

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
"THE GREAT WAR AND ENGLISH STUDIES"

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, DHAKA UNIVERSITY

18 – 19 December, 2014

Muzaffar Ahmed Auditorium, Social Sciences Faculty

THE GREAT WAR

A Distant View

KAISER HAO

How ironical, this use of the epithet "great" for things horrible. "The Great War", "The Great Plague of 1665.", "The Great Earthquake of San Francisco." We have "The Great Calcutta Killing". But we Bangladeshis are hard to impress: the only event so far to observe the centenary of the start of The Great War here, as far as I know, is the exhibition of photographs of colonial troops in the conflict, mounted by the Alliance Francaise. Our history departments have other great things to think about. We take a distant view of the war; after all it happened a hundred years back, thousands of miles away.

Not as many Indians took part in it as in the other world war, which also brought the theatres of war close to home. When the country's major public university organises a conference on the subject, it is in the Department of English, and even there, I'm told, not without having to overcome murmurs of dismay. Specialists in ELT (English language Teaching) can't relate to anything literary or historical or philosophical; younger literature teachers are obsessed with the buzz words of the moment: it was "Diaspora" the other day, today it may be "Ecological Criticism", or is it "Transgender Studies"? And yet, the very discipline of English (which does not mean

ELT) owes its rise largely to the Great War, as do so many other things that constitute, for good or ill, the world we call modern.

The very word "modern" implies valorisation of change. Things used to be like that; but now they are different; the new is modern. "Modern" in fact is a modern word, coming into use after the end of the medieval era in Europe and the birth of the Renaissance. One order ending and another beginning evokes the notion of apocalypse, which now acquired a secular historiographic significance.

Darwinian evolutionary theory, Marxian economic philosophy, among other intellectual trends generated a ferment of apocalyptic ideas

in the nineteenth century. Growing tension following Germany's unification and meteoric economic development led to presentiments of an impending conflict, and futuristic popular fiction depicted an Anglo-German war. What unfolded after the assassination of the Austrian archduke is therefore the chronicle of a war foretold. It came to be seen as the long-feared apocalypse.

What makes the Great War extraordinary is the intensity and duration of the conflict and the extent of its consequences. Not since the Trojan War have massive armies been locked in such a long-drawn conflict. Nor has any other war since inspired such an outpouring of literary and artistic works.

That is not all. Aspects of the modern world that we take for granted had their origin in wartime developments. The intelligence services, for instance, became powerful because of the war; both MI5 and MI6 were born during the war. Conscription was introduced for the first time in Britain. Passports became de rigueur because governments wanted to control the movement of people.

The fallout wasn't restricted to Europe. In fact, the Great War affected a larger area of land in the Middle East and around Asia Minor. The debacle of Turkey led to the creation of the nation-states we find in the Middle East today. It led to the promotion of Jewish immigration

into Palestine. The Balkans provided another area for map-making exercises. These are developments that directly impinge on our lives.

The Great War, then, was the modern apocalypse. But one should ask at this point if it was the Great War by itself that played this role. I suggest that the Great War is inseparable from the Second World War. It is a truism that the uncertain and unfair peace that was imposed on the Central Powers eventually led to the Second World War. If we examine the ramifications of the effects of these two wars we will see that together they brought into being the world we live in.

The writer is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

Impact on Nazrul

NIJAZ ZAMAN

In mid-1917, the World War was raging in Europe and in the Middle East. The war seemed far from Raniganj, where an eighteen-year-old school boy at Searsole Raj H.E. School was preparing for his send-up exams. But instead of giving his exams, sometime in August or September 1917, Kazi Nazrul Islam joined the newly raised 49 Bengal. With a few hundred other Bengalis, he travelled all the way across India to join his regiment at Karachi. Two battalions of 49 Bengal were sent to the Mesopotamian front, but Nazrul remained at Karachi, being promoted to lance naik and then havildar. After the war ended in 1918, the regiment was demobilised and Nazrul returned to Calcutta in March or April 1920.

Though Nazrul spent only two and a half years in Karachi, they were crucial years. His stay in the army exposed him to war, but also to what was happening in the war zone. Army life, paradoxically, gave him the leisure to read and write. He subscribed to Bangla journals from Kolkata and also sent poems and stories to these journals. The young man, who had written songs and dramatic pieces for a *leta* group based on

myths and legends, now found inspiration in real-life events. The war gave him matter for several short stories – some real, some highly romanticised. His experience in the army also gave him matter for his first novel, *Bandhon Hara*, about a soldier-poet very like himself and even called "Nuru" – Nazrul's nickname. Though in *Bandhon Hara*, Nuru goes to Mesopotamia to fight for the British, Nazrul would be writing much of his life against the British. Like many in India, he saw Kamal Ataturk as the symbol of a new country which had become independent. The socialist ideas of the revolution in Russia would inspire Nazrul to write his powerful poems of equality. The revolutionary poems of Nazrul are also indebted to the martial tunes that he heard as soldier. Nazrul, like the western poets of WWI, was a soldier-poet, but without the despair of Wilfred Owen or the frustration of the soldier depicted by Ernest Hemingway. With "Bidrohi," Kazi Nazrul Islam became the "rebel poet," but it is quite possible that without his experience as a soldier-poet this poem might never have been written.

