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Transcript

Britain in the Great War

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Presenter, *Newsnight*, Author, *Great Britain's Great War*

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BRITAIN IN THE GREAT WAR

Dr Anthony Seldon:

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to what's going to be an absolutely riveting hour. My name is Anthony Seldon and I'm master of Wellington College, which lost a ridiculously high number of its former students in the First World War.

I have just a small number of announcements to make before we start. This is all on the record. Having had a look at you, you all look avid Twitterers, particularly in the front row; just to say that comments can be made on Twitter at #CHEvents.

Now my task is to introduce the speaker, Jeremy Paxman. I'm not going to spend any time at all introducing him because if you don't know who he is then you are probably not alive. So, Jeremy Paxman.

Jeremy Paxman:

Thank you very much, Anthony. I have no idea why this is on the record – it seems to me we're destined to have a dishonest conversation, but there we are. I was delighted to accept the invitation to come here for a very simple reason. When I started work in this odd trade that I follow, the very first telephone number that I put into my contacts book, of which I was immensely proud, was that of Chatham House, because people used to shout in the office: oh, ring up Chatham House and they'll have someone. I didn't know what Chatham House was. I've learned a little bit more since then. So it occupies a rather special place in my heart.

I'm very honoured to be in such distinguished company, because I'm just a hack. I'm not even a proper historian. It's an enthusiasm of mine and I will talk about my enthusiasm, which is about really not the battles – it's not arrows on maps. It's about what it did to this country, because my case is that this is the event that made modern Britain. If you had been a Victorian time-traveller and come back in 1914, I think you would have recognized how the society worked. If you came back after the war, say in 1924, you would not have understood this country. It was a completely changed entity.

That's my particular area of interest. The reason that I was intrigued was because it seems to me that we're now a hundred years on, at the point at which what was family lore has now become just history. Particularly, it's become history inasmuch as it's illustrated, it's illustrated in static, very often

blurry images in black and white, and we live in a world which is accustomed to seeing any event anywhere in the world in colour, probably in high definition, and in our own sitting rooms in high resolution. So it's very hard, I think, for people to get to grips with what the world was like then. We live in an age which prizes individualism. We live in an atomized kind of society where the premium is upon self-expression and self-indulgence. The people of 1914 did not grow up in that sort of world. That makes a double conceptual difficulty, I think.

I did this television series about the effect of the war on Britain and it has been quite astonishing to me. I've never done anything, good or bad, that has caused me to be so frequently accosted by people who said: thank you very much for that, I never knew. This seems to me astonishing because I think we ought to know.

When I started examining what it was that we ought to know about the First World War, I discovered quite quickly that what I thought I knew about the war wasn't really knowledge, it was prejudice. I had grown up – you can see from my venerable condition, I'm 63 years old, rather to my astonishment. I was born in 1950. I grew up in the penumbra of those beliefs about the First World War which were nurtured originally by people like Lloyd George and other critics, but which came to fruition in the 1960s – 'Oh! What a Lovely War', which is now being revived, as you know, at Stratford East. Continues then through into the 1980s. 'Blackadder', which is apparently – this was one thing that really did shock me, that it is – I'm not talking here about it being used as an illustration, a way into talking about attitudes to the war. But I discovered there were some people who thought this was fact. It's not, it's comedy. Rather good comedy, I think.

But it really appalled me, that and the assumption that the whole enterprise had been futile sacrifice. That what was being taught very often in schools was not any understanding of why people went to war, why they had the attitudes they did and why indeed we survived it and came out victorious on the other side (along with our allies, of course), but that the whole thing had been an exercise in betrayal by the ruling class of the rest of the country. This seems to me to be not true. It does, however, suit the set of prejudices that I grew up with. When I came to examine what was really happening in the First World War, as far as one could – and mercifully it was a pretty literate kind of culture so there's an absolute wealth of material: diaries, letters and the like. There is a wealth of material and you can find out. Obviously it's second-hand, there are no witnesses left alive, apart from children – there are still one

or two children who experienced the First World War alive but not many. You certainly will not get the first-hand testimony of an adult any longer.

