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World War I

With Paula Larsson (P), Olivia Durand (O),

Waqas Mirza (W) and Jack Doyle (J)

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P: Hello and welcome to the podcast “A very brief introduction to the British Empire”. This podcast is run by Uncomfortable Oxford, a student-led social enterprise that runs walking tours and public engagement events in the city of Oxford. Today's episode is titled, the First World War, and we have guest speaker Jack Doyle. My name is Paula Larsson. I’m co-director and co-founder of Uncomfortable Oxford and a doctoral student in the history of medicine.

O: My name is Oliva Durand, co-founder and co-director of Uncomfortable Oxford. I am also a doctoral student in global and imperial history at the University of Oxford.

W: And my name is Waqas Mirza. I am also a Dphil student in French and English Literature at the University of Oxford.

O: So our speaker today is Jack Doyle, or should I call him Dr. Jack Doyle, because Jack was one of our fellow doctoral students up until fairly recently. He is not a fully-fledged doctor, so congratulations Jack.

J: Thank you. It still feels weird to say.

O: We are looking forward to it ourselves. Jack wrote a dissertation on the Imperial myth: British, American, and French fighter pilots as competent and cultural icons. And today he will tell us about how the First World War is very much a global war. And may i say an imperial war as well.

J: So thank you very much for having me everyone. It's a pleasure to be here and as Olivia said my work is on every little violence during the First World War. I was until very recently a member of Oxford's globalizing and localizing the Great War network, which brought international perspectives together on the First World War during the war`s centenary, which recently finished, and now you don't talk about the First World War I guess.

But I'm going to be talking today about the first World War as an imperial conflict. And so I'm going to be doing that in a couple of different ways. First, I'm going to give you sort of an intro to the scope of the war. A lot of us are really familiar with the tropes of the First World War, which

I'm going to talk about, especially in British memory.

But I'm going to talk specifically about two aspects of the war that coincided with the military campaigns of the war, which is anti -colonial rebellion and revolution and also the creation of the white Commonwealth in the case of the British Empire. So really the creation of distinctive 20th century white nationhoods and rhetorics about race that are maybe underplayed in terms of thinking about the First World War.

So the First World War that I'm talking about today, as I mentioned, looks very different from the one we invoke on Remembrance Day in the UK. So I'm an American who moved to the UK about 10 years ago, and I remember my own introductions to how many British people commemorate the First World War as being this weird mix of moving, uncomfortable, and confusing.

Seeing literally everyone bustling around central London wearing a poppy in November felt significant to me as an 18 year old who is really interested in history, and getting to grips with what many British people described to me as a pointless war and a generational loss was a little more difficult. The way that everyone from war poets to my friends describe the First World War was as this massive unfathomable loss that defied explanation but had also made Britain what it was today.

So as I became a First World War historian, I started to realize that some of the unease I felt about things like the two-minute silence and the national insistence on wearing poppies was because this version of the war was distinctly British. It combines a nostalgia for the British Empire with a real lack of insight or sometimes interest in the British Empire's actual scope.

When most British politicians invoke our first World War British soldier, they`re usually talking about a white English soldier in a pals battalion slogging through the muddy trenches and No Man's Land of Belgium and France, and they're almost never talking about say a Sikh Sepoy in Mesopotamia. They rarely mention who that white English pals battalion commonly thought he was fighting, which makes it so much harder to understand why the British Army followed that Sikh soldier`s footsteps into Iraq almost 100 years later.

That kind of rhetoric has resulted in this weird not particularly historical fetishism of the First World War that we're seeing play out in real time right now with racists defending the Cenotaph in Central London, but it's also why even those of us from all over the world who want to know more about the First World War often don't get to go beyond reading like western front war poetry in school. So that's why I think we really need to talk about the First World War as an imperial conflict, which is what I'm going to do today. I think a good way to think about this war is that it violently transformed 19th century imperialism into new imperial entities.

So in the case of some powers like the Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and German

empires, it effectively broke those systems of imperialism. So literally it dissolved systems of governance, radically redistributed resources and communal identities, and capitulated to colonial self-determination in cases.

