

From 1914 to 1918, wartime morale was reflected in the pages of the *Linlithgowshire Gazette*

Morale was high at first, as the great majority of people, however reluctantly they went to war, were convinced that right was on their side. The politicians and the newspapers 'sold' it to the public as a simple matter of honour and necessity: the War was being fought for two reasons, to defend 'plucky little Belgium' and to prevent the spread of German militarism. On 14 August 1914 the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* reported how Asquith put it in the House of Commons:

Britain, if at this juncture she had either through fear of consequences, through moral weakness, or for any consideration whatever, refrained from joining the coalition against Germany, would have deserved the scorn of the world, now and in future generations... The outrage committed on Belgium by Germany rendered the intervention in the war really the only thing to be done... We are fighting in the first place to fulfil a solemn international obligation... Secondly we are fighting to vindicate the principle that small nationalities shall not be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering power... We are fighting, not for aggression, not for the maintenance even of our own selfish interest, but in defence of principles, the maintenance of which is vital to the civilisation of the world.

On 9 October 1914, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* printed "A Call to Arms" translated into couthy Scots verse by a local versifier, Georgina Russell of Ecclesmachan. It became:

*Ye Scottish lads, come, rally roon',
Oor day o' trial's here';
Great sacrifices maun be made
Tae save oor land sae dear.
Then haste and join the ranks, my lads;
Yer duty's very plain.
That German Tyrant, we'll mak sure,
Shall ne'er mak' war again.
Think on the plucky Belgians' fate,
An what they hae endured,
'Twas thro' that gallant stand they made
Oor safety was secured.
The torture o their womenkin'
A' nations maun deplore'.
Get at the savage Germans, lads,
An' slay them by the score.'
(And so on for another four stanzas.)*

The underlying imperial and trade rivalries between Britain and Germany were downplayed or simplified in the press, national and local; the issues at stake were laid out simply and were widely accepted. Assurance of the rightness of their cause kept morale high until well into 1916.

At the outbreak of war, confidence in the might of the British navy was high. The British army was widely believed (incorrectly) never to have lost a war; and there was confidence too in the endless resources of manpower, resources and goodwill that could be drawn on from Britain's enormous empire. On 4 September 1914, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* commented:

We realise now the meaning of a loyal Empire which will rally round the Mother Country. It is loyal because of the generous trustfulness of the Mother Country which has allowed her Colonies freely to follow their own inclinations in the matter of self-government. The British Empire's resources are truly inexhaustible. No German hordes will be allowed to swallow up the great fabric of freedom and humane government that the name of our Empire stands for in the world.

By late 1915, the appalling conditions of trench warfare and the extent of the losses led to some doubts beginning to creep in. However, the few people who called for peace talks were vilified in the press as cowards or friends to the Germans. In October or December 1915, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* mentioned a favourite 'ditty' of the troops being 'Are we downhearted? - No!'

Nevertheless, we have in our midst a certain sparse and undesirable proportion of the pessimistic stamp...not traitorous, perhaps timid, or arrogant, or taking a narrow view... Such persons... have... done no little harm to the nation and to the cause....Individuals of that category are to be found... in all ranks of the community, even the highest. The speeches recently made in the Upper house by such peers as Lords Courtney and Loreburn were assuredly regrettable utterances. Those diatribes have been avidly seized hold of by the German press and falsely used as indicative of public opinion and sentiment in Britain.

Henry Ford, and later Andrew Carnegie, both came in for severe criticism and mockery of their calls for an end to the war. On 10 December 1915, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* editorialised:

The war must be fought out to a finish, and however well-intentioned they may be, individuals essaying to stop it will be merely wasting their energies on a vain and futile task. Among those of that category is Mr Henry Ford, the Yankee millionaire who made his 'pile' as a manufacturer of motor cars...His peace expedition by ocean liner to German, is certain to be a ridiculous fiasco.

