

A closer analysis of the mood of Britons in the summer of 1914 suggests a less than enthusiastic response to the impending conflict. Discuss, with due attention given to regional comparisons and contrasts.

The attitude and mood of the British people in the Summer of 1914 towards the impending conflict will be analysed. Exploring closely as to whether or not people were enthusiastic or critical of the possible war with Germany will show us how the population viewed both themselves as a nation, and the acts of Germany. This essay will also research into the protests against the conflict and look into the factors of fear from previous wars and countless deaths which may have contributed to this unrest. Why the British public might have been for the war will also be explored, as well as whether there were certain regions of the United Kingdom that may have differed in opinion and reasoning, especially within cities compared to rural areas.

From the period of July to December of 1914, there seemed to be an overall coherence in attitude towards the war.¹ A myth brought about by propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s cemented ideas that the population of Britain was enthusiastic towards the war, this could have been due to the fact that a surge of men volunteered for military service at a rate that Britain had never seen before.² Many volunteered due to the thought that the war would be over in a few months, and many working class men were unemployed, which meant that the army provided them with some sort of occupation.³ Silbey suggests that many social historians have “treated volunteers as a herd”⁴ and that “working class enlistment and popular motivation”⁵ has often been downplayed. This supports the theory that there was encouragement and enthusiasm towards a war.

Furthermore, Adrian Gregory claims, “there were a few colonial gains, disguised as mandates, which had negligible real value”.⁶ This is another example of why Britain was enthusiastic about the war, protecting and possibly expanding the ever weakening and dying Empire. Gerard DeGroot supports this theory, that “Britain’s concerns were mainly imperial”⁷ and claims “most Britons mistakenly saw the Empire as symbolic of British supremacy.”⁸ With the invasion of Belgium, the conflict quickly “became a war of morals”⁹ with Britain inserting herself as the one to contribute to end the fighting. David Lloyd George, the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1914, claimed that the government “used [the] luxury of hindsight to justify their decision to enter what become a horrific conflict by claiming it was enthusiastically supported by the majority of the population”¹⁰ suggesting that the war was supported by the people of Britain. He also believed that the “hysterical masses [that] had demanded war against Germany whilst British statemen did their best to keep the country

¹ Pennell, Catriona, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.2.

² Silbey, David, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p.1.

³ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War*, p.1.

⁴ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for war*, p.2.

⁵ Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for war*, p.2.

⁶ Gregory, Adrian, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.1.

⁷ DeGroot, Gerard, *Back in Blighty: The British at Home in World War One*, (London: Vintage Books, 2014), p.5.

⁸ DeGroot, *Back in Blighty*, p.5.

⁹ DeGroot, *Back in Blighty*, p.7.

¹⁰ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.3.

neutral.”¹¹ Again, the population received a large amount of blame, with Lloyd George supporting the government claiming that it was the people that pushed for the conflict, suggesting a large enthusiasm towards it. From the overwhelming evidence, it can be said that the impending conflict was met with enthusiasm from the majority of Britons. However, it cannot be mistaken that many myths of an enthusiastic population came around after the war.

During the summer of 1914, the people of Britain became increasingly more anxious about the prospect of a future war.¹² Throughout July 1914, European issues escalated, with little to no serious attention being placed on them. These issues included the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, being assassinated, as well as Bosnian-Serb nationalist created an outbreak of violence in Sarajevo, Bosnia.¹³ This was only dealt with severity from the British public towards the end of July due to the political climate escalating. Before the First World War, Germany was thriving, with the creation of a competing navy, the Berlin-Baghdad railway, and the invention of the Kruger telegram. Britain could have made an alliance and was “inclined to address vulnerability with diplomacy.”¹⁴ Due to the ever-growing German economy, David Lloyd George “favoured an agreement”¹⁵ with Germany as they were never technically a threat or rival to Britain, but they could have been a powerful European ally. This may have contributed to the feelings of sympathy that Britons had towards Germany, along with the rising suspicion and fear towards Russia.¹⁶

Upon the realisation of the impending confrontation in August of 1914, the “people feared war in areas where it would cause the most economic dislocation, highlighting the importance of locality in framing people’s reactions to war.”¹⁷ For example, in Yorkshire, they were collectively against the war due to its impact it would have on the economy.¹⁸ The anxiety towards the future of industries was felt in Huddersfield, and there was a fear of the navy destroying fishing trades in Grimsby.¹⁹ This piece of evidence shows that large industrialised areas in England were more concerned for the welfare of their jobs, money, and economic value within Britain compared to the actual conflict with Germany itself. The Vice-Chairman of Manchester Conservatives and Unionist Association, Percy Woodhouse, urged the government not to break Britain’s policy of neutrality, with support from Lord Derby, who also wanted Britain to take no sides.²⁰ The brother of David Lloyd George, William George, a solicitor in Gwynedd, Wales, wrote a letter encouraging his brother to keep Britain away from the conflict.²¹ These individuals demonstrate and could reflect the feelings of the population, and the opinions of other influential peoples around them, thus supporting the theory of an overwhelming lack of enthusiasm from Britons, and a cloud of gloom over the impending conflict.