The First World War also literally made empires, so the United States filled the vacuum left by exhausted European powers on the world stage. In the case of the British and French empires, things were a little more complicated. These powers technically won the war, but their vast, literally global overstretch demonstrated the fragility of imperial power. So these empires did not truly collapse, but they did have to reconfigure say the 19th century power and expansiveness of the British Raj into a 20th century imperialism.

O: So can you maybe give us an idea of how vast the British Empire was at that point during the First World War and how vast it ended up being with the collapse of all the empires at the end of this conflict.

J: Yeah, so kind of at the end of the 19th century, you know we've got the scramble for Africa. Britain is a major player in that. They are really starting to consolidate power in the Middle East, as the Ottoman Empire is collapsing. There is also, as I'm going to be talking about, this really real tension between especially France and Britain and Germany in Africa, because Germany is starting to emerge as this new imperial power. So as I will kind of touch on, the British empire is actually the biggest it ever is right after the First World War. But that does not necessarily translate to then, having a, what we may think of as like a good hold on those countries, or necessarily that same kind of imperial relationship that it had with its colonies in previous centuries.

P: Just for individuals to frame their mindset. What you said is absolutely correct in that the western front is what most people conceptualize as the First World War. Can you talk a little bit about what other fronts there were in the conflict and what other areas and theatres of wars existed.

J: Yeah absolutely, I'm gonna get into this a little bit, but technically some of the earliest casualties you may say in the First World War are in places that most people wouldn't expect necessarily. So the German attacks on ports in Algeria and in the southern part of Africa. There are campaigns throughout the war in East Africa, which is a really contentious place. Southern Southern Africa, North Africa; there's sort of a central European Italian fronts. There's the Eastern Front where they're kind of transformed as Russia collapses as an empire.

There's campaigns in the Middle East, which kind of incorporates North Africa and Egypt. And you can see that the geography of these campaigns all really map onto existing imperial holdings.

There's also obviously naval components to this that involved some parts of Southern America.

North America is not so affected by the military aspect of the conflict but like vast numbers of people are mobilized from those places, as is true of Australia. So really, we are talking about involvement globally, in one form or another.

W: So, I'm just wondering about the label itself, world war, so how come a label which or a title which clearly indicates, you know, the scope of the global has been popularly reduced to the western front, why is it not been named the Western war instead of the World War?

J: Yeah that's a great question so part of it is that the majority of white British soldiers fought on the western front and so like the popular perceptions of engagement with the front in terms of like, you know families actually communicating with their soldiers on the front from Britain was really focused around Belgium and France. But obviously that wasn't true, there were you know everywhere there were white British soldiers deployed all over the world.

And so I would say the reason that we often imagine in Britain the First World War as being just fought in the trenches of the western front is a lot of it has to do with both Anglocentrism and at the time just the speed of communication as well. It was really easy to get information, news real footage, and photographs from France and Britain. And so that very quickly translated into the popular experience in the war in the British public eye.

There was an awareness certainly of the wider imperial involvement of the war, the global scale of the war. But I think a lot of it has to do with communication and what was available.

W: So maybe we could even say that the way it was taught and talked about: it wasn't the world war but rather the western white world war?

J: As we're gonna get into in the podcast, there is definitely an awareness of it being a world war because of the impact that it has in especially colonized nations. And the language that people use who are not directly impacted by the European war to refer to the war very much reflects its status as a world war.

People are, you know, connecting their personal struggles to what is being asked of them by imperial powers, you know often they will refer to it as the European war. But I think it is worth calling it a world war because it truly does often have far more material impact on countries that are not in close proximity to the western front.

Basically I'm saying: to understand the full legacy of British imperialism, we have to look really hard at the processes and conflicts of empire at the start of what we call the short twentieth century, which is basically this idea historians have to talk about the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Cold War.

To do that as I said I'm gonna look at two processes that occurred simultaneously to the military campaigns of the First World War, so anti-colonial rebellion and the creation of the white British commonwealth.

I want to demonstrate that these cultural, legal, and military processes were all equal parts of the First World War and that they determined how present-day maps and conflicts look.