When morale began to falter, it was not that people doubted the righteousness of their cause or feared defeat – but that that the war was lasting far longer than they had ever expected and was causing slaughter on an unimaginable scale. It was not doubt, but war weariness which afflicted the population. In early January 1916, Georgina Russell of Hillside Cottage, Ecclesmachan, was now aware that victory would not be swift and glorious, but still maintained a jingoistic tone in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 6 January 1916:

:

*Ye laddies frae Broxburn, frae Inchmahan, an' Upha!
Oh! oor thochts are ever wi' ye, though ye've been sae lang awa'...
Noo the year that's fast approachin' hauds momentous days in store,
An' the Huns will learn a lesson that they never learnt afore;*

On the home front, the population was subject to orders, restrictions, bans and interference as never before. There was annoyance and resentment, but morale held up, enabling people to accept the endless restrictions of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) as a necessity of war, as described in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 30 June 1916:

Since the outbreak of hostilities, nearly two years ago, Britain in almost all respects has undergone a tremendous transformation, some of the consequences of which may be temporary, but the bulk of which must inevitably leave permanent marks. The main fabric of society may remain, but society itself is bound to be much changed and modified, and he would be a rash man who would venture to predict the extent of the changes and the modifications. Today we are necessarily under a regime little other than martial law: what was not so long ago permissible to all may be easily questioned by the authorities, and is often rigidly repressed... Every city and town, almost every parish, however remote, knows bereavement of the dear and the brave belonging to them, stricken down in this awful strife; and yet the heart of the country bears up and is confident of ultimate success.

Sheriff Macleod remarks in Linlithgow Sheriff Court were reported in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 21 September 1917:

The free-born Briton has now submitted to restrictions which would have horrified his forefathers. The modern British householder may not allow the light of his windows to gleam outside. He may not keep a large quantity of food in his house. He may not buy tobacco after a certain hour of the evening, and if he is under the age of forty-one, he never knows whether he will eventually find himself in khaki uniform, though (sic) he likes it or not...the people of this generation have resigned themselves to suffering all the restrictions that may be imposed upon them, in order to accomplish the national purpose of taming the Prussian eagle. They have set their teeth in grim determination to see the thing through.

Normally the local newspapers were relentlessly optimistic. The Government Press Bureau restricted the war news which could be published and also restricted the content of soldiers' letters home published in local papers. So it was unusual to find the following letter from Colonel H. M. Cadell of Grange, with its frank assessment of the desperate food situation at home. The letter was published in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 15 December 1916 and was headed 'Suggestions in view of a famine':

Sir, - To anyone who can read the signs of the times the outlook this winter, both national and domestic, seem to be growing increasingly dark. We have, after two years of terrible expenditure, not yet won the war, and the end is apparently not even in sight.

The shortage of the American wheat crop, and the dangers and losses to our shipping from submarines, with the consequent enormous rise in freights will make food dearer than ever for a year to come at least.

I mention these unhappy but too well-known facts only in order to emphasis the great and pressing need for everybody - old or young - to help to ease the sad situation in any practical way they can.

Now I have a few practical suggestions to make to people here who will listen to me. Everybody who has a bit of garden ground and a pair of willing hands can cultivate vegetables and potatoes, which just now, if they are good, are selling at about a farthing each. Pigs can also be kept, and are by the most profitable kind of live stock if enough food for them can be got easily. A pig can be bought for 30s, and if well fed sold for £6 or £8 in eight months' time.

Col. Cadell offered to let at a nominal rent a few acres of vacant ground at Bridgeness, and other vacant land at Grange, for allotments. Of course, he conceded, it may, by some miracle, happen that there would be no serious famine at all: 'the war may soon end triumphantly, and all our fears prove groundless. But that happy consummation is highly improbable, and in any case nobody will be any the worse for practising a little war economy now'.

It was mentioned in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 12 January 1917, that Colonel Cadell was disappointed as only one person took him up on his offer of an allotment.

