

Was Britain Heading Into a Major Political Crisis When War Broke Out in Summer 1914?

HAO Yichen

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

The paper critically analyzes if there was a major British political crisis in 1914 by summarizing the chain reactions among disputes. This topic has been investigated and interpreted by different scholars, who have expressed diverse perspectives regarding this topic. By using case study method, this paper will explore the 1914 British political crisis and discuss its relations with WWI, which contributes to the understanding that the political crisis is a collection of several struggles. Through the case study of the British political crisis, the paper hopes to have a clear perception about identifying the cause and effect of a political crisis. Although the British political crisis is shaped step by step, it causes negative consequences on national strength. In conclusion, the paper deepens our understanding of the process of the British political crisis. To a certain extent, it will reveal that it is difficult to overcome the political crisis, since it accumulates long-term conflicts. Moreover, the paper can be a valuable source to understand how to correctly view the impacts of the British political crisis. Admittedly, the paper is limited because not all political crises lead to long-term effects, and most countries find a solution when the political crisis appears, such as the Meiji Restoration in Japan and the rise of Nazis in Germany. Further studies can focus on other political crises and compare with the 1914 British political crisis.

Keywords: Britain, political crisis, 1914, WWI

Introduction

The paper's research question is regarding if Britain was experiencing a political crisis during the outbreak of WWI in 1914. This question needs to be explained by highlighting the reality of the British political crisis and the links to WWI context through a series of conflicts, and evaluating if these two aspects are feasible to interpret the question. This research question is puzzling because the British political crisis did not suddenly happen in 1914. The critical analysis of these conflicts plays a key role in reshaping the process of the British political crisis. The development of these conflicts has caused internal instability at the time, but the interaction of these conflicts has not been in more detail these years. This question is complex and challenging because it is rare research to connect the British political crisis with WWI, and it is likely to be controversial.

To give background information, it is crucial to demonstrate what was happening in 1914 and then indicate the circumstance in Britain at the time. In the summer of 1914, an unexpected war broke out in Europe among imperial powers like Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. World War I began as a spark to challenge the global structure, and this revealed some fatal issues in some countries. Britain was one of them that had experienced some internal crises; and to some extent, they caused negative consequences at this time. These

crises almost led to the collapse of Britain; even Dangerfield argues that if there was no WWI, Britain might have disappeared due to unresolved conflicts at home (1961, p. 3). These crises included a major political crisis in Britain that was regarding the criticism of the Liberal Party. At that time, the Liberal government strongly supported WWI, but the Labor Party opposed the war. Eventually, Liberal Britain participated in WWI, whereas this crisis brought about the collapse of a pre-war regime in Britain, and liberalism never recovered in the post-war period (Dangerfield, 1961, p. 297).

This paper will discuss four main conflicts to depict that Britain was undergoing a political crisis when WWI started in 1914, and they are Irish Home Rule, the House of Lords, women's suffrage, and labor unrest. Then, the paper will interpret these conflicts' causes and effects as well as its relations with WWI and post-WWI. It is a unique case study because it is necessary to understand and analyze the process of the British political crisis based on these conflicts. This case also applies to consider and evaluate the negative consequences of the political crisis on British domestic politics at the time.

This topic matters, because it provides a big picture of the British political situation in 1914, gives audiences an opportunity to learn about more details regarding the British political crisis and bridge the gap between the imagination and the reality of the British political crisis, and reflects the extent to which the political crisis has had a long-term impact. It can help understand if the political crisis consists of various conflicts, how these conflicts interact with each other and analyze why these conflicts shape the British political crisis. Also, this research can be used as an inspiration to explore and compare with other political crises.

The paper is divided into several sections. After the introduction, the paper will introduce and examine Irish Home Rule as a starting point of the British political crisis. Next, the paper will look at the financial struggle between the House of Lords and the Liberal Party and how it links to the political crisis. The paper will then discuss British women's voting issues and why their participation in political affairs threatens those politicians' rights and leads to the political crisis. The paper will subsequently review the weaknesses of the Liberal Party behind labor unrest under the political crisis. Finally, the conclusion will summarize all sections, emphasize the significance of this research, and reveal potential limitations about this research.

