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Citizenship (Great Britain)

By Nicoletta F. Gullace

World War I had a profound impact on concepts of citizenship. Not only did hosts of people find themselves under new sovereignty at the end of the war, but many individuals had to contend with the experience of statelessness or redefinition as “enemy aliens” in countries where they had lived for decades. Patriotism, however, opened up new ways for previously disenfranchised groups to lay claim to the rights of citizenship and British women, as the following article shows, were particularly adept at drawing attention to their own war service to make a more general claim for that elusive signifier of liberal citizenship – the vote.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Patriotic Women Deserve the Vote](#)
- [3 Conscientious Objectors](#)
- [4 The “Soldiers’ Vote”](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

World War I brought issues of [citizenship](#) to the fore in a variety of ways. Not only did [empires collapse](#), leaving a multitude of peoples vying to redefine their place in the “nation”, but in liberal countries that believed they were fighting a war for “democracy,” the relationship of the citizen to the state became equally fraught. Citizenship is the legal recognition of an individual’s membership in a sovereign state. Yet while the liberal states going to war against the German Empire were quite clear

about the obligation of their citizens to serve, those citizens themselves began to question why this service did not naturally confer upon them a series of rights, which were often curtailed by gender, race, class or domestic status. At this period in time, during the height of the women's suffrage movement, the vote became the primary symbolic signifier of liberal citizenship in the minds of a disenfranchised would-be electorate that was asked to sacrifice lives and loved ones in the name of democracy.

The case of [Great Britain](#) is particularly revealing of the way in which patriotic service opened up unexpected avenues for previously disenfranchised men and women to lay claim to the rights of electoral citizenship. When the question of franchise reform was raised in 1916, [suffragists](#) seized the opportunity to argue that women had served their country as valiantly as men. And for the first time, the majority of men in [Parliament](#) seemed convinced by their arguments. The Representation of the People Bill (1918) was the broadest Reform Bill in British history, enfranchising female householders over age thirty, while vastly broadening the male electorate through a liberalization of residency requirements. Ironically, younger women who had worked in munitions factories were left out of the Bill due to concerns about a predominantly female electorate. Yet, in keeping with the Bill's patriotic rationale, [conscientious objectors](#) were stripped of the parliamentary vote for seven years after the war. Furthermore, the rights of naturalized [aliens](#), particularly those from enemy states, were encroached upon and curtailed during and after the war. The British case reveals the way in which World War I introduced broad new notions of patriotic citizenship that would re-frame older qualifications for political enfranchisement.

Patriotic Women Deserve the Vote

The Great War radically transformed citizenship in Britain by making patriotism, rather than sex or property, the fundamental measure of a person's worthiness to vote. When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, the women's suffrage movement split between [pacifists](#), who opposed the war, and patriotic feminists, who regarded war as an opportunity for women to demonstrate their worthiness for the vote. While the Women's Freedom League and some other organizations remained steadfast to the cause of [pacifism](#), both the Women's Social and Political Union, the organization of the militant Pankhursts, [Emmeline Pankhurst \(1858-1928\)](#) and [Christabel Pankhurst \(1880-1958\)](#), and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the "constitutionalists" under the leadership of [Millicent Garrett Fawcett \(1847-1929\)](#), threw their energy into patriotic support of the war effort despite some dissent from pacifists within the movements. As more and more men were needed in the war, women increasingly stepped into industrial jobs, support roles, and military auxiliary duties that liberated men for the front. Most dramatically, the NUWSS supported medical and hospital units that brought women into combat zones as [nurses](#), ambulance drivers, and doctors, allowing suffragists to claim that women, too, risked their lives for their country.

Conscientious Objectors

By 1915, the manpower needs of the army engendered a debate over conscription, as “shirkers” – men who had failed to enlist under the voluntary system – were excoriated in the [press](#) and on the street, many receiving white feathers of cowardice to shame them into enlistment. A conscription bill passed at the end of 1915, ending the manpower crisis but creating a new class of social pariah, the conscientious objector. While most liberals had conceded the need for conscription, others had insisted upon preserving the right of an individual to refuse to serve on religious or conscientious grounds. The public loathing of “Conshies” was overwhelming and Christabel Pankhurst did not let the opportunity to capitalize on this mood slip by, noting that cowardly men and naturalized aliens could vote while patriotic British women were excluded from the franchise.

The “Soldiers’ Vote”

In 1916, Sir [Edward Carson \(1854-1935\)](#) called for a bill that would re-enfranchise soldiers, some of whom had lost their votes because of complex residency requirements that predicated exercise of the franchise on the possession of a stable domicile. Carson, a conservative anti-suffragist, unwittingly opened the floodgates of franchise reform with his call for a “soldiers’ vote.” Liberals pointed out that workmen, who toiled in heavy industry and munitions, were also laboring for their country and had lost the vote when they travelled to distant munitions centers. Women’s suffrage societies pointed out that women were performing the same industrial jobs as enfranchised men and argued that women, too, needed to be recognized for their service to their country. As the Representation of the People Bill was debated in parliament, it took shape as the most far-reaching Reform Bill in British history, awarding the vote on the basis of patriotic service, rather than simply on sex, property and age.

The Bill not only re-enfranchised soldiers who had lost their votes by moving, but enfranchised *all* soldiers who had served at the front, including boys as young as nineteen. The “military service franchise” of the Bill also included women who had served abroad as military nurses, conceding the idea that women could serve the military needs of their country. In addition to soldiers, munitions workers and other men whose jobs required them to move were re-enfranchised or enfranchised for the first time, while women over thirty, who were householders or married to householders, received the vote. Most significantly perhaps, conscientious objectors were disenfranchised for a period of seven years after the war. Only valiant efforts by parliamentary liberals prevented this measure from being permanent.

Conclusion

Scholars have dwelled upon the fact that women over thirty, rather than younger women who shouldered the most war work, were the ones to receive the vote. Yet the introduction of the age and property qualification for women was a political compromise to stabilize the vast new electorate, to reward the mothers of soldiers, and to prevent the female electorate from outnumbering the male

one, a discrepancy only heightened by the casualties of war. For all its limitations and inequities, the Representation of the People Bill of 1918 was the broadest Reform Act in British history, adding more than twice as many voters to the electorate as any other franchise reform by giving the vote to 5 million men and nearly 9 million women who would have been ineligible to vote before.^[1]

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Notes

1. ↑ See Gullace, Nicoletta F.: 'Blood of Our Sons'. Men, Women and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War, New York 2001 and McCrillis, Neal R.: The British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage. Popular Conservatism, 1918-1929, Columbus 1998.

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