

Executed: what were the principles for which Edith Cavell lived and died?

CYNTHIA COCKBURN 4 August 2014

Nurse Edith Cavell was shot by a German firing squad in 1915. The words '*For King and Country*' are inscribed on her monument in London, but so too are her own words, '*Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone*'. Cynthia Cockburn explores this contradiction.

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Today, 4 August 2014, the media will be consumed by commemorations of the entry of Britain into the First World War. A service will be held tonight in Westminster Abbey, the last candle snuffed out at 11 pm, the very moment the government declared war on Germany. During the last few months, as this date approached, some of us have feared the memorialising of the First World War might feature triumphalism. That fear has proved unfounded. The crude facts of the war itself, overwhelming in their horror, have inhibited glorification. The dominant mood in authoritative speeches and in the media has rather been one of respect for the '[courage, toil and sacrifice](#)' those who paid the price. Nonetheless, what the memorialisation has become a platform for is *nationalism*. More subtle, less inflammatory - but nonetheless dangerous.

Consider what the dead are represented as having bought with the price they paid. In the hindsight of the memorialisers, the war was fought for democracy and freedom. David Cameron, [reopening](#) the refurbished Imperial War Museum on 17 July, deplored that 'too many have cast it as a pointless war'. He reminded his audience that it had been necessary 'to prevent the domination of Europe by one power: to defend the right of a small country - Belgium - to exist'.

Though it is the German attack on Belgium that is signalled by the date August 4, on the larger scale the war was fought for world dominance

between rival empires. On the one hand the British had authority over one-fifth of the world's land-mass and one-quarter of its people. On the other the Austro-Hungarian empire held sway over large expanses of eastern and southern Europe, and the German Reich had gained colonies in the 19th century scramble for Africa. Also in play on the world stage were the Russian and the Ottoman Empires. The rivalry was also between capitalist structures. The late 19th and early 20th centuries had seen the growth of mega-corporations such as US Steel, J.P.Morgan, Siemens and AEG competing for domination of resources and markets. A significant source of profits was states' massive expenditure on armaments in the years preceding the war.

A certain sensitivity to anti-colonial sentiment today seems to have impeded a revival of pride in the victorious British empire that narrowly defeated its rivals in the 1914-18 conflict. Nonetheless, what is being widely expressed in the commemorative discourse is pride in 'nation'. David Cameron in his [speech](#) at the Imperial War Museum, announcing an expenditure of £50 million to 'make this centenary a truly national moment' said 'I want a commemoration that captures our national spirit' in a manner similar to the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

However, today's peace movements, including [Women in Black](#) against War to which I belong, are saying that this is no time for nationalism. The cost of that terrible war was paid by people of every colour and every name on every continent. The punitive peace terms imposed by the victors led to a surge of nationalism in Germany and Italy that gave rise to the Second World War. The defeated Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires were dismembered into a multitude of nation states. Nationalism has been our nemesis ever since. It continues to put democracy, inclusion and peace beyond reach.

Women in Black, an international network, has active groups in many cities of the world. Every Wednesday evening our London group is accustomed to gather at a spot near St. Martin in the Fields Church, near Trafalgar Square, and stand for one hour in silent vigil for peace with justice.

Of some poignancy, particularly on this date of August 4, is the site of our vigils: we stand around the plinth of the memorial to [Edith Cavell](#), a nurse commemorated for having been tried for treason by the German military authorities during the First World War, and executed by firing squad. As I

stand there, my shoulders to the cold stone of the monument, I find myself puzzling over two facts that seem to me in stark contradiction. Here is Edith Cavell, heroised by the British authorities for having forfeited her own life to save the lives of British soldiers from the enemy. Indeed inscribed above her head on the monument are the words *For King and Country*. Yet - what we know of Edith Cavell suggests a very different truth. The reality is that she defied British war policy and succoured the enemy. What's going on here?

In 1914, Edith Cavell, then in her late forties, was a nurse in Brussels. She had been practising nursing in Belgium for seven years already, and was by now a successful professional, publishing a nursing journal, *L'Infirmière*, and running a clinic with training programmes for nurses who would work in Belgian hospitals, schools and kindergartens. During July that year she [travelled home to Norwich](#) for a holiday with her widowed mother.