The writer retired Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka and Advisor, Department of English, Independent University.



Mother and child wearing gas masks, French countryside, 1918. (Bibliotheque nationale de France)

Men of Colour in the White Man's War

SHAMSA MORTUZA

What is great about World War I? For one thing, it set the whole world ablaze, resulting in 16 million killed and 20 million wounded. While Europe remained the epicentre of the man-made catastrophe, over 4 million non-Europeans were grafted into the war, who became the cogs in the Great War Machine.

The most remarkable part of this War, according to one South African non-white war veteran, "was to see the different kinds of human races from all parts of the world." That does not mean the War created one melting pot. The whites were not necessarily happy to see the "coloured" men fighting alongside them. The British, for example, deliberately deployed the colonial troops in places outside Europe so that they did not have to raise arms against white men. Both France and India did racial profiling as the "colonial troops" were branded under "warlike" and "non-warlike" categories. Such profiling saw the employment of "manly" soldiers from Punjab and Nepal in the western front, while people from the sub-Saharan region were reduced to "beasts of burden." Earlier, Indian troops were not allowed to fight in the Boer War in South Africa. The logic, as surmised by Santanu Das, was: "If a 'coloured' man were trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there... that he would not one day attack his own white master?" In hindsight, we know that the violence unleashed by the Great War eventually paved way for the end of colonialism.

The writer is Professor of English, University of Dhaka.

TAGORE'S LETTERS

Letter to William Winstanley Pearson
(11 October, 1915)

A few nights ago I dreamt that I met you somewhere in some battle-field. You were standing on high land with a soldier by your side. Your face was deathly pale, full of profoundest sorrow. I did not know the reason but it seemed to me quite natural. I raised my hand to touch you but I found that you were wounded in your right arm.—I said to myself that death had pierced his soul and a prolonged and loud wail came from my heart. It was an intense suffering for me—I suppose it was your pain which was transferred to my heart.

Letter from Susan Owen—mother of Wilfred Owen, to Rabindranath Tagore

It is nearly two years ago that my dear eldest son went to the war for the last time and the day he said goodbye to him—we were looking together across the sun-glorified sea—looking towards France, with breaking hearts—when he, my poet-son, said those wonderful words of yours—beginning at "When I go from hence, let my parting word" [opening line of Poem 96 of English Gitanjali]—and when his pocket book came back to me—I found these words written in his dear book—with your name beneath."



Stanley Spencer's Travoy's Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing-Station (1919)