So I want to give you an idea of just how global the First World War really was, how it's impact on the UK as we know it today is actually nowhere near as significant as it was on many colonized countries. And to introduce you to the kind of imperialism that took Britain through the First World War into the 20th century.

So I'm gonna give you some numbers and fast facts, not to bore you as historians often do, but to try to help you understand what a conflict that we so often imagine small, as you know, people dying over patches of field in northern France has to actually do with the vast empire and every continent.

So, quick intro, there's been lots of debates over why the First World War started and who started it. And people usually point to Gavrilo Princep who was a 19 year old Bosnian Serb who assassinated the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on the 28th of June 1914. This often gets skated over as this kind of random almost accidental stumbling into war; this random, like, anarchist violence. The assassination itself certainly wasn't well planned and involved many of the conspirators including Princep almost botching in the job.

At his own trial though, Princep describes his struggles explicitly as being part of an anti-imperial struggle. So he kind of sets the tone for how we think about the war. He says, I am a Yugoslav nationalist aiming for the unique unification of all Yugoslavs and I do not care what form of state but it must be freed from Austria.

So this kind of rhetoric essentially set up a chain reaction of responses from European imperial powers who all had these really complicated legal, political, and economic alliances and rivalries with one another, trying to condense them as quickly as possible but it gets a little complicated.

So technically speaking, Britain entered the war because it had an obligation from the 1839 Treaty of London to protect the neutrality and sovereignty of Belgium.

Now Belgium's neutrality was being threatened in the first place because of the possibility of invasion from Germany who mobilized for war after the Serbian attack on their Austrian ally Franz Ferdinand. Serbia, however, was under the protection of Russia, the Russian Empire, who were allied with the French Empire, which meant that Germany's declaration of war on Russia implied the invasion of France. To invade France from Germany, it's easiest to go through Belgium, which is the official reason that Britain got involved.

So that's a pretty complicated series of events and you can probably guess that the reality is actually way more complicated even than that. Now Britain's entry into the war, I think had to do with long-standing competing interests of European imperial powers that obviously went far beyond Europe.

All of the main players at the start of the First World War as I was explaining had been competing for colonial resources and land in the 19th century during the scramble for Africa, which would play out as massive military campaigns, conscription, and accelerated economic exploitation across Africa during the war.

Germany as I said had been growing as an imperial power during the late 1800s which resulted in international trade tension. The Franco-Prussian war between Germany and France; and a naval arms race between Britain and Germany in particular. Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire was in decline which peaked different imperial interests in the Middle East.

So what you got here by 1914 is this incredibly messy political hotbed causing tension all over the world, and that's making everyone very very uneasy. There was actually a fair bit of opposition to the war within Britain. Many liberal politicians pointed out that the war was going to destroy the decades of work that had gone into regulating international trade, especially between empires and this sort of cross-national cooperation.

But the conservatives meanwhile were urging war. They were using the invasion of Belgium and the atrocities committed by German soldiers to get the country and by extension the Empire to act.

So what we get as a result was a conflict that began in August 1914 and came to a halt in Western Europe officially on the 11th of November 1918.

But in reality that conflict stretched well into the 1920s and 30s in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa.

So historians of the First World War often challenge the idea that the war ended at all in 1918 to show just how much this was a conflict between competing empires. They argue that the war certainly didn't end for Russia, which descended into civil war from which emerged the Soviet Union.

It definitely didn't end in 1918 per say for Turkey, because that became a new state partly in response to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and occupation from allied militaries. Plenty of the international agreements that determined what our world actually looks like today too happened after the armistice in the long period of violence and diplomacy that followed the end of fighting in Europe.

So, I think throwing out the idea that the war just came to a halt when the gun stopped on the western front is a really good one. I think it's a good first step to challenging how we think empires operate and identifying what they wanted to achieve through war.

J: What did the British empire want to achieve? So all of the British Empire was involved in the First World War, but the reasons why are as we've kind of suggested not centered at all in British commemoration of the war. During the war centenary a few years ago, lots of museums and politicians tried to talk about how global and especially racially diverse the war was by mentioning the contributions of say like Indian or Caribbean soldiers to the British war effort.