Europe was under growing threat of war in these summer months. Everyone could see it coming. Austria-Hungary and Serbia were in conflict by late July. Germany demanded passage through neutral Belgium to stage an invasion of France. Belgium refused, re-asserting its neutrality, and on 31 July mobilized its defence forces.

Alert to the news, back home in Norfolk, Edith Cavell packed her bags to go back to her job. She [stated](#), 'At a time like this I am more needed than ever'. Deaf to the argument of friends and family, and clearly untouched by any sense of loyalty to 'her' nation, she returned to Brussels on 3 August, the day that Germany declared war on France. The following day, 4 August, they declared war on Belgium, and Britain in turn declared war on the German Empire. That was the day Edith Cavell unpacked her holiday clothes, put on her nurse's uniform and quietly renewed her work in a Belgian clinic.

As she must have foreseen, within two weeks the Belgian government had fallen and abandoned Brussels to the German forces. Her clinic became a Red Cross facility. She cared without distinction for all who needed nursing care - Belgians, Germans of the occupying forces, and others. In the autumn, the 'others' began to include some injured British soldiers and, as well as nursing them clandestinely, she put them in touch with Belgian activists organizing an escape route from the occupied country. When this was discovered by the German authorities Cavell was arrested, tried for

treason and, on 15 October 1915, after some weeks in prison, executed by firing squad.

The British government recognized this incident as a propaganda windfall. Wellington House, the [British War Propaganda Bureau](#), set about honouring Edith Cavell as an English patriot, martyred by the national enemy. Cavell's remains were returned to Britain and a [state funeral](#) held at [Westminster Abbey](#). The authorities wished to bury her there, but the family refused, and took her coffin home to the village of [Swardeston](#), in Norfolk, where her father had been vicar. Many years later, Rev Phillip McFadyen, a subsequent vicar of Swardeston, would write of the manipulative way Cavell's execution had 'been used to sway neutral opinion against Germany and eventually helped to bring the USA into the war'. He [reports](#) that propaganda around her death caused voluntary military enlistment to double for eight weeks after it was announced.

What would Edith Cavell herself have made of all this? Curiously, on her statue in London, in contradiction to that phrase *For King and Country* inscribed above her head, her own words, with very different import, appear on the plinth beneath her feet. They were spoken to a chaplain the night before her execution: *Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone*. Cavell is clearly referring here, not to her assistance to British escapees but to the fact that she nursed German war-injured. The statement appears to be a sharp rebuff to the British government, who nonetheless paid for the stone on which it is carved.

An apocryphal story has it that [Dick Sheppard](#), the well-respected pacifist Anglican priest, vicar of St.Martin in the Fields, intervened to get Cavell's words carved there. Coming out of his vicarage one day, at 6 St.Martin's Place, just a few yards from the site at which the monument was being erected, he peered beneath the tarpaulin covering the half-finished statue. Shocked to see the inscription *For King and Country*, he protested to the authorities that they betrayed Cavell's pacifist and humanitarian values, and insisted that her own words be added.

Patriarchy and nationalism are deeply intertwined in this story. In the exploitation of Edith Cavell for 'England' a central trope was her womanhood. She was portrayed, like innocent Belgium, as the victim of a rapacious monster. Interestingly, the German Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Alfred Zimmermann, made the following statement about Cavell

to the press on behalf of the German government.

It was a pity that Miss Cavell had to be executed, but it was necessary. She was judged justly... It is undoubtedly a terrible thing that the woman has been executed, but consider what would happen to a State, particularly in war, if it left crimes aimed at the safety of its armies to go unpunished because committed by women.

The period following the First World War was one of nation-making for a new world order. It was simultaneously a [reaffirmation of patriarchy](#). It is symptomatic that the Versailles Treaty of 1919 did not make the vote for women a condition of the peace. Furthermore, it denied women the right to their own national identity, regardless of that of their husband: fifteen European nations introduced new legislation annulling a woman's nationality on marriage to a foreigner.

Standing around Edith Cavell's statue this week we shall be commemorating not her 'patriotism', but her professionalism as a nurse and her courageous refusal, in sailing back to her clinic in Belgium, to stick with her 'side' in the conflict of masculine nations.