

People Power

Lyn Smith

During a long career, Lyn Smith has worked as a freelance interviewer for the Imperial War Museum as well as lecturing at universities in Britain and the United States. Her other books include Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust, Young Voices, and Voices against War. This is her introduction to People Power, the handsome volume published to accompany the IWM's wide-ranging and informative exhibition of the same name.

This book accompanies the first major exhibition of its kind at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), London. Based on testimonies from the IWM's vast collection of anti-war recordings, documents and photographs, it traces the complex and evolving history of the British anti-war movement from the First World War to the present, against the backdrop of international events, through the organizations involved and the individuals who made a stand. It also considers some of the ethical and practical problems surrounding the issues of war, peace and conflict resolution.

The story of one of the most enduring movements in British history emphasizes how the museum's remit has always been much wider than the sharp end of war. As its twenty-first annual report, published on the eve of the Second World War, explained, as well as providing a lasting memorial to common effort and sacrifice, the IWM also aimed to demonstrate the futility of war after the carnage of the First World War, which had been regarded as 'the war to end war'.

The modern peace movement emerged in January 1916, in the middle of the First World War, when national conscription for military service was introduced for the first time in British history, and a new group, conscientious objectors (COs) – popularly known as 'conchies' – came into being. In all, 16,300 COs faced tribunals during that war. They were branded as cowards, reviled and persecuted. Many endured repeated prison sentences; some, such as Howard Marten, faced the death penalty; a number ended the war with impaired health; and sixty-nine died. Yet by 1919 it was generally accepted that a man had the right



to follow his conscience in time of war; and the foundations had been laid for all subsequent protest in Britain against war. Among the major belligerents in the First World War, only Britain and the United States, with their traditions of individual liberty and religious freedom, recognized a legal right to conscientious objection.

The story continues through the interwar period, covering the expansion of the peace movement and its increased public legitimacy. Notable personalities were influential to the cause in these years, not least Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of non-violence took a firm hold that has lasted to the present day (as a young boy the future Labour politician Tony Benn sat at Gandhi's feet, and was deeply impressed). In the 1920s and 1930s influential peace organizations were founded, such as War Resisters' International and the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). The PPU, under the leadership of the charismatic parson Dick Sheppard, became particularly important, attracting a vast following of registered supporters by 1938. But, with the rise of Hitler and the spread of totalitarianism during the 1930s, a crisis occurred that led to much painful heart-searching within the anti-war community. Many left the movement, arguing, like the author A. A. Milne, that the Fascist advance had to be stopped. None the less, during the Second World War over 60,000 men applied for CO status, almost four times as many as in the First World War. After women were conscripted in December 1941, 1,074 of them registered as COs.

Testimonies from the Second World War reveal important changes in the treatment of those who opposed war; there was a concern to match objectors to work that they could conscientiously perform and find satisfying, unlike the boring, menial nature of the alternative labour offered to the conchies of the previous war. They also had a comparatively easier time with the authorities and the public, although brutality (albeit more random) did occur, and many suffered physical and mental abuse. There was no major movement in this war to fight against conscription; that battle was in the past. Also, as the COs were more dispersed and less liable to repeated prison sentences, the camaraderie that had been so vital for their counterparts in 1914-18 was not so strongly developed and could lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. The exceptions were members of tight-knit units such as the Friends Ambulance Unit and Parachute Field ambulance, who performed their humanitarian service alongside fighting troops, bonding together as they shared the risks and dangers of war zones. Some COs were confronted by excruciating dilemmas, especially when the full horrors of Nazism began to emerge, which caused them to revise their stance and enter the forces. Conversely, some combatants, witnessing the



reality of total war, opted to leave, claiming CO status.