That was a phrase that was used a lot. They contributed a lot to the war. So they didn't really suggest what these people were contributing to, which again brings up the question of what a Punjabi Sikh soldier might have been doing in Iraq in 1917. The short answer has to do non-surprisingly with the protection and continued expansion of the empire, which required the mobilization of more manpower than mainland Britain could offer.

So Britain at the beginning of the First World War does not have a large army. So is calling on the empire to fill up and pick up the slack basically. So this included but was not limited to over a million Indians, 600,000 Canadians, 400,000 Australians, 15,000 West Indians, and over 200,000 black Africans, and those were just people affiliated with the military.

So that's not counting the impact on civilians that the war had across British colonies and dominions.

P: Yes, that’s funny that you should say that. In Canada we have similar kind of tokenistic narratives about a diverse experience of the war in which we really highlight our different indigenous soldiers and Japanese and Chinese and black soldiers that went off to fight.

But it also doesn't acknowledge how much the Canadian contribution was really about asserting its own place within an empire, and its own status as one of the stronger dominions within the empire itself. And in lots of ways it forgets that the purpose of the war was to enact imperial rivalry.

J: Yeah definitely, I think it's complicated but also really important to examine how those narratives are being presented. You know often those are really a big source of pride for especially marginalized and indigenous communities, which I think is important to respect, also realizing that a lot of mostly white politicians use those to, and certainly used those at the time, to justify the wars aims in a sort of pan-imperial unity, which I think is a good thing to keep in the back of the mind.

P: Yeah, it's always a tension between the memory of something in the form of celebration and

how that celebration is used to justify not just historical past injustice but also modern inequality.

O: And yeah, that's clearly not limited to the British empire because France itself also brought a lot of soldiers coming from the colonies who were often called the indigenous troops, being part of the French army during the first world conflict. And this is also a narrative that is very much struggling to find its way into the public discourse in France.

It's still very much, because a lot of the trenches were in between France and Belgium, it's still very much focusing on this history of the trenches and on those places within France as if the first World War or the world stage was very much in France during that war when it wasn't.

J: Yeah absolutely, and I think you can see with the British and French comparison, how those different empires conceptual race as well, and so black Senegalese troops in France were really positioned as these, with martial race ideas of them being sort of shock troops and much tougher than white soldiers, whereas Britain did not want to have black soldiers at all.

They, you know, really range in the martial race idea with especially Punjabi Indians, but most black African troops, different for black Caribbean, but African troops in the British military were in non-combatant roles.

So, mobilizing all these people as you can imagine was really, really complicated. It meant confronting the vast reality of what the mmpire actually looked like and how it did or didn't work as an institution.

For many it rapidly accelerated processes of globalization and immigration, and it put white authorities into closer contact with the centuries of racism and oppression that they themselves had perpetrated.

For example Brighton's Royal Pavilion, which many of you may have seen, it's this big beautiful building in the center of Brighton was designed and designated as a hospital for Indian soldiers during the early years of the war. This forced authorities to implement culturally specific facilities, like separate water supplies, for muslims and hindus. And it brought imperial forms of racism home to Britain with hospital authorities scrambling to train up white male orderlies to treat Indian soldiers so that white English nurses would not come into contact with brown men.

Some of the pavilion's present-day boundaries and gardens actually date back to the war, because racial intermixing led to Indian soldiers' visits into the city of Brighton being chaperoned and monitored, and they put up fences around the pavilion sometimes so that people couldn't easily see each other. You have to remember that many of these soldiers in Brighton pavilion were illiterates, and they were often from north of India and from very rural communities

And as the war went on they were subjected to harsher forms of conscription and the profound disruption of their home communities, labor, and families. We see this threat of First World War conscription as being a real catalyst for anti-imperial struggles across colonial contexts.

