Transcript: Q&A

Britain in the Great War

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BRITAIN IN THE GREAT WAR: Q&A

Dr Anthony Seldon:
Jeremy, while the questions are starting: if tonight on Newsnight, if you’re indeed on Newsnight tonight, you could have one politician or one general field marshal from the war on the show tonight, who would you have? And what would you ask them?

Jeremy Paxman:
Oh, the Kaiser, of course. That would be a brilliant interview. There is no one – no, there are people lower in my estimation than the Kaiser, but not many. This question of apportioning blame is a rather glib sort of game to play but I think that without German ambition, which was understandable – the British and the French flaunted their colonies – without that and particularly without the guarantee to the Austrians, I think the war might well not have happened. There would have been a conflict at some time, I think, but –

Anthony Seldon:
And if we had had an earlier-day Paxman and an earlier-day inquisitive media, would the war have been allowed to be fought in the way it was?

Jeremy Paxman:
That’s a very interesting question. Of course our values now are very different, aren’t they? Kitchener hated journalists. He banned journalists. Quite quickly actually they had accredited war correspondents but they told by and large the same story. I think there’s a lot of nonsense talked about the media really – much of it by myself. I think it’s hard to predict how a modern media would behave in those sort of circumstances because a modern media wouldn’t exist, because the values that it prizes are the values of society as a whole, which is, as I mentioned earlier, unutterably different to the society of 1914. So I don’t know. I think it would be fascinating – I think General [Douglas] Haig would have been a really interesting man to interview, because I think he’s been traduced, rather.
Question 1:
Could you say a word about how the man in the street’s attitude towards foreigners, towards Germans, changed during the First World War and how it continued afterward?

Jeremy Paxman:
I’m not sure I can say much about how it continued afterwards, but it is certainly the case -- the Germans were the largest immigrant community in London at the start of the war. I can’t remember the precise figures now, I think it’s something like two out of three bakers were German. There were lots of – I had an email last week actually from a lady whose family came over in about the 1860s. They were butchers. Unfortunately they had the name Kaiser. They were butchers in Kent, they changed their name to Key. I also had an email the same day from Roger Protz, the chap who runs the Campaign for Real Ale. He said: my family came over in the 1840s. Half of them changed their name during the First World War to Potts. We’ve not spoken to them since.

When there were particular atrocities, like the atrocities in Belgium – some of which genuinely did happen and some of which were hugely exaggerated or made up – there were attacks upon German businesses. There were large numbers of Germans interned. There was a big internment camp, for example, on the Isle of Man. There were lots of others. There were lots of Germans rounded up right at the start of the war. Osbert Sitwell, I think, recalled some being taken off to Alexandra Palace or somewhere on a bus, along the side of which was inscribed: England Needs You. He was put in command of looking after some German internees – I think he was in the Grenadiers – and he was astonished, when he was carrying out this duty, to be greeted by one of the internees saying: which table would you like tonight, sir? A lot of them were waiters, you see.

Question 2:
If you look at the First World War in the light of history, would you not agree that nature is the destroyer of proud empires?

Jeremy Paxman:
Who is that a quote from?
Question 2:
That's from me.

Jeremy Paxman:

Question 2:
Every proud empire in history has ultimately been destroyed by a war.

Jeremy Paxman:
But you said nature, didn't you?

Question 2:
Yes, nature, in human [indiscernible].

Jeremy Paxman:
Well, speak for yourself. Of course, no empire lasts forever. I can't think of one. The current American empire clearly won't last, nor will, I suspect, the Chinese one that follows it. That's the nature of empires. Does that mean nature – I suppose it does, yes. Is that all right?

Question 2:
That's all right.

