



Teacher material

Experiencing the end of World War 1

Activity Plan

Introduction

To introduce the enquiry, read the extract from Lieutenant Richard Dixon, or give students a copy to read in pairs. (See Student