So, that brings me to my first point which is talking about this anticolonial rebellion that is really fermented and catalyzed during the First World War. In the British Empire, this massive years-long mobilization for the war on the western front and elsewhere meant that people who were subject to British imperialism were getting real incentive to question and seek agency in new ways when thinking about their relationship to empire.

So I really think this is one of the processes that is inseparable from the wars, just as significant as its formal, uniformed military campaigns. People came out of this challenge to the empire that was being posed by the war from different directions. Early on some nationalists in colonized countries encouraged men who were technically British subjects to participate in the war as part of the British military.

The rationale was that it might lead to Britain respecting demands for autonomy and equal treatment. So one of these people, this might be surprising in fact, was the Jamaican activist and black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, whose work would later influence the rise of the Black Panther Party and Rastafarianism and a lot of ideas of Pan Africanism.

When war broke out in Europe, Garvey's Pan Africanism, the Universal Negro Improvement League telegramed London: “expressing our loyalty and devotion to his majesty the king and empire, praying for the success of British arms on the battlefields of Europe and Africa and at sea.” So as the war went on though we see a wave of rebellions in the vaults, often continuations of pre-war anti-colonial resistance.

So i might give you all a question which is: just thinking about it practically, why do you think these rebellions might have been happening during the first World War? What things could have factored into people choosing this moment to organize against the British Empire?

O: I'm thinking maybe for instance, like closer to home, how maybe the Easter rising in Ireland, I guess this comes at a point when there's lots of discourses about rights and duty, and, well, the people living in the British colonies or in Ireland as part of the United Kingdom are demanded to fulfill certain duties, they still have any unequal rights, and that feels like there's something completely off in the deal that they're being offered.

J: Yeah, absolutely that's definitely a big part of it. With Ireland, you have the context of, you know, decades of a really virulent political discourse about this question of home rule and some people in Ireland take the war as an opportunity to engage not just politically but you know militarily when there's so many British troops literally off the streets, the policing had really changed in Ireland.

P: You also see how suddenly individuals across the world are being asked to go against not just their own interests, but also they're cultural beliefs. On our previous episode on the conquest in Asia, Urvi Khaitan, who was speaking, talked about how her grandfather had gone in the first world war across the ocean and how this was a really big step, because he lost his caste by crossing the ocean, and so there's a lot of cultural reasons not to. And it's really a lot to ask of someone to cross the world, leave behind your family, everything you've known, potentially risk your life.

Now the British have been doing this for centuries, of course, but a British soldier who left to go across the world for conquest, you know in Africa, Asia, and North America, they got something out of it. Their country benefited from those conquests, whereas when you're asking individuals who've been conquered to go and fight for their conquerors, like what's the incentive for that. In fact it's much better for them to learn how to fight and then rebel.

J: Yeah absolutely, and that's a really good segway actually into an example I want to bring up, and which encapsulates some of these things that you guys have mentioned. I want to talk a little bit about the Chilembwe uprising, which took place in January of 1915 in Nyasaland, which is present-day Malawi.

Like many of the anti-colonial rebellions that took place during the First World War the Chilembwe uprising wasn't particularly successful in practical terms at the time. But I want to talk about it because it speaks to some of the really fundamentally imperial dimensions of the war and also this emerging global anti-Imperial movement that is also present in something like the Easter rising, another unsuccessful rising that tapped into something deeper going on.

So as a little background to the Chilembwe uprising, Nyasaland was a small region that was part of the, at the time, the British central Africa protectorate, with at the time of the first World War an estimated population of just under a million people. Like other British African colonies, it was governed by racial principles defined in part by people like Cecil Rhodes, with the results of black Africans being qualified as lesser to white British people, or even Asian British subjects, and disenfranchised of much of their communal land.

So as a young man John Chilembwe, who was a black African from Nyasaland, he worked for a white English missionary. They had a close relationship and the missionary eventually took him to the United States. And in the United States Chilembwe studied at the Virginia theological seminary college and he became exposed to African-American intellectuals and organizers like Booker T. Washington, for example, who really influenced how he returned to southern Africa.

When he returned home Chilembwe set up his own mission to create spaces of education, worship, and political thought for black Africans, which provoked some really targeted racist attacks from wealthy white landowners.

