

Norman Angell on the Outbreak of War in August 1914

Articles by Roger T. Stearn and David Rubinstein in the *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, Vol. 62, No 1, 2010, pp. 49 – 86, discussed British Quaker opposition to militarism in the years before the outbreak of the Great War and Friends' responses to the outbreak of hostilities. In this issue we reproduce an article given prominence in *The Friend* published on 21 August 1914. Its author was a non-Friend, Norman Angell, and the article had appeared previously in the political journal *The Nation*. A week earlier *The Friend* had given publicity to Quaker responses to the outbreak of war as expressed at Meeting for Sufferings. Now it turned to an avowed secularist and self-labelled pacifist (*sic*) to express anti-war arguments in political terms and language. That decision is interesting in its own right but the article also expresses an anti-war case in terms that remain relevant to this day.

Ralph Norman Angell Lane was born in Holbeach, Lincolnshire in 1872. Throughout his adult life he campaigned internationally for peace and co-operation between nations. He did so not so much on ethical, moral or religious grounds but on economic and common sense terms. His case was set out in *The Great Illusion* in 1909. After 1918, Norman Angell continued to work for peace. He was briefly a Labour MP and was knighted in 1931. His work as a peacemaker was recognised when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933.

Peter Smith

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THE UNSOUND FOUNDATIONS

*We print this week, at special request, and by permission of the Editor of the NATION, an excellent article by Norman Angell – which appeared in that journal a week ago. It seems to us that the present war has abundantly confirmed some of Norman Angell's first*

*principles and we are glad to do anything to spread a knowledge of his views.*

All other speculations as to the causes of this catastrophe, or lessons to be drawn from it, must take into account this central and pivotal fact: that the men of Europe have not yet learned so to organise their society as to make their conduct obey their intention. We are all of one mind to do one thing, and we all do the exact reverse. We are slaves and puppets of forces which make our conduct, not something which our minds and consciences have settled upon, but something as divorced from moral responsibility and human choice as the bending of the growing corn before the wind.

This fact is most generally cited as demonstrating the inevitability of war: as proving that men have no choice. It only proves, of course, that so far men have failed to lay even the foundations of their society aright.

It is not in this present case even a matter of uncontrollable elemental passion. There is no passion. A Chauvinist journalist writes of it as "a war without hate", and all first-hand testimony as to feeling in France and Germany is to the effect that the millions are going submissively, unresistingly, to kill and be killed for some cause concerning which they have little feeling and less understanding. Nor is it a question of the collision of two rights. The general population does not know in all this tangle on which side right lies. So that, in simple fact, we have a population of 350 million souls, the immense majority of whom – and by that I do not mean something more than half, but more nearly a proportion represented by 349,900,000 as against the 350,000,000 – were in favour of peace. And all these millions who wanted peace have gone to war. Everybody has gone to war. The action which we did not intend we have taken. The action we did intend, we have not taken.

This essential helplessness of men, their failure to have formed a society which can carry out their intention, goes a great deal deeper than mere political machinery. It would be easy to show, of course, that in our own country, in some respects the

most democratic in Europe, the determining factor of policy has been the secret action of three or four men, incurring, without popular sanction, without the nation knowing to what it was committed, obligations involving the lives of tens of thousands and the destiny of our Empire. We find that we have obligations of "honour" of which not one man in a hundred thousand was a week ago aware - obligations which, indeed, we had been assured solemnly did not exist. The particular political contrivance which makes that possible may, perhaps later, be changed, if, after the welter into which we are entering is over, sufficient civilisation is left to us. The more superficial aspects of the trouble we may be able to change, unless the improvement of Parliamentary institutions in Europe becomes something which the quite possible development of this war in the direction of a Slav hegemony of Europe places outside practical politics.

But one must look for the prime cause beyond the mere defects of machinery: in the defects of an education which makes it impossible for the mass to judge facts save in their most superficial aspect, or to think of war as other than a jolly football match: which also makes it impossible for the average man to keep two co-related facts in view at the same time. In all this business, the average man has overlooked so capital a fact as the predominating part to be played by the Russian autocracy manipulating 150,000,000 of peasants, at the real head, it maybe of 200,000,000, in control of a country impregnable by its bulk, much more resistant to the paralysis of war than more developed nations, largely hostile to Western conceptions of political and religious freedom. This fact is obscured because another fact, the alleged menace of Germany, has taken hold of the public mind. Yet even our present public is capable of realising that a country of 65,000,000, highly civilised, wedged in between hostile States, with a culture that has contributed in the past so much to civilisation, racially allied to ourselves and with moral ideas resembling our own, with a commercial and industrial life that is dependent upon an orderly and stable Europe, is necessarily less of a menace than the Slav hegemony.