Conscription continued into the postwar period with the introduction of National Service in 1949 for young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty. Just over 9,000 registered as COs, a much smaller proportion than in the Second World War – this was in line with the declining support for the anti-war movement in the years immediately after the war. With the emergence of the anti-nuclear campaign in the late 1950s the movement began to revive, but not quickly enough to have much impact on the attitudes of conscripts, as National Service ended in 1960. Since then service in the armed forces has been voluntary, so Britain has never experienced anything like the anti-draft protests that erupted in the United States during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

During the Cold War, it was the growing awareness of the nature of atomic weapons and the developing nuclear arms race between the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – that gave rise to a new kind of protest, more related to the moral issue of the survival of mankind than to war. From the late 1950s, this led to the formation of a range of anti-nuclear organizations, of which the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), launched in 1958, and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, established in the 1980s, are the most well known. Interviews with activists from this period chart the successes and failures of the so-called 'nuclear pacifists', as well as the splits and schisms within the anti-nuclear movement and between this and the more traditional pacifist organizations such as War Resisters' International and the Peace Pledge Union.

The end of the Cold War and initial hopes of a more peaceful world led to a lull in anti-war and peace campaigning. But the failure of the 'peace dividend', which resulted in a new range of regional and intrastate conflicts, led to a resurgence. The first Gulf War 1990-91, the Balkan wars of 1991-95, the start of the Afghanistan War in 2001 and continuing conflict in the Middle East have had considerable impact on the movement, not least because of the vast numbers of civilian deaths graphically portrayed in the press and on TV. Images of devastation, streams of refugees and terrible human suffering resulted in widespread revulsion against war. These events, together with a growing suspicion of the basis for another conflict building up in Iraq, fed the huge public outcry against that impending war on 15 February 2003 when vast marches of protestors took place across Europe, the United States and in cities worldwide. In the UK, two million are said to have taken to the streets of London to express their discontent, many carrying placards with the slogans 'No' and 'Not in My Name'. This was a record number for any





British protest. It also led to increases in the membership of new anti-war organizations such as Stop the War Coalition, the Movement for the Abolition of War, and, later, after the war had started, Military Families Against the [Iraq] War. Yet the war went ahead, probably the most unpopular war in British history, and it was subsequently subject to a devastating critique in the report of the Iraq Inquiry, chaired by Sir John Chilcot, which was published in July 2016.

There is widespread acceptance that it was the Iraq War of 2003, and the rise of sectarianism during the subsequent occupation, which provided the opportunity for the birth of the insurgency group that morphed into the so-called Islamic State in 2014. Its evolution and spread to Syria and throughout the whole region of the Middle East, North Africa and beyond has resulted in what has been called an ‘endless war’, and revealed the failure of George W. Bush’s War on Terror. This new type of war against terrorism presents another kind of challenge to the British anti-war movement, in addition to its long-standing concerns, including resistance to the renewal of the Trident missile system.

The twentieth century is now considered the most bloody in history, claiming 187 million deaths in war. A far higher percentage of war fatalities were civilian than in any previous era: in the First World War, one-fifth of casualties were civilian; the figure rose to two-thirds in the Second World War. In the twenty-first century, in the conflicts such as those in Iraq and Syria, the estimated figure is as high as 90 per cent. Along with the horrendous number of civilian casualties there have also been massive displacements of populations. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 65.3 million refugees fled the conflict in Iraq and Syria in the period from 2005 to 2015 – the highest number of displaced persons since the end of the Second World War, when the whole of Europe was on the move. But the past hundred years have seen the rise and evolution of an active and persistent anti-war movement in Britain. In the turbulent years since the First World War it has waxed and waned in response to changing circumstances, and although it is not always easy to quantify its impact, it has endured, and continues to demonstrate a robust resistance to warfare and a vigorous commitment to peace, as well as continuing the non-violent activism that started with Mahatma Gandhi.

People Power: Fighting for Peace from the First World War to the Present by Lyn Smith is published by Thames & Hudson in partnership with IWM. The exhibition at IWM London runs until 28 August 2017. For more details visit iwm.org.uk.