So during the first World War, forced conscription and disease hit Nyasaland hard, which really radicalized Chilembwe's convictions toward armed revolts, and so conscription is something that we haven't talked about too much, but that was a real big catalyst for a lot of anti-colonial rebellion

So this idea that you know going into often a rural region getting every able-bodied man that kind of effectively wipe out your, you know, agriculture, your families, and really profoundly impacts, you know, the growth of a community. And so we have some of Chilembwe's letters and public writing, including his condemnation of the British use of African troops and porters to counter the German invasion of Nyasaland in the autumn of 1914.

So i'll read a little bit from this letter that he wrote:

"regarding this worldwide war, we understand that this was not a royal war nor a government war, nor a war again for any description. It was a war of free nations against a devilish system of imperial domination and national spoliation. If this were a war as mentioned above, such as a war for honor, government gain riches, etc, we would have been boldly told to let the rich men, bankers, titled men, storekeepers, farmers and landlords go to war and get shot. Instead the poor Africans, who have nothing to own in this present world who in death leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire distress are invited to die for a cause which is not theirs. It is too late now to talk of what might or might not have been whatsoever be the reasons why we are invited to join in the war. The fact remains we are invited to die for Nyasaland. We leave all for the considerations of the governments and that justice wins."

So this letter was censored by local authorities when he tried to publish it in the regional newspaper, but John Chilembwe's message resonated with many. I find this letter really fascinating because he does gesture to this idea of a wider British imperial community. I think it's important to recognize that this existed to an extent. And a bit like Marcus Garvey he's using these early phases of the war to articulate a sense of community and mutual responsibility.

Albeit that the British have not kept up their end of the deal on. At the same time, he's clearly calling the war Europe, as he sees it playing out with German soldiers literally appearing in familiar places in Southern Africa, and he says, you know, it is now too late to talk of what might or might not have been.

Now just a few months after you wrote this letter, John Chilembwe and about 200 men tried a coordinated attack on British-run estates with the hope that this would inspire people particularly people whose families were affected by conscription to organize further.

Though his rebellion was swiftly put down, and Chilembwe and many of his co-conspirators were killed, he was often referenced in future Malawian independence movements, and today

he's very much still a part of the mythology of the state. He's on Malawian currency. The 15th of January, which is the day of the uprising is commemorated as a national holiday, so it's really essential to understand that this rebellion and related anti-colonial movement was not just a consequence of the First World War, but it was an active part of its religious and cultural change.

J: So that should give you some ideas for thinking about the anti-colonial rebellion that was the first part of this talk. Now I want to move on to the creation of the white Commonwealth, which is the second part of this discussion about the Imperial dimensions of the first world war.

So we see this process of nation building and empire reshaping happening in white dominion countries during the war too. Often we see empires as just straightforward relationships between colonizers and colonized. This gets a little complicated for the First World War with majority white countries like Canada and Australia, who are developing their own nationhoods after decades of settler colonialism.

But we're also very much participating in the British war effort. So in terms of land as I said the British Empire was the biggest it ever was immediately after the First World War.

This is basically due to Britain profiting from the spoils of winning the war, and it's the last big burst of British and French imperial expansion that has created some of the most charged conflicts in this history. So there I'm thinking especially about the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, which essentially carved up the modern Middle East into what post-colonial theorist Edward Said described as an imagined geography, that's allowed the West to “manage and even produce the orient” often to violent ends.

However the toll of the first world war and later the second really strained Britain's ability to manage an empire as it had done in 19th century, and what's sometimes not included in thinking about that process is the increasing independence of Britain's white majority settler colonial states, from the 19th century onwards.

The British Commonwealth emerged as an idea during the first war and was put forward in earnest at the Peace conference in 1919. In 1926, the Commonwealth became a formal institution of countries “equal in status, in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of the domestic or external affairs though unified by common allegiance to the crown.”

Though this wasn't directly cited as the reason practically speaking, these promises really extended to the white citizens of independent countries who had participated in the first world war, so originally Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

So, what do these countries all have in common? What do you see as linking these countries when I mention those?