So I set about writing this book, *Great Britain's Great War*, which later became the television series. The particular thing that set me off was this character here in the middle of this photograph. This is my great-uncle Charlie. Great-Uncle Charlie is described in the 1911 census as a 'loom overseer' in West Yorkshire. West Yorkshire had a huge textile industry. He was a working-class lad. I guess this picture is taken late 1914, early 1915. He was in that tranche of thousands and thousands of young men who joined up. He joined, as you can see from the crosses on his shoulders – on each shoulder he has a red cross. He joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. This, as I say, was probably taken sometime late 1914, early 1915, and he was dead on August the 7th, 1915, at Gallipoli.

This was a photograph that I grew up with on the wall. He was my mother's uncle, dead long before she was born, of course. But I grew up with this photograph and Uncle Charlie was in my life as sort of an absent presence, or a present absence. He was a person who had once been flesh and blood. Now my mother went out to try to find his name on the memorial out at Gallipoli. She eventually succeeded in doing so. I haven't been, I don't think I will go. I would be absolutely astonished if any of my children ever expressed an interest in going. Agreeably surprised, but I would be astonished. We are, I think, at the point where this has passed now, as I say, from family memory to history.

So Uncle Charlie joins up. If this is spring of 1915, he's dead six months after this is taken. He is almost certainly a young man who had never left his country, probably never left his county. When my mother died, we found this old cigar box which contained all the mementoes of his life that had been accumulated by Charlie's mother. They were the form informing her of his death, various medals which were given to everyone who had served in 1914 and 1915 (it was said, incidentally, to distinguish them from those who were conscripted in 1916). The dead man's penny – the brass plaque that the families of all dead men were given. This sort of stuff. I just got intrigued as to what his life was and tried to find out as much as I could about him. I thought that there's nothing unusual about his life; I bet every family in this room has got some similar story, because this was a virtually universal experience – not necessarily of death but certainly of wearing a uniform or engaging in some other form of war work. It was not unusual, and yet it seems to have slipped from our consciousness.

I'm not going to rehearse the causes of the war; this being a foreign affairs think tank, doubtless you all know much better than I do. But I like this picture because here are three ladies on the beach – I'm not exactly certain which beach it is, there's no note on the photograph. But I love it. There they are with their parasols – it hadn't been a particularly brilliant summer but they were enjoying what sunshine there was. And here's the newspaper boy behind them: 'War Declared: Official'. And they're completely oblivious to it. I think that that was symptomatic of the cast of mind of the country as a whole. People really had no idea of what the country was getting into.

There are various stories in the great myths about how people suddenly jumped for joy and were really keen to be at war. I don't think this is true. I think it is certainly the case that when the deadline passed for the Germans to get out of Belgium and therefore Britain found itself at war, there was certainly a tremendous mood of excitement. But nobody really understood what the excitement was about. So I think it's unfair to characterize this as enthusiasm for war. If you look at the accounts people have left about why they joined up, you will find little suggesting that they thought it would be a very speedy war which we would joyously enter into and whack the Jerries (or the Huns, as they were called then).

The British army was very small at the time. It was a professional army. It was a great deal more competent, man for man, than most of the continental armies, which were conscript armies. Most experience of war in the century up to 1914, or slightly under the century up to 1914, of course had been of conflicts taking place a long way away, fought by a professional army whose exploits impinged very little on the lives of people at home. It was, as I say, a well-trained army but it was very small. The initial force sent to the continent as the British Expeditionary Force at the start of the war, after the deadline had run out, started off at about 80,000. That is the projected final size of the current British army, small enough to be encompassed in Wembley Stadium. But that was, by comparison with the millions of soldiers who could be put under arms by France or Germany or Russia, a tiny number. They quickly found that they were overwhelmed and there was a catastrophic retreat, after which a dispatch was published in *The Times* informing the British people that something very serious was afoot.

The British people needed somebody – or the British government needed somebody – who could set about engineering a new army. This, you will all know of course, is Herbert Horatio Kitchener, the great imperial hero. In Margaret Asquith's famous phrase: 'terrible general, wonderful poster'. This was originally produced on the cover of a magazine called *London Opinion*.

When it was seen there, it was commandeered by the committee which was in charge of recruitment because there was an immediate realization that there would need to be a huge new army formed if there was to be any chance of defeating these massive continental armies.

Kitchener realized very early on, within days of his appointment – not a job that he wanted, he hated politicians, he hated journalists. He had actually been on a cross-Channel ferry waiting to escape to the Middle East, where he had been given a new imperial job at the time. He was pacing around the deck, unfamiliar with the convention that the Channel ferry waits for the arrival of the boat train, berating the skipper of the ferry for not having left and shouting at him to get on with it. Unfortunately, the train did arrive, the skipper waited, and on it was a messenger summoning him to London. He becomes the war secretary.

