

Anticipating war in Britain and France: everyday life and popular attitudes towards war from the Balkan Wars to the First World War

William Mulligan

As the Peace Congress of the Socialist International took place in November 1912, war raged in south-eastern Europe between the Balkan League and the Ottoman empire. The impact of this conflict upon popular perceptions of war in Europe remains poorly understood. The Balkan Wars, widely reported in the western European press, were characterised by violence against civilians. Communities were expelled on grounds of ethnicity and religion, while for many family life was destroyed. In short the Balkan Wars demonstrated very clearly the terrors and horrors of warfare.

This paper will examine how these reports of atrocities were woven into pre-existing socialist critiques of militarism, which stressed the roots of modern war in capitalist exploitation. It will argue that the emotional impact of the reports from the Balkan Wars marked an important addition to the theoretical underpinnings of anti-war sentiment in Europe before 1914. The impact of war on the fabric of everyday life – food, family, employment, and worship – was connected to more abstract ideas about war, the international system, and capitalism.

The final section of the paper will argue that the popular reaction to the outbreak of the First World War in France, Germany, and Britain, was shaped by perceptions of the Balkan Wars.