Question 3:
The British economy would have been forced to produce an unprecedented amount of war materiel during that four-year period. How was the government able to influence war production without nationalization?
Jeremy Paxman:
Lots of people did, of course, in the famous phrase, very well out of the war. They could mobilize the workforce in previously – women, as I mentioned, previously the main employer was domestic service. The munitions industry was essentially – the vast bulk of the workforce were women. How did they manage to mobilize industrial production without nationalizing it? It was a quite profitable business to be in. I think there were a lot of people who did well out of it – uniforms to be made, munitions to be supplied, the rest of it. I don’t know. I’ve not actually – some of these things were effectively nationalized, some of the enterprises were effectively nationalized, but I’m not sure how current an idea it was in people’s minds. I don’t know. Sorry about that.

Of course they could appeal to patriotism too. There were reserved occupations. You did not have to serve in uniform if you were in a reserved occupation which was judged to be vital to the war effort. That made being in a reserved occupation and justifying your existence there quite attractive, I suppose. And there were simple appeals to patriotic duty. During that German spring offensive in 1918, there was a big appeal for people to work over the Easter weekend. [Winston] Churchill, who was the minister of munitions at the time, described the response as being almost embarrassing, so many people turned up and worked so hard. So there was a multiplicity of reasons, but I don’t imagine – well, it doesn’t matter what I imagine. Please.

Question 4:
We [The British Council] have just published a report on the global scale and global legacy of the First World War. I would like to invite you to comment on that, especially in the context of your mentions of the different values and perspectives of the time compared to now. Because of course today society, even within Britain, is very different. I’d like to volunteer myself as an example for what you said about family histories: I’m half-German and half-Turkish and I live here, and I suspect I have a lot of links of the same kind as you suggested earlier. But talking about the international dimension and not just Britain then, today is important.

Jeremy Paxman:
Fair enough. I hope I haven’t suggested – I don’t think I have, actually – that this was a uniquely British experience. What interests me is what it did to this country and what the impact of the war was, what our relationship was to the
war and the idea of war and the idea of being at war with a country which, in my opinion, is probably our closest neighbour in Europe, or probably anywhere. So I haven’t dealt with the aspects that you want to talk about, and you’d better find someone else to come and talk here to do so. I’m sorry. But that’s what interested me and I wouldn’t presume to comment upon what France was like in 1914 or what Germany was like in 1914. I think I know a little bit but not very much. I think knowing your limits is quite important really. Not that it’s a journalistic practice very often indulged.

**Question 5:**
There are two really interesting documentaries at the moment. One, of course, has been yours, Jeremy, and the other has been about the relationship with the royal families across Europe – that there was a link to Queen Victoria between both the Tsar and the Kaiser. I wonder what your view is on how this war ultimately impacted the relationship between us here in Britain and our view on the royal family, here and across the whole continent.

**Jeremy Paxman:**
As you know, it was the occasion for the royal family to change their name and become the House of Windsor. I think that the experience of war probably consolidated the position of the monarchy, as it undermined it in Germany. That is my hunch and what little I know about it suggests that that was the case. They battened very quickly onto the idea that they were to set an example, so the king made the interesting decision to give up drink until the war was over. There were allotments in Buckingham Palace, the vegetables grown there were sent to hospitals where the wounded were being treated. They renamed themselves. Visits to the troops all the time, hospital visits by other members of the royal family. I think that they saw, as the royal family have seen on many occasions since, that the way to secure your position is to identify with the nation rather than expecting the nation to identify with you, which was the Kaiser’s big mistake. So I think – we are pre-opinion polling here, but I think that it probably consolidated the position of the monarchy. I can’t be certain but that’s my hunch.
**Question 6:**
You have emphasized the human sufferings in the war. Inevitably, I’m thinking of Wilfred Owen’s phrase, ‘the pity of war’, by which he meant war was piteous. But a professional historian, Niall Ferguson, has claimed that it was a pity in the sense that it was a great error of modern history. I’d like to know your opinion about that.

**Question 7:**
My question is related to your point at the beginning, where you said the ‘Oh! What a Lovely War’ and ‘Blackadder’ impression, just very often completely untrue. Were there any of your own preconceptions or your own understanding of conventional wisdom about the war which were confirmed in the research in the making of the programme? And did you put in for hardship pay after the television interview with Eamon de Valera’s grandson, because he did seem extremely stiff in the interview and I wonder if he thawed out a bit off-camera.