He realizes, as I say, very early on that this is a war that will require time and vast numbers of men. He predicts that the war will be won by the last million men. He also predicts that it will last years, probably about three years, he thinks.

The problem then is to raise an enormous new army. Various tactics are tried. I like this recruiting poster because these are clearly thatched cottages in the south of England and the man defending them is clearly a Scottish soldier in a kilt. So there's the simple appeal to patriotism – your country's call, isn't this worth fighting for? There's an appeal to ideas of masculinity and domestic duty: 'Women of Britain Say Go!' And there's appeal to conscience really: two children, one little girl sitting on her father's lap, a rather shifty-looking cove – 'What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?' This is an appeal to a sense of potential guilt.

And people come through in vast numbers to join up. After the publication of the so-called Mons dispatch, which reveals how the British Expeditionary Force has been thrown back, they're signing up by the tens of thousands each day. This is three young men attesting their willingness to fight. It was very easy to join an organization that it was actually terribly difficult to leave. All you had to do is be between 18 and 35, you had to be over 5'4" tall, you had to be able to inflate your chest to 34 inches. I doubt there's a person in this room who can't inflate their chest to 34 inches. Some couldn't though and they had to go into special battalions for stunted men – bantams. (Sorry if there's anyone very, very short here.) But it was dead easy to join and very hard to get out of. There was a bounty paid to the recruiting sergeant, which made it very easy for somebody to say that they were over the requisite age

and for him to wink at them and say: come back tomorrow and say it. My kids now, when they go to the pub and try to blag their way in, the question that always gets – it's dead easy to say, oh, you're over 18. It's much more difficult when they then say: what's your exact date of birth? Because everybody generally knows that, but you don't if you're faking your age. So you would wink at them and they would come back again later on. There were plenty of people who joined up under age; allegedly there were some 13, 14-year-olds. But most people joined from a place of work, and they joined in very large numbers.

What was the motivation? I think it was probably a sense of duty. I think there was a tremendous enthusiasm for joining some enterprise that your friends were joining. There was no real understanding of what was going to meet them once they crossed the Channel into France. As we all know, famously – it's the story of the war that we recall – this is what met them. It was trenches. Now trenches were not new in the First World War. They had been a feature of battlefields for some time, but generally as a temporary measure while you took cover and manoeuvred yourself to another position, or units manoeuvred themselves to another position to give them a better firing position. But they became horribly static in the First World War. This, I guess, is somewhere in Flanders. It's a sergeant of the Lancashire Regiment. I guess it's somewhere in Flanders because in Flanders the water table was pretty near the surface. This isn't actually the worse, there are some places where the water table is sort of up here. There are plenty of accounts of men drowning. Other places like the Somme, which is essentially chalky, they would drain much better, so they were a better place to be – except on that first day, and many other days actually.

So the trench became a permanent feature of the war but it was not something that was anticipated at the time, that they would become so permanent. Obviously there was a doctrinal question here. As long as the Germans were in a trench in France or Belgium or somewhere, they were on the offensive. They were on foreign soil. If you were British or French or one of the allies and you were in a trench on French or Belgian soil, you were still trying to get the enemy out. So by definition these trenches were temporary. The German ones could be very permanent and very comfortable and very deep, and were concrete-lined very often. So by and large the German trenches were a bit better than the British trenches. The British trenches were intended to be occupied temporarily, and it turned out not to be quite like that.

I think to understand what it must have been like to live in these conditions is extremely difficult. Food generally cooked further back, brought up to the front

line; by the time it got there it was cold. You were in a very small group of people. There's one description from somebody who used to be a fellow here, of how they were like – a lieutenant in a unit of men – were like survivors after a shipwreck, cast adrift. They were very small units, people formed intensely close relationships in these very squalid conditions. All the usual human functions had to be performed there.