¹¹ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.4.

¹² Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.23.

¹³ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.24.

¹⁴ DeGroot, *Back in Blighty*, p.5.

¹⁵ DeGroot, *Back in Blighty*, p.5.

¹⁶ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

¹⁷ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

¹⁸ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

¹⁹ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

²⁰ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

²¹ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.26.

Prior to the war, Scotland's industrial economy was facing a gentle decline, and once war broke out there is evidence to suggest that it declined further.²² Scotland saw very few anti-war meetings and rallies compared to Ireland,²³ with twenty-five percent of West Scotland's working men volunteering for military service.²⁴ This is evidence of conformity and support of the conflict with Germany, showing enthusiasm. Scotland may have wanted to join the war as there was a threat along the coasts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland and down to Dover.²⁵ Communities in Scotland experienced the fear of a German invasion and landing on the shorelines. This along with the surge of recruitments in Scotland can be used as evidence of war enthusiasm.²⁶

During July and early August of 1914 in Wales, the response to the rumours of war from most political and religious leaders in Gwynedd was that "British neutrality should be maintained."²⁷ However, by the time war had been declared on Germany, leading figures within Gwynedd "squarely [aligned themselves] behind the government's policies and supported the war with a profound patriotism and deep sense of moral purpose."²⁸ This shows the willingness to prepare for conflict in order to defend British honour and show loyalty. In Wales the public's response was far more complex, and "exposed not only the divisions between the English and Welsh speaking communities in the region but also the cleavage separating the leaders and ordinary people."²⁹ Thus demonstrating that although the leaders were eager to follow government rules, policies, and regulations, the public were uneasy about the dispute. Some did share the excitement induced by the wave of a patriotic feeling, nevertheless most felt far less confident compared to leading figures. In his book, *Gwynedd and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Cyril Perry mentions a novelist from the Caernarfonshire area that wrote, "no one knew what to make of it,"³⁰ providing us with a first-hand account of the attitude and thoughts of the people in Wales. It is a testimony to how people wanted to be neutral within the conflict but wanted to protect their country and others out of moral obligation.

Ireland had distributed an early wartime pamphlet, attempting to recruit men for military service, showing a willingness to be involved with any war efforts. It was expressed in the *Cork Free Press* newspaper that the people were "against military despotism and in defence of the integrity of small nations."³¹ Thus meaning Ireland was against the total control of the military, being wary that the armed services might outrank political authorities. However, they did believe in protecting other small countries. It can be said that the population of Ireland looked at their own morals, creating enthusiasm towards entering the conflict.

In conclusion, looking at the evidence presented, those across Britain, especially in industrialised and trade areas, were against the war with Germany, fearing for their

²² Royle, Trevor, *The Flowers of the Forest: Scotland and the First World War*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2006), p.4.

²³ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p. 84.

²⁴ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p. 85.

²⁵ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.228.

²⁶ Pennell, *A Kingdom United*, p.189.

²⁷ Parry, Cyril, *Gwynedd and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Volume 14, (Welsh History Review, 1988), p.78.

²⁸ Parry, *Gwynedd and the Great War*, p.78.

²⁹ Parry, *Gwynedd and the Great War*, p.78.

³⁰ Parry, *Gwynedd and the Great War*, p.78.

³¹ Jeffery, Keith, *Ireland and the Great War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.12.

livelihoods, as well as being more concerned about communist Russia. There was an overwhelming sense of fear and unwillingness to enter any conflict. However, it cannot be overlooked that some Britons were more than happy to defend a fellow European country, recognising that Germany wanted to expand its power, and anticipated the job opportunities that the conflict would provide, believing that it would only last a few months. The opinions of the British public were mixed, with some being enthusiastic, but most were much more neutral or were against the conflict. Both Ireland and Wales were largely against the war, but once thrown into it they were ready to participate. Scotland was largely supportive of the war, fearing an invasion on their coastlines. The evidence of a large wave of volunteers for the army suggest and supports the notion of eager attitudes. By the end of 1914, the population within England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland had mostly embraced the war.³² The rising temperature of the political and economic climate within Europe pushed for Britain to involve herself with other countries' affairs which resulted in the participation in the fighting, despite the wishes of the many of the population.

³² Pennell, A Kingdome United, p.1.

Bibliography

DeGroot, Gerard, *Back in Blighty: The British at Home in World War*, (London: Vintage Books, 2014).

Gregory, Adrian, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Jeffery, Keith, *Ireland and the Great War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Parry, Cyril, *Gwynedd and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Volume 14, (Welsh History Review, 1988).

Pennell, Catriona, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Royle, Trevor, *The Flowers of the Forest: Scotland and the First World War*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2006).

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