Irish Home Rule

First and foremost, Irish Home Rule was a dilemma for the Liberal Party, but it was undoubtedly a crisis in Britain. On the one hand, the Liberal Party needed to support Irish Home Rule in exchange for the support of Irish nationalists to defeat the Conservative Party to obtain votes (Lubenow, 1985, p. 128). On the other hand, Irish separation from the British jurisdiction was undoubtedly worse for Britain, since Britain would face a split in the territory and lose control of Ireland. In the 1880s, Irish Home Rule split the British Liberal Party; but in the 1890s, the majority party in the House of Commons was defeated by the House of Lords. During this period, the House of Lords weakened its power over the budget issue, which also led to another crisis (O'Day, 1998, p. 235). Until 1914, Irish Home Rule had a majority of the House of Commons. To consider the crisis of Irish Home Rule, in July 1914, Britain dealt with the crisis caused by Ulster's opposition. In Northeastern Ireland, people used intense force to boycott the implementation of the Irish Home Rule Bill and the power of the Dublin Parliament (Smith, 1993, p. 171). This had received tremendous support from the Conservative Party in London and military officers. It was well-known that the Conservative Party leaders supported the armed resistance in Curragh (Dangerfield, 1961, p. 333). The officers said that they would rather resign than force Ulster. An independent Ireland ruled by Dublin had real support from the Conservative Party, which tried its

best to support the Ulster opposition. Dangerfield notes that the Conservative Party and the army were indeed willing to betray the House of Commons, which was already experiencing a political crisis (1961, p. 348). The Liberal Party had to compromise with the Irish Home Rule Bill under this pressure, because Britain could not continue worsening its internal struggle. However, due to the outbreak of WWI, Irish Home Rule was suspended until the end of the war. As a result, the crisis of Ulster still existed in Ireland. This proves that the Liberals could not solve Irish Home Rule successfully, and the Liberal Party found it difficult to survive in the post-war period.

The House of Lords vs. the Liberal Party

Second, the conflict between the House of Lords and the Liberal Party on the issue of national finance has led to a crisis in Britain. Since the 17th century, the British Constitution announced that the House of Commons controlled national finance. This has created a barrier between the House of Lords and the Liberal Party. In 1909, there was a turning point when the House of Lords opposed the introduction of the Liberal Chancellor David Lloyd George's "People's Budget", which contained the following content: increasing taxes on incomes, estates, and land. "People's Budget" aimed to stimulate new liberalism for social reform. Murray points out the fact that "People's Budget" threatened the Conservative Party's tariff reform, which did not focus on a higher tax burden (1973, p. 556). Tariff reform would help Britain benefit from the protection of unfair foreign trade and consolidate its imperial power as well. Since the Conservative Party had a majority in the House of Lords because of advocating tariff reform, they were likely to block the Liberal Party's proposals regarding "People's Budget" of 1909 (Thackery, 2011, p. 200). Dangerfield demonstrates that if "People's Budget" was rejected by the House of Lords, the King would create 500 new members of the House of Lords and pass the budget with a majority (1961, p. 44). After this threat, two more elections were finally passed, and later the House of Lords agreed to pass "People's Budget". From the perspective of the House of Lords in this crisis, they resisted the instability caused by the financial control of the House of Commons and passed a new Parliament Act that restricted the role of the House of Lords in terms of finance. It meant that the House of Lords could stop legislation only by the House of Commons, whereas the maximum could not exceed two years to deal with it. At the same time, this action also delayed the Irish Home Rule Bill from 1912 to 1914 (Dangerfield, 1961, p. 96). Although the Conservative Party lost its power, it played a significant role during the wartime and succeeded in the post-WWI, especially when the Liberal Party was weakened by the split in leadership and the Liberal-Labor alliance divided at this stage. Thus, the Liberals were crushed by the Conservative Party in this political crisis, even though Britain remained liberal after WWI.

The Rise of Women's Suffrage

Third, the problems caused by women's inequality in voting have further caused the ruling crisis of the British Liberal Party. Dating back to the Enlightenment, this movement could be regarded as the beginning of feminism. Then, the first bill on women's suffrage began in the 1850s. In the late 19th century, women's voting continued being supported. Since the 1870s, women claimed that the allowance of women's suffrage would help spread the ideology of feminism (Strayer & Nelson, 2016, p. 606). In some local elections, some women began to vote. For example, they voted for the poor at this time. Nonetheless, women were excluded from parliamentary elections. At the beginning of the 20th century, more militant activities emerged against this limitation, especially in Women's Social and Political Union (Strayer & Nelson, 2016, p. 606), and had grown