I'm not going to quote a great deal of poetry in this talk but I will quote one poem. It's not by Sassoon or Owen or anyone, it's by AP Herbert. AP Herbert was a volunteer in the Royal Naval Division, which was rather an odd formation because lots of people felt that it was rather more British somehow to join the navy than to join the army, so there was a surplus of sailors. There was a Royal Naval Division formed which was to fight as infantry. They maintained all sorts of nautical traditions – beards, and asking for permission to go ashore when they were going on leave from the trenches. They were hated by some of the military commanders. There was a General Cameron Shute who took command of the Royal Naval Division formation in 1916, and he came on a visit to their trenches. After he'd gone, Herbert wrote this poem, which begins: 'The General inspecting the trenches / Exclaimed with a horrified shout / "I refuse to command a division / Which leaves its excreta about". / But nobody took any notice / No one cared to refute, / That the presence of shit was congenial / Compared with the presence of Shute. / And various responsible critics / Made haste to reply to his words / Observing that his staff advisers / Consisted entirely of turds. / For shit may be shot at odd corners / And paper supplied there to suit, / But a shit would be shot without mourners / If somebody shot that shit Shute'.

So these were pretty squalid places really, in which people formed intense relationships. If you think for a second about living – and people rotated through the trenches, you didn't spend the whole war in a front-line trench. You were moved from there to a second-line trench, a reserve trench and so on, and then you might well go back again. People didn't spend the whole war there but they did form intense relationships in these very difficult conditions. If you imagine eating together, going to the loo together, sleeping together – because they very often cuddled up for warmth – these were very intense relationships.

Imagine what happens if – because the life in the trenches was nocturnal as much as it was subterranean – imagine going out or seeing your best friend sent out on some sort of operation after dark, maybe to cut barbed wire or something, and he's shot. Perhaps he's lucky and dies quickly but perhaps he's unlucky and it takes some time to die, and you can hear his cries, and

then eventually they stop. And it's too dangerous for you to go out and get his body, so he remains out there. Then perhaps through a trench periscope or something you see several days later the body, and it's moving. The reason it's moving is because there are rats underneath the uniform. This is an intensity of experience that any of us would find it terribly hard to get our heads around. This changed the people who went through it. Nothing would ever be the same in their lives and nothing was ever the same in the life of the country.

By 1915, it was clear that the supply of volunteers couldn't last. I like this photograph. I only include it really because they're so young. This fellow has obviously served already at the front somewhere, he has a wound stripe down here. It's a wedding photo. But by 1915 it is clear that you cannot rely indefinitely upon a steady stream of volunteers. Sooner or later you're going to have to find a way of getting into uniform people who are not volunteering. Apart from anything else there's a moral question: why should people risk their lives in order to ensure the comfort of people who choose not to risk their lives? Where is the equity in this? There isn't any. So it's decided in late 1915 that conscription will have to be introduced. It comes in in January 1916.

Actually, I think it was conducted very humanely. It did not assume, as continental systems did, that people were automatically without a choice. If you did not wish to serve you could appear before a tribunal and you could argue your case. You could argue you were engaged in vital war work. You could argue that there were compassionate grounds on which you shouldn't serve. There were people who tried it on. There was a man in Leeds who argued that he should be exempt from military service until he completed his course of hair restoration. There were many others – all sorts of different walks of life, trades, who argued that they should be exempt, and there were plenty of people who were exempted. It is not true, in another of the First World War myths, that conscientious objectors – of whom there were about 16,000, who refused to serve full stop – it is not true that they were taken out and shot. There were no conscientious objectors shot. There were a small number of about 15 upon whom a very severe sentence was passed of death, but it was never carried out. There were no executions of conscientious objectors. I don't say it was easy for them – I don't think it was. I rather admire their heroism in going against the tide.

But the way that the system operated – and of course it was people who didn't have to fight, people with gray hair, sitting in judgment on those who were younger than them and deciding whether or not they could be exempt. There was that aspect of it that was unjust, to all appearances. But it is

eminently fairer, in my judgment, than a system which assumes you have no choice at all.

Women too joined the war effort. This is a photograph of three members of the Women's Land Army. I doubt very much that they wore these clothes other than for publicity photographs. The white coats look altogether too clean. The slouch hat was formally part of the uniform. The Women's Land Army wasn't that big; it was about 100,000 people, formed in 1917, by which time it was clear that the German tactic – in fact they were quite explicit about it. They said that they would starve Britain into submission. The German tactic was, by the use of unrestricted U-boat warfare, to starve Britain into giving up the fight. It quite nearly succeeded. We were weeks away from running out of commodities like wheat. One of the things that happened was the formation of the Women's Land Army, it was a small thing. Allotments were encouraged all over the country. Rationing, of course, was introduced.