W: Can you name the countries again?

J: Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

W: Well, they're very far, very far away?

P: They are very much, as you said, white settler majority countries that have generally displaced indigenous populations to be settled by a white Europeans.

O: They are quite different from colonies such as India, which is very much about trade, the Caribbean which was about a plantation economy. You have lots of people moving from Britain or from European countries to settle permanently into those countries.

J: Yeah, absolutely, you're capturing this idea of movement, and you know a lot of cultural exchanges, as well as resource exchanges between these countries. So, which I think is really important for thinking about how these countries are then conceptualizing themselves during and after the war there.

It's significant as well that the white members of these countries are also considered to have sort of equal status within the British military during the war. They are not regulated in the same way as say British Indian soldiers versus members of Britain's army.

Of course, many people during the first World War may not have seen it as strange or jarring or that these countries were participating in the war alongside mainland Britain.

There's a great propaganda poster made in London in 1915, with the picture of a big mane lion standing on the kind of like pride rock situation, and he is surrounded by four young male lions who are labeled Canada, Australia, India and New Zealand. And the caption reads: "the empire needs men, I'll answer the call. Helped by the young lions, the old lion defies his foes. Enlist now."

So even if these countries and their trajectories out of immediate British control are really different, it absolutely served the British government to portray them as being united in a common struggle.

W: Yeah, I think I've seen this exact poster in the Imperial War Museum in London.

J: Yeah and the Imperial war museum is always an interesting one, because that very much came out of the first world war. So the way that the empire is portrayed and the choice of that posture to portray imperial relations is always an interesting one for me.

P:I mean, it's literally called the Imperial War Museum. I think if nothing says that the first world war was about empire, the name of that museum does.

J: yes. So of course there was a lot of talk about this sort of cross imperial cooperation, but for the country's themselves. These especially white settler colonial countries, the war had a really different impact to the way it was received in Britain, which is that it had a really tremendous and demonstrable impact on shaping these countries ideas of white nationhood.

I think we can read this as a symptom of British cultural imperialism, which still keeps hold in especially these countries with majority white populations. I mentioned earlier that 600,000 Canadians supplemented the British military and indeed they were essential to the Western Front's, many of the Western Front's bloodiest military conflicts, like the opening days of the Battle of the Somme.

Paula, I don't know if you visited the Canadian parliament. But it's always struck me that it's sort of themed around the first world war.

P: I haven't seen the parliament buildings in a very long time, but the idea of the first world war is definitely a huge part of Canadian nationality. The birth of Canada, although it technically happened in 1867 is culturally defined as in the first world war, and not just in the first world war, but during like a single battle on a single ridge during the first World War. It's called Vimy Ridge, and it's seen as like this moment in which the nation itself was born.

So it really has boiled down the entirety of the national legacy to you know like a handful of soldiers of a specific battlefield at a specific moment in time. And and even still this battle itself is kind of over celebrated just because it was convenient to choose that battle. I mean, there was much more significant battles that Canadian soldiers fought in, for instance at Cambrai, but the Vimy Ridge one has been signified as the moment in which Canada's nation was born, and if you go visit Vimy Ridge today, you'll see it, a very large beautiful memorial of lady Canada weeping for her fallen soldiers.

So the Canadian nationhood is highly you know centered around this narrative of the first world war, and what you were saying about white nationality is another significant portion of this. Because even though today we recognize and celebrate the contributions as I said of the different ethnic groups of Canada, the solidification of Canadian nationhood also went hand in hand with the solidification of Canadian whiteness.

The first 20 years of the 20th century between, you know, 1900-1920 is a moment in which Canada saw the largest influx of immigrants it has ever in history ever seen.

And as soon as the war ended in 1920, you have Canada pass a complete ban on any Chinese immigration for instance. So as time goes on there's stricter controls on who's allowed to come

into the country because they had this huge influx, and this concern is that there's just going to be too many people who aren't of Anglo-Saxon descent, and so they are incredibly strict then after that.