**Question 8:**
You talked about the British people’s response to the war – they were defending themselves and their hearths. If you go to Australia or New Zealand or Canada – this is true of both the First and the Second World Wars – they weren’t fighting for their motherland or Britain, they were fighting for a concept that’s now alien to us but still very important to them then: the British Empire. That was what they were fighting for when they sacrificed more lives proportionately than we did, I think in both wars. Did you have any sense of that in looking at Britain, that they thought they were fighting for the British Empire rather than Britain?

**Jeremy Paxman:**
I did have some sense of that, and I disagree with you about the motherland. I think the term was in use and it was used explicitly in recruiting campaigns in Australia and in Canada. But the Canadian effort in particular – the Australians and New Zealanders particularly associate what happened in the Gallipoli fighting with the formation and development of their sense of national identity, so I think it was tremendously important. They did lose very large numbers of men. They were also – never mind, I won’t start rambling about it. But yes I did. Of course we forget there were Indian troops landed at
Marseilles within a month of the war starting. There were all sorts of other contingents from all over the empire that fought, or served, as the Chinese Labour Corps, for example. There were very large numbers. The motivation for the British Empire, I don’t know, it was always something of a division between different parts of the empire on that thought.

The pity of war, yes, Niall Ferguson, yes. Of course it was a pity it was fought. It would have been much better had those people not been killed in such vast numbers. But I do not believe that it was avoidable – that some sort of confrontation was not avoidable indefinitely. I think what Germany was after made war – or conflict of some kind, at some point – more or less inevitable. I’m familiar with Niall’s argument, I don’t agree with it.

Oh, Eamon de Valera – why do you say he was stiff, I thought he was a rather nice old cove. Probably younger than me. I didn’t think he was stiff. It was a bit cold and wet there, but it’s always a bit cold and wet in Ireland in winter, isn’t it? No, I didn’t feel he was particularly stiff. It is difficult, I think, it’s a very difficult question. It actually happened in the Second World War as well. I had a friend who served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, an Irishman who was torpedoed. At one point a notice appeared in the Irish Times saying that ‘friends of Mr Jimmy Robinson will be pleased to hear he’s alive and well after his very recent boating accident’. There were lots of Irishmen who served with the British forces during the First World War, as it was the opportunity for the event which is the most emblematic in the history of independent Ireland.

Anthony Seldon:
And the other part of that question was did anything stand out from either the book or the television programme that particularly surprised you.

Jeremy Paxman:
Well, life is a constant surprise.

Anthony Seldon:
Is there one thing that particularly stood out, that you learned and you didn’t know before?
Jeremy Paxman:
Writing a book or making a television series, it’s a process of accretion. What gets me out of bed in the morning is curiosity. When I find something out, I think, gosh, how interesting. Then you’re onto the next thing. So I can’t.

Anthony Seldon:
Which did you find more interesting and enjoyable and enriching: the television series or the book? Intertwined, obviously, as they were.

Jeremy Paxman:
Writing a book is a notably lonely experience, as you know. Some days when it goes well it’s like surfing, and some days when it goes badly it’s like swimming in treacle. That’s how it is. Whereas television is a collaborative exercise and there’s always someone to have a joke with, a cameraman or a sound recordist or whatever.

Anthony Seldon:
Well, it’s much to our enrichment that you both presented and wrote the series and wrote the book, and have given us such a magnificent lecture today. Just a few thanks. Thank you to Chatham House and to everyone from Chatham House who has helped make this lecture possible. Thank you to all of you very much indeed for coming, and to the questioners. Apologies to those whose questions we didn’t have time for today. But above all, thank you to Jeremy Paxman, in his incredibly busy schedule, for coming and joining us today and sharing his thoughts so generously with us, and indeed for signing his book after. Thank you very much.