believing that the United Kingdom should be alarmed over the German expansion into other European countries. The anxiety of communism seemed far greater than anything else. Angell's opinion clearly was not uncommon due to his support from Sir Edward Grey, as well as it being published in a large newspaper for the average British person to consume. The belief that Britain did not have a moral obligation to intervene suggests that many did not care about the German occupation of other countries and were no longer supportive of Britain being involved with constant fighting. Although the United Kingdom did become involved, it cannot be overlooked that there was indeed opposition to the involvement of war.

Bibliography

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Annotated Bibliography

The books being analysed will be focused on the attitudes of Britons towards the inevitable war with Germany. The historiography of the book will be explored, and the background of each author will be examined. These books will contribute to both the essay and report for this module. The first piece analysed will be a book by David Silbey. The second analysed piece is a letter from *The Times* in August of 1914. This article focuses on protests against the war by working-class socialists. To conclude, the sources will be assessed on how they contribute to this particular area of study.

Silbey, David, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

David Silbey is an Associate Director of the Cornell in Washington programme, and a Senior Lecturer at Cornell University. He teaches European history, modern military history, guerrilla war, and the role of popular will in waging war, making him an experienced expert in his field. He explains that the aim of his book is to investigate the motivation behind the working-class population of Britain to join the conflict with Germany, volunteering, and supporting the total war. Throughout the book Silbey attempts to clarify why so many men volunteered to fight in the war, explaining that "British men volunteered for military service at a rate never before seen in her history."²⁰ The pre-war era of the United Kingdom had provided the population with very few incentives, with the working-class experiencing stagnant wages and a raise in unemployment, resulting in many strikes with minimum success.²¹ Volunteering for military service offered very little, due to the fact that Britain was not technically threatened by Germany, with no direct danger to the lives of Britons. Silbey continues, "Historiography has tended or downplayed the subject of working-class enlistment and popular motivation",²² telling the reader that the majority of the population of the United Kingdom, did indeed support the conflict, and wanted to participate. He also accuses previous historians of "treating volunteers as a herd. Historians have been able to apply single motivation to them, often an emotional, even irrational one",²³ giving the impression that the impetus behind volunteering has been largely overlooked, generalised, and not researched into depth, making it seem that the people of Britain simply wanted a conflict. On the other hand, he notes that "social historians have been reluctant to look at the majority elements of the working-class, which supported the war. Instead, they have focused on the small minority of anti-war protesters."²⁴ Here, it is clear that Silbey disagrees and almost discredits social historians, believing that there were far more supporters than protesters towards the opposition. This book could therefore help with the essay, which focuses on the enthusiasm of Britons towards the war.

Marwick, Arthur; Simpson, Wendy, (Eds), *War, Peace and Social Change – Documents 1 1900 1929*, (Open University Press, 1990).

²⁰ Silbey, David, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916*, (London: Routledge, 2004). p.1.

²¹ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, p.1.

²² Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, p.2.

²³ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, p.2.

²⁴ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, p.2.

This article named 'Social Demonstration', appeared in *The Times* newspaper on the 1st of August 1914. The piece describes how working-class socialists had a meeting with the House of Commons in order to arrange a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, which would commence on the 2nd of August 1914. The group wanted to protest against the war with Germany, expressing terms that needed to be resolved. The article shows that "serious alarm [of] the prospects of a European war into which every European power will be dragged",²⁵ suggesting that there was a fear of total war between all European countries, and possibly the destruction of each other. The Socialists stated, "we stand by the efforts of the international working-class movement to unite the workers of nations concerned in their effort to prevent their governments from entering the war."²⁶ This shows that at the time many people did not want the war and actively wanted to prevent the British government from entering the conflict, especially as many were far more concerned with the power of Russia, "we protest against any step being taken by the Government of this country to support Russia."²⁷ The fear of communist Russia seemed a far greater threat to the British population and Europe compared to Germany, a fellow European country with royal bloodline ties to the British royal family. The protesters may have believed that the government leaders were being wary of the wrong country and great European power: "The Government of Great Britain should decline to engage in war but should confine itself to efforts to bring about peace as steadily as possible,"²⁸ telling the readers that rather than be involved in conflict, Britain should be the peace makers, communicating between many countries to resolve issues that had been building up for a considerable amount of time. This piece shows us that there was some considerable doubt towards any conflict, and not all the population wanted to participate.

In conclusion, it can be said that the war had an overwhelming amount of support for a number of reasons. Britain was going through a difficult time of unemployment, general strikes, and wanted to remain a large power within Europe. However, it cannot be overlooked that socialist groups did not want the conflict due to previous wars with long-term effects on Britain, the health of many Britons, and the much more powerful and fearful communism of Russia. The attitude towards the war was mixed, with an overwhelming understanding that the conflict was inevitable.

²⁵ Marwick, Arthur; Simpson, Wendy, (Eds), *War, Peace and Social Change – Documents 1 1900-1929*, (Open University Press, 1990), p.3-4.

²⁶ Marwick; Simpson, *War, Peace and Social Change*, p.3-4.

²⁷ Marwick; Simpson, *War, Peace and Social Change*, p.3-4.

²⁸ Marwick; Simpson, *War, Peace and Social Change*, p.3-4.

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