

Foreword

On the day Dick Sheppard's seminal letter that led to the formation of the Peace Pledge Union appeared in the British press in October 1934, Hitler's secret order to expand the German armed forces in violation of the Versailles Treaty was already two weeks old.

This was a time of growing unease about events on continental Europe and an emerging realisation that the League of Nations, which many hoped to be a bulwark against future war, was in fact a paper tiger. People fervently wished for peace; the memory of the 'missing' had not yet faded, especially among the crowds of weeping women on Armistice Days. What might be called a 'pacifist tendency' was widespread. In this climate Dick Sheppard's letter, inviting opponents of war to contact him, came at an auspicious time. People wanted to do something, to stand up and be counted, to argue for negotiated resolutions to problems; they were uneasy about the actions of national leaders.

By the time Britain declared war on Germany the PPU had over 1000 groups and its public meetings around the country often had Special Branch officers taking notes at the back. Dick Sheppard did not live to see the vast organisation the PPU had become. He died in 1937, just after he had won the Rectorship of Glasgow University in competition with Winston Churchill.

The memorial brochure published after Dick's death recorded his belief that 'since Britain had signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact (an international treaty of 1928 that prohibited the use of war as an instrument of national policy), thereby pledging our country never to go to war, we could as individuals implement the pledge by an equally solemn personal one. For we can all be responsible for our own pledges, even if, it seems, we cannot be so for those that we undertake collectively.'

Since the early 1920s Dick Sheppard frequently and publicly questioned and challenged the growing adulation of military prowess, particularly in association with remembrance of the war. The questioning of the dominant assumptions about war has been a constant and central feature of the PPU throughout its history and continues to be the most public part of our work.

Today, Britain, more than many countries, sees itself through the prism of the two world wars, and this view requires a simple narrative in which Hitler was uniquely evil and the war with Germany was therefore inevitable. But the route to war was not scripted in advance: there were always choices and different possible endings. There is a tendency - known to psychologists as 'hindsight bias' - to regard historical outcomes as more probable than alternatives seemed at the time. Among the general public this tendency translates into a bitesize, desiccated view of the past in which war was a necessity, and such a view in turn

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confirms a present supposed need for military might.

Much criticism is now directed at the government and at Tony Blair for the fate of British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time soldiers are praised for their gallant effort in fighting a largely unwanted and unwarranted war. It does not seem to occur to many that while Tony Blair gave the go-ahead for war, it was the tens of thousands of soldiers who took the Queen's shilling, packed their kitbags, and flew off, who made it real. The whole-hearted support of parliament and much of the public tends to be forgotten in the rush to blame somebody for the murderous fiasco. There is always a choice. Dick Sheppard's idea of individual pledges is not the whole answer to a world without war, but it is a big step in that direction.

For the PPU, a number of fundamental elements, as can be seen in the following pages, find expression in different ways at different times. The individual renunciation of war, which led many to conscientious objection, today forces most of us into an uneasy accommodation, as we are forcibly conscripted into paying for war and preparations for war through the tax system. This commits many of us to challenge the state's war-making tendencies wherever we can. Crucial, too, is the need to challenge and question the social values that normalise war and make it seem natural. Finally, there is the increasingly urgent need to ensure that the next generation is intellectually better equipped to understand and handle conflict and prevent it turning into violence.

Jan Melichar