And Canada even for instance starts internment camps of its own in the first world war, specifically against Ukrainians who were seen at the time as a different race of people and then of course Germans, and later Japanese during the Second World War. So the idea of interning, you know, those considered foreign and especially not those considered Anglo is a very big part of Canadian nationhood too. It then really goes hand in hand with this narrative of that first world war being the birth of a nation itself.

O: And I think it's quite interesting to think that for like white settler colonies, the start of the national histories is very much linked to the first world war, because in the very strong sense it reinforces the idea that the start of the national history starts with this involvement of white sectors in this conflict within the British military. I guess it maybe contributes to erase the stories and the narratives of the presence of the indigenous population of Australia, New Zealand, Canada even more.

J: Yeah absolutely, and then you know those indigenous again contributions to the war effort are often put forward instead of the history of those people literally being there before the nation was built. And the, you know, the Canadian parliament that I was thinking of. Of course Canada became independent and formed in 1867, and the original parliament building burned down during the war actually, unrelated to the war. But when they rebuilt it they very much chose it to be almost a memorial in many ways to Canada's war dead.

Now, the Houses of Government are covered with paintings of First World War battlefields, and similarly Australian losses at Gallipoli are a huge part of the national myth of Australia, and they were often cited by far-right politicians including during the First World War itself as justification for the continuation of the white Australia policy, which originally forbade non-white immigration to Australia from 1901.

There's actually a really striking moment in the Paris peace conference, where Japan asked to be an exception to that white Australia policy to allow Japanese immigration to Australia, and so we see a tension in that negotiation of Australia's sort of white citizenry idea that's coming out of the war.

So the choice to center explicitly imperial participation in the First World War is a distinctive one. I think it's significant that it isn't shared by a majority white Britain affiliated, although my Irish family would not let me say it, country like Ireland, which has its fair share of wartime losses in the first world war, but really strikingly does not commemorate the first world war on a national scale. Instead what you know was commemorated in 2016 was the Easter rising, the failed uprising which later sparked the Irish war of independence, which is also commemorated.

And I think that tells a particular story about the impact of cultural imperialism and how choosing to align yourself with a British history of British and Imperial sort of self ideation really does change not just how people think of themselves but policy and how we tell those sorts of history.

So I'll wrap up by saying I think the case violent you know, what it speaks to the war. Sorry, I think that this idea of white nationhood coming out of the war really speaks to the First World War as being far more than the sum of its casualties. So literally far more than the number of poppies that adorns the tower of London a few years ago, or even the number of war graves marked and unmarked spread across the world.

Rather as we get further away from the first world war, and that crisis passes from living memory into mythology, we can see more clearly the deep profound risks and constant shaping groups, that's left in our presence. It's shaped how we think about race and nationhood, not just in our day-to-day experiences but in the laws and maps that enforce those.

It's arguably driven most of the world changing events of the 20th century. It's global scope is often hidden hardest in places that so often get left out of British challenges of the war.

The first world war offset and rearranged the imperial powers that have driven our world for centuries, with the British Empire renegotiating its place in the world as America came to the fore.

So if nothing else, I hope I leave you with an opening up of your perspective on the First World War beyond the trenches of the western front, and hopefully thinking about the ways in which empires still structure our lives and histories, even after what we consider say the fall of the British Empire. So thank you very much for having me.

P: well that was really enlightening. Thank you Jack for that really great discussion of the imperial aspects of the first world war.

O: I was super impressed how he managed to pack so many topics within this short podcast, but I think it was also very enlightening.

W: Yes thank you very much. You clearly expanded the reach both globally and culturally of this war.

P: It would honestly be really interesting to hear about other uprisings and conflicts that happened in different areas of the world too, because I think that a lot of our listeners will have never heard of Chilembwe's uprising itself, and hearing more of those stories really helps to reframe the narrative of celebration and memory and loss that is the British and Canadian and other colonial narratives of the first world war conflict.

P: So that has been the end of episode 7 of a very brief introduction to the British Empire and it's also the end of our second module: a new imperialism. Our next module will begin on the topic of unmaking Empire and we'll be discussing the inter-war period.

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