**We vs. They: the sense of national identity in Britain**

The end of the Great War marked a new beginning in the history of the Old Continent. The long-time rivalry between imperial powers of Europe, which sparked the greatest armed conflict of that time, ultimately led to their collapse. In the wake of the war, empires, being assembled over hundreds of years by subjugating foreign lands and different ethnic groups, finally disintegrated. New political entities, namely nation-states driven by the sense of national identity, started to appear on renewed Europe’s map. “The feeling and recognition of ‘we’ [versus] ‘they’” (Lee, 2012, p. 29) – as national identity is viewed in psychological terms – constituted one of the factors determining the future of the continent in the twentieth century. As for the British Empire, however, matters took a different turn – especially in the field of national identity.

Unlike the other imperial powers such as Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires, British Empire has become strengthened by the sudden outbreak of the Great War. As observed by Cambridge University historian David Reynolds, due to the war, the pursuit for self-determination among British Dominions such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand has been hindered for many decades to come. A new sense of national pride and an intense sensation of being part of the British world aroused among the subjects of King George V to Queen Elizabeth II.

In mainland Britain things were no different. It appears the war strengthened ties between the British state and its diversified population. Still, just before the outbreak of the first global conflict, the attitude towards British centralised state was different. In 1912, a Home Rule Bill for Ireland was introduced. A national identity built on the grounds of Gaelic language and Roman Catholic religion has been a bone of contention between Ireland and British settlers. The Irish were not the only nation striving to establish a self-determined statehood. Scotish nationalists followed Ireland's steps in 1913, introducing their own Home Rule Bill. Unsurprisingly, Welsh supporters of independence could not waste their opportunity to emerge from the English shadow. Thus, in 1914, the Welsh Church Act was introduced. It disestablished the Anglican Church of England in Wales, which owned large estates there. These, in turn, ensured the power and influence of English landlords over the region throughout the past centuries. Therefore, in the mid of 1914, the future of the union between England and three other member nations was doubtful. Out of the blue, the urge for self-determination has been overshadowed by concerns about the threat of German imperialism. The United Kingdom, by that time, appeared very disunited. Nevertheless, the four nations of Britain managed to unite for the greater, British cause. Even those of most dominant reluctance towards the English – Catholic Irishmen – expressed their readiness to fight shoulder to shoulder with the British. Hence, the implementation of the then-recently adopted Irish Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment Bill had been suspended by the wartime. Due to the wartime experiences, the sense of ‘we’ vs. ‘they' has been pushed into the background. Welsh and Scots identified themselves not only by their ethnic origin, but also they felt the pride of being British. Ireland, however, took a different, more radical path.

The Irish did not abandon the idea of self-determination for long. Unlike the other nations of Europe, they took advantage of the war turmoil and launched an armed insurrection focused on winning independence from Britain. Sinn Féin, an Irish nationalist independent movement, on 24 April 1916 proclaimed the Irish Republic. With weapons supplied by Germans, Irish insurgents intended to seize the control over Dublin. The coup, however, was poorly organised and enjoyed the insufficient support of the locals. These factors determined its fiasco. Had it not been for the brutal reaction of British military commanders, the coup might have been remembered as a senseless act of irresponsibility. Ironically, it was the British who proved their recklessness. Martial law was imposed; three thousand random people were arrested and the leaders of the insurrection – executed. The last decision turned out to be disastrous for the British. Although the rebellion was crushed, the Irish won the moral victory. The brutal reaction of English authorities evoked empathy and solidarity among millions of people. In consequence, Ireland’s struggle for independence gained recognition while the sacrifice of the rebels was enough to turn them into martyrs, icons of the independent movement. This fueled Ireland's pursuit of freedom for years to come.

The same 1916 year, events took place that strengthened the old antagonisms between the Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists from Ulster, who opposed the breakaway with Britain. On the first day of the Battle of Sonne, the 36th division consisting mostly of Protestants of which many previously were Ulster Volunteers, supposedly went ‘over the top.' The event has been remembered as an act of ultimate sacrifice for the greater cause. That day coincided with the traditional anniversary of Battle of the Boyne in which joint Catholic Jacobites forces fought against Williamites coalition of Protestants. Among the latter fought no one else than Ulster settlers, whose descendants would die 226 years later in a battle against Germany. For Ulstermen, the history has made a circle. On the one side (as they believed) – Protestants defending civilisation against barbaric invaders, on the other – Catholic traitors plotting a rebellion against Mother Country. In the face of the sacrifice made by Ulstermen, Easter Rising was seen by the Protestants as the proverbial ‘stab in the back.’ The fact that it was the German enemy who supplied the rebels contributed to deepening the divisions between Republicans and Unionists.

Soon, as the war was over Sinn Féin worked hard to establish an entirely independent, Irish nation-state. Unlike Poland and Czechoslovakia, Ireland was offered nothing more than Home Rule, which now would be implemented as the war had ended. Britain’s unwillingness to grant Ireland the right of self-determination resulted in a guerilla war of independence. After nearly two and half a year of fightings, the British authorities decided to make concessions to Ireland. An agreement establishing the Free Irish State was signed. The country was divided between two warring parties; twenty-six provinces of the South was granted Dominion status, whereas another six of North (Ulster) remained as an integral part of United Kingdom, being wholly dependent and controlled by London. Such a course of action led to another conflict – a civil war, which lasted for another ten months. Still, it did nothing more but constituted to the strengthening of the hostility between the two sides. The final termination of ties with Great Britain and the formal creation of the sovereign Republic of Ireland followed in 1949. Status of the Northern Ireland has remained the bone of contention as the tensions continued throughout the rest of the twentieth century. ‘The Troubles’ – as this conflict between the Loyalists and Republicans is commonly referred to as – remains a Gordian knot which cost lives of thousand people.

Unquestionably, Irish violent history of fighting for self-determination in the twentieth century proved to be exceptional as compared to Wales and Scotland. Nevertheless, the future of United Kingdom as a country of the dominating British sense of national identity over the last decade has been hung in the balance. 1997 marked the ceremony of returning Hong-Kong to China – an event referred to as a symbolic end of the British Empire. The same year, both union members – Wales and Scotland – were granted the Home Rule. As for the last party of the association, the question of self-determination has been raised in recent 2014 referendum. Although the pragmatic ‘No’ side won the plebiscite, the results proved the sense of being Scottish is relatively high. The vote difference was hardly 10 percent points. Furthermore, the recent political turbulences concerning 2016 Brexit referendum, e.g. Britain's in or out of the European Union might alter not only the very future of the European project itself. At stake here is the preservation of the United Kingdom as a whole. Scotland recently announced readiness to hold another referendum if the British decide to vote in favour of leaving the European Community. Thus, on the answer to the question of ‘to be, or not to be’ depends not only the future of United Kingdom but foremost the future of national identity, the future of the sense of being British.

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