

First world war 100 years on



Peace campaigners protest at official commemorations of first world war

Anti-war vigils and demonstrations by pacifists emphasise that 'route to war was not scripted: there are always choices'

- Ben Quinn and Richard Norton-Taylor
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Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn addresses those at the No Glory in War rally in Parliament Square, London, to commemorate the millions killed in the first world war. Photograph: Lee Thomas/Zuma Press/Corbis

Wearing a Tommy's helmet and with a placard around his neck emblazoned with the words of first world war veteran Harry Patch, "War is nothing better than legalised mass murder," Chris Knight was in no doubt that public sentiment was on the side of those gathering near Parliament on Monday to express their opposition to the official commemorations of the conflict's centenary.

"I think that we do have the country with us, and the government are going to have problems, for example, when it comes to the war's Christmas truce, when they will try to conceal the fact that it was fact a mutiny by ordinary British and Germany troops," said Knight, a retired anthropology professor and political activist whose father was one of the second world war's Desert Rats, and whose grandfather served in the first world war.

Gathering in Parliament Square under the bronze gaze of a statue of Field Marshal Jan Smuts, Knight and others were among various leftwing activists, pacifists and others who joined in events designed to provide an alternative take on the centenary.

The Parliament Square gathering, organised by the No Glory campaign, which is closely associated with the Stop the War movement, was addressed by figures including the Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn, who read Keir Hardie's anti-war speech of 1914, and supported in abstentia by Carol Ann Duffy, whose poem *The Last Post* was read aloud by the writer AL Kennedy.

Speakers, who made way for musical contributions including a Turkish folk lament, included the historian Neil Faulkner, who sought to link the Great War to present-day conflicts, telling a crowd of about 150 people: "The first world war created the Middle East of today."

Earlier in the day, an anti-war vigil mounted separately by the First World War Peace Forum, including Pax Christi, the Quakers, and the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) was mounted on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields church in London's Trafalgar Square.

"The route to war was not scripted in advance: there were always choices and different possible endings", was their message 100 years after Britain declared war on Germany.

Bruce Kent, the veteran CND campaigner, was among the scores taking part in the vigil.

So, too was Norman Kember, emeritus professor of biophysics at Barts hospital who was freed by the SAS after being abducted in Iraq in 2005. "I am glad in the media there is no sense of celebration," he said. "People realise what a tragedy it was."

Albert Beale, PPU spokesman, said: 'The main problem is the hypocrisy of the official ceremonies – [mourning] with crocodile tears." He urged people to commit themselves to renounce war in the future rather than just denounce those of the past.

Kent said he was delighted that opposition to the first world war had been able to show itself "amongst all the current artificial nostalgia".

A smaller vigil by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom on Monday stood by the site of Kingsway Hall in central London with representatives of a number of anti-war women's organisations, already active in the suffragette movement, who delivered a Mediation Appeal to 10 Downing Street on 4 August 1914 on behalf of 12 million women.

Lydia Meryll said the causes of wars, including inequality and the scarcity of resources, had to be confronted. She was dressed as Margaret Ashton, Manchester's first female councillor, whose portrait was banned by the city council in the 1920s because of her opposition to the first world war.

The vigil was "to draw attention to the activities of women who felt so strongly that war and militarism was not the solution to conflicts", said the league's Katrina Gass.

The league later delivered a petition to Downing Street making the case for non-violent alternatives to conflict. "Sadly the advocates of peace struggle to be heard against the din of those who beat the drums of war and sell arms to both sides in conflicts," said the petition addressed to David Cameron.