alongside the constitutional movement of suffragists. Besides this, suffragettes represented a more radical movement compared to suffragists, since suffragists only focused on suffrage. Suffragettes' activities included the interruption of meetings and arson. In order to prevent this series of actions, the Liberal government issued the hunger strikes and the "Cat and Mouse" Act in 1913. These participants were arrested and started a hunger strike against the Liberal government. The Liberals did not want to take the risk in their deaths, so the "Cat and Mouse" Act allowed these women to be released, and women who recovered from the hunger strike would be arrested again (Dangerfield, 1961, p. 203). At that time, it was a painful and challenging situation for these women against the Liberals. The women's suffrage movement eventually stopped due to the outbreak of the summer war in 1914. It is worth mentioning that the key figures of the suffragette movement, Emily and Christabel Pankhurst, supported WWI, but Sylvia Pankhurst formed an alliance with the Labor Party that opposed to the war. In the post-WWI, women still fought for feminism and consistently acquired voting rights (Siegel, 1998, p. 290). Overall, it was backward of the Liberal Party not to support women's suffrage. The Liberal Party's actions violated human rights when oppressing these women. In that patriarchal society, women did not have the same voting rights as men; and it was unfair to exclude women from political affairs, since they were also citizens who should be able to participate in public activities.

Labor Unrest: The Birth of the Labor Party

Furthermore, the labor unrest defied the British Liberal Party during this period, especially while industrial development was an essential part of the British economy. Industrial dispute such as strikes frequently occurred in the pre-war time, and the days of strikes lasted for a long time. There was an increasing trend of labor riots. Some of them also led to violence. At the same time, the Triple Alliance led by miners, railway workers, and transportation workers emerged. Workers demanded the increase of wage and expected to create the union (Callaghan, 2012, p. 3). Especially under the influences of Socialist thoughts, workers emphasized the significance of their rights. This crisis triggered the political rebellion. For instance, in the Taff Vale case of 1901, it required that workers who engaged in strikes would pay the price for the loss of the company (Callaghan, 2012, p. 11). Labor riots became more and more intense until 1906, while the New Liberal Party reversed the situation, which helped the Labor Party succeed in the elections. According to Callaghan's data, the number of Labor Members of Parliament increased from only two members in 1900 to 42 members of Parliament in December 1910 (2012, p. 11). The Labor Party expanded its role of the state and got the working-class representatives into Parliament. Green argues that from the angle of the Conservative Party, the electoral success of the Labor Party also pursued the Liberal-Labor alliance in Parliament (1985, p. 685), even if it was controversial that the Labor Party displaced the Liberal Party as a dominant left-wing. Finally, the emergence of WWI ended industrial conflicts and strikes, and restored peace to the industry in Britain. After the war, the Labor Party enhanced its power and strived for protecting workers' rights as the center of its political agenda. Laborers gained more support from the Labor Party, because they were satisfied with a higher wage and better working conditions (Lawrence, 2006, p. 201). Hence, labor resistance was a big challenge for the Liberal Party. The Liberals used violence against labor riots, and ultimately, they had to tolerate the rise of the Labor Party to give laborers more power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the outbreak of the summer war in 1914 coincided with the political crisis related to the British national movement. Irish Home Rule reflected severe competition between the political parties, which

even threatened the integrity of the British national territory and sovereignty. In the crisis of the House of Lords, they controlled by the Conservative Party clashed with the House of Commons controlled by the Liberal Party. This eventually led to the reduction of the role of the House of Lords in terms of finance and delayed the Irish Home Rule. The inequality of women's suffrage demonstrates the lagging nature of British society under the Liberal Party. In the process, women's protests also caused an unstable social order in Britain. The labor turmoil allowed the creation of the union of workers, and the rights and interests of the working class were gradually protected. At the same time, the Labor Party expanded its power in Britain. To a certain extent, Britain's performance in WWI was an attempt to externalize domestic political contradictions, but unfortunately this only temporarily suppressed internal conflicts without any solutions. Thus, people will see a modern Britain that is shaped by various disputes. It seems that Britain has lost something, but it may gain more in the future.

This paper has analyzed how these conflicts connect with one another and shape the British political crisis under the context of WWI, and has explained the cause and effect of the political crisis. This paper helps understand how to critically evaluate the extent of the impacts that the political crisis will cause in the future, and illustrates that the British political crisis is a unique case, since its consequences existed in the post-WWI period. At the same time, this paper further deepens the academic understanding of the British political crisis and its chain reactions caused by Irish Home Rule, the House of Lords' struggle with the Liberal Party, women's suffrage, and labor unrest.

The paper has several limitations. The single case provides limited interpretations and may not fully explain other political crises. Future studies can focus on other cases, such as the Meiji Restoration in Japan and the rise of Nazis in Germany, in order to compare and contrast different situations and further refine the analysis of political crises. Also, to fully understand different political crises, exploring other perspectives and reasons to develop an in-depth perception will have a clearer insight towards the following topic.

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