But the collective mind as it exists in our age can only see one such fact at a time: in the Crimean War we saw Russian barbarism

but not Turkish; in 1914 we can see German barbarism but not Russian. The first step to a better condition in Europe will be some demonstration enabling the collective mind to seize upon a truth so wide and embracing as to render the eclipse of minor facts of little practical importance. Such a demonstration might come with the collapse of credit and industry dragging with it so much of the structure of civilisation, thus making visible the essential unity of European civilisation and the futility of that struggle for purely political domination, which the present war constitutes. A war which the great mass certainly did not desire is accepted passively as inevitable because parties representing the protection of old privileges, attached to an older form of society, can appeal to the momentum of old political conceptions so intimately associated with ideas as to the prepondering need of military power and political domination.

And there is this curious psychological fact. The parties which may be termed the parties of ideas, seem to show less capacity for ready movement and effective action in imposing their point of view than do the parties composed of men who have simply taken over old prejudices. The military and chauvinist elements in Parliament and in the press are, numerically perhaps, in a minority. But their effectiveness in propaganda, in the presentation of their case, has in this crisis been greater than that shown by their opponents. Take the incidents of the last week or two. As soon as the possibility of war became evident, forward sections of the Opposition carried on, with the help of the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* and the allied papers, what was in fact a war propaganda with "a kick and a punch", as the Americans would call it, that swept the inert mass of the country to the point at least of "accepting the inevitable". At that early stage a move was made among small groups on the anti-war side to resist this propaganda with an equal "kick and punch"; but immediately considerations of "not being controversial", "not alienating X, Y or Z", began to paralyse, to some extent at least, the clear, downright expression of opinion hostile to intervention. There seemed to be no general realisation on the peace side that the danger was desperate, that we were on the edge of a volcano; that the war party were not hampered by considerations of "not embarrassing

the Government"; and of not being "too controversial". There was thus created a situation in which all the psychological momentum which goes for so much in these things was on the side of war, while the forces which might have been ranged on the side of peace were in large part inert or disorganised.

The instance is only worth noting at this early stage after the catastrophe, as bearing upon what the attitude of democrats and pacifists must be if we are to salve anything from the wreck. If such a case for peace as that which this week's situation presented cannot win to itself the element of pugnacity and fight which are put into the opposite case, cannot redirect those elements of human nature to its own cause, then it is incapable of grappling with the problems which will confront it in the years that face us. We who favour peace have suffered in the past from the general impression that good intentions and high aspirations would in some way atone for the absence of the humbler virtues of technical efficiency in the method and management of propaganda, in the direction and control of the fighting forces.

Perhaps this catastrophe will help us to realise the magnitude of the problem which faces us. Peace is not a section of certain social problems which we have to solve, not one among many. It is the basis of the whole democratic and social problem. Our schemes of social reform must now be shelved. Perhaps they will wait for a generation, perhaps longer. The efforts of many years of social endeavour will be nullified because, instead of so marshalling all the forces of reform as to make them in some measure all parts of the army of peace, we have conceived of anti-war propaganda as a separate and limited task. The problem of peace is neither more nor less than the problem of so laying the foundation of civilised society that a stable and secure superstructure becomes possible. It is all one general interdependent problem. Constructive social work depends upon making peace secure; peace depends upon an educated democracy; the military organisation of states is in the long run fatal to democracy; if democracy is to survive, the general War problem must find solution.

In so far as that problem is one of change in ideas – and it is mainly that – it is essential that the old fallacies concerning the place and efficacy of force and the nature of political power should not merely be relegated to the background by the preoccupation of the public with other things, but so undermined as to be destroyed. If the old ideas are definitely to pass from politics, a large body of the public must see fairly clearly how and why the arguments that supported those ideas are false. Failing this, it will always be possible to revive the old ideas by some incident like that through which we have passed. The importance of securing the realisation of certain economic and material truths is not the hope of dissuading men from going to war because their bank account would suffer, but of showing that the interdependence of the modern world has made the whole conception of society as a conglomeration of rival States an absurdity, an impossible foundation for our work in the world. What is now happening to the credit system of the world is important in this; that it is a very visible demonstration of the unity of mankind, of the need for confidence and co-operation, if States are to fulfil those functions for which they were created.

*Norman Angell*