It may be that the population was better able to absorb the loss of so many young men because sudden death among the young was not uncommon, not perceived as it is nowadays as unnatural. In one randomly chosen issue – the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 30 June 1916 - there were reports of one child killed by a car, three other road accidents, two pit accidents and two pit fatalities, and two industrial accidents, one of which later proved fatal.

Overt calls to keep up morale became common in 1916 and continued for the rest of the war, for example in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 15 December 1916:

The man whose heart is in his boots is very frequently met these days. According to him, everything is going wrong. We are up against it, sure enough, and nothing but a miracle can save us. We have been that way before many a time, but the peculiar thing is we have always found a way out, and we will again. If only we are true to ourselves, the miracle will happen.

It is most refreshing, however, to hear from the lips of Sir William Robertson that "it is the duty of every man and every woman to wear a cheerful face in time of war, because by so doing they were performing a national duty". If he can afford to be cheerful, why should we be downhearted?

The Press Bureau ensured that every battle was portrayed as a victory; only in distant retrospect could it be admitted that any had been defeats. On taking over as Premier in December 1916, Lloyd George could admit that "The Allies have suffered disaster after disaster, through tardiness in decision and in action".

It was safe to blame the late Asquith government, as morale was about to be boosted by his decisiveness and energy. In general, doubters were not to be allowed a public voice; questioning the rightness of the war would tend to lower morale and the public determination to fight on. In a report of a socialist meeting in the Steelyard at Bathgate, the speaker, casting doubt on the rightness of the war, was shouted down by a man who has lost his son in the war. How would the bereaved continue to support the war if they began to feel that their loved ones' sacrifices had been in vain?

But by 1917, there was an evident change – war weariness was first mentioned in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* in a syndicated article in August 1917, but it was evident in several articles earlier in the year, for example in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 25 May 1917:

Still the old question is asked, "How long?" How much longer must the tragedy of war continue, while precious lives are lost and all that the world values is devastated and destroyed? There is no answer to the question possible...

In Ecclesmachan, Georgina Russell was striking a different note in her verses. The following was in memory of Thomas King, killed in the Gretna disaster, and Piper Duncan McNeil, and was published in the *West Lothian Courier* on 6 July 1917:

*We watched them, through boyhood, approach manhood's dawn
Now those halcyon days seem so long, long ago:
And alas! From their ranks two bright faces have gone
While the rest, with their Master, are facing the foe.
Two years have departed, on slow, leaden feet,
Since the first to Eternity swiftly was hurled
Now our piper has followed our singer so sweet
And, perchance, they have met in that blest spirit world.*

And on 1 March 1918, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* reported:

Some of our boys are home on leave from the front this week, including at least one Military Medallist. Like most of the other boys, they don't exactly pretend to like winter campaigning, but they are "sticking it" in the old familiar way. They have the upper hand of old "Jerry", as the newest name for the enemy is pronounced.

At home too, there was a sense of weary resignation, that the war must be fought to an end and Germany completely crushed. In the words of one of the popular songs of the war, 'Keep right on to the end of the road, Keep right on to the end.' This must be 'the War to end wars'. The Reverend Alexander Mitchell's sermon (minister of Linlithgow High United Free Church) at New Year 1917, was reported in the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* of 5 January 1917, and concluded:

[The soldiers] know it, and we know it, that it would be sheer madness to conclude a peace when the battle is only half won, which would result in another great European war before many years would pass over our heads.

On 1 February 1918, the *Linlithgowshire Gazette* commented:

The whole nation desires peace, but we did not spend precious lives in this war to allow the German Government in the end to achieve its nefarious plans - and this is what would happen if we gave up or slackened in the struggle now.

And the army and the home population did 'stick it' to the end - proof that civilian morale did not break down as it did in Germany. The population knew why it was fighting, and knew why it continued to fight even in the face of the most terrible losses. The still greater tragedy was that, despite the suffering, they did not achieve the war to end wars. In twenty years, it had all to be done again.