The War in graphic art

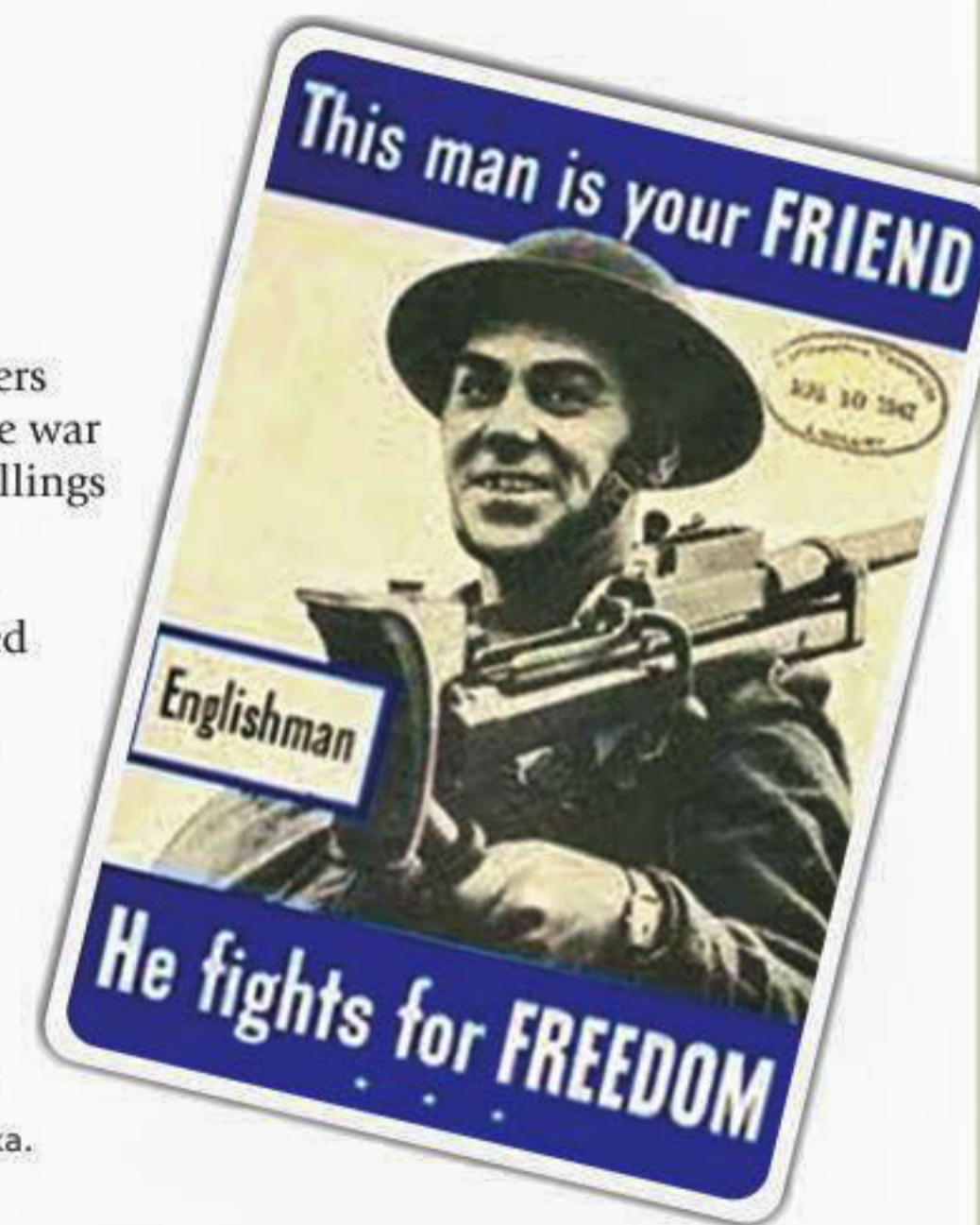
SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

War is a dirty business. Except for liberation wars such as the one we fought in 1971, where, at the end of bloodshed and violence, a 'terrible beauty' is born, all wars are often waged on false logic, manufactured lies and skewed ideologies. Looking back at the 'Great War', one wonders what justified its sanction or continuation for four years.

Exploring the narratives that the war has produced, one realises that the war was fought strongly on ideological grounds which, as we all know, never leave clear winners or losers. And as ideology has the power to mutate and change with time and exigency, the Great War was predestined to be followed by more devastating sequels. Ideology of the kind that guided the prewar and wartime policies spurred great passion, misplaced patriotism and false consciousness. But when young men died and were maimed, cities were devastated, and country sides ravaged, questions were raised about the ethics of war. Countering the official

propaganda, a school of painters soon emerged -- even while the war raged -- who considered the killings and violence evil, and found redemption in art. Their work reminded the world of the need to break the cycle of sin and redemption. The wars that followed, however, quickly drowned their voices, and proved that ideology, particularly the ideology of power, can overrule all objections.

The writer is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.



The Influence on English Studies

FAKRUL ALAM

The First World War was a truly momentous event; things fell apart rapidly all over the world after it; the centre seemed not to hold anymore; millions died or were traumatised because of it; and innocence seemed to give way permanently to massive disillusionment long after everything had become quiet on western fronts. Life became tragic for war survivors and their families; politically the Russian Revolution and Communism became unavoidable after it; feudalism in Europe was swept away, and the great empires of the nineteenth century now felt

clearly for the first time that the sun was about to set on them. The rest of the 20th century would be shaped by this war.

The First World War had decisive impacts on the arts too. Internationally, the movement called modernism gained impetus because of the war; major poets wrote moving poems about the futility of the war; Hemingway declared "a farewell to arms" fictionally; Bernard Shaw depicted a British society drifting towards disaster because of the war in his *Heartbreak House*. Rabindranath Tagore tried to warn the West and the Japanese of the evil consequences of nationalism and the war-mongering that it

had led to; and it was only appropriate that his collection of healing song-lyrics, *Gitanjali*, would be found among Wilfred Owen's remains. Kazi Nazrul Islam's life showed that colonials too were part of the war effort; their lives and literature would also be changed forever by the war.

In short, the First World War would become known as the Great War. It must be seen as "the defining event of the 20th century" (*The Economist*, March 29, 2014); surely, a good reason for all of us to remember it and reflect on its consequences in this centenary year.

The writer is Professor of English, University of Dhaka.