This, again, was a huge social change. I don't think we should underestimate the significance of it. It was government saying there should be an equitable distribution of food, as government had also said there should be reasonable rates of pay, as government had also said by this stage we shouldn't allow people just to get drunk all the time. There were serious restrictions on when and where you could drink. You couldn't even buy a drink for your wife or your husband. Government was also dictating what rents people paid. Government was now involved in almost every area of life, because by now the war had dragged on for three years.

People had got accustomed to the sight of wounded men. This man has lost both his legs, this man has lost his left leg only. There were huge advances in medicine and there were huge advances in the idea that the state owed a duty to those – this was the beginning of the military contract, I suppose, or early days of the military contract – the state owed a duty to those who had been damaged in its defence. This is a serious change, I think, because previously, before the war, you can read plenty of accounts of beggars on the streets, very often figures in red military coats who were disabled veterans from the professional army. But with the advent of a civilian army, massive numbers of casualties, you get a change of attitude, because there is no distinction between these men and all the civilians in the country. They just happen to be wearing uniforms. You even got a uniform, incidentally, if you'd been wounded. This is the wounded soldier's uniform.

This is a photograph taken right at the end of the war, of a group of children clambering aboard a captured German artillery piece in St James's Park, just

down the road. The story of the end of the war is actually pretty quickly told, I think. There was a huge German offensive in the spring of 1918, which was really a last-gasp thrust by the Germans, which very nearly succeeded and then faltered at the last minute. The Germans had thrown everything into it, including young men previously considered unfit for military service, who had been sent to the front wearing Berlin police helmets because there were no military helmets left. It was do or die, and it failed at the last, it stalled. There was then a massive Allied counterattack, and in the space of a hundred days the German attack was essentially rolled up. The war, as you all know, ended with the armistice on 11 November.

There was pretty unbridled celebration throughout the country and lots of scenes of bad behaviour, no doubt. But you can see from this – I didn't notice this before, this is a wolf cub, or a boy scout. Even children had been involved in this war effort. There were designated roles for boy scouts and their counterparts. Everybody had been involved in this war, and at the end of it was inconceivable that Britain would revert to the sort of governance it had had before the war began. At the start of the war about four adults in twenty could vote. After the war there was not proper universal suffrage, because it wasn't equally spread between men and women and not even every male had the vote, but the franchise was hugely extended. Then shortly after that, of course, you get the first Labour government. A matter of some debate whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, even now.

But the whole quality and texture of the country had entirely changed. At the end of it you get, I think, a recognizably modern society. It had come at the cost of about three-quarters of a million British dead – but very large numbers were not dead. About 5.5 million men returned from life in the services and had to find a way of picking up the pieces afterwards. Partly they did this by attempting to resume the jobs which had been performed by women during the course of the war, but the position of women in society had changed hugely. The main employer of women before the war was domestic service. By the end of the war it had been made patently clear that women could do all manner of jobs that had previously been reserved for men. This didn't stop men from trying to claim their jobs back and it is also true that many of the promises made to men while they were in uniform – that there will be homes fit for heroes, there will be full employment and so on – these promises were not met. But just because a politician breaks his word doesn't mean he didn't mean it at the time he said it, and I think there was a new kind of social contract formed as a consequence of this war, about which we seem to have largely forgotten now.

The question has been raised in the last six months: what's the appropriate way of marking this centenary? I find this quite a difficult question to answer. There was a lot of guff talked about the misapplication of history. There was a lot of guff talked about comparisons with the diamond jubilee celebrations. I find it a difficult question to answer how we should mark this. I don't know how any of the commemorative events will turn out. On the whole, I'm rather in favour of small initiatives from schools. It's very interesting, you've probably all been to those Commonwealth war grave cemeteries, but it's very striking that clearly already teachers are setting as projects in classes the task of identifying a particular soldier, tracing his life and then going to see where he ended up. They're rather moving. There's a lot of not particularly good poetry written by the pupils, usually with the theme 'what a terrible waste'. But it indicates that there are people still trying to make a connection between this incredibly different life we lead now and the life led by those men then.

As to the specific mechanisms, I don't know. I prefer quiet to martial music. But it seems to me that this was such an important event that it behoves us at least to remember what these men and women and children suffered at that time, and the enormous debt that we owe them. Thank you.

Anthony Seldon:

Thank you very much to Jeremy Paxman for giving a brilliant talk. His equally brilliant book will be on sale and Jeremy going to stay on to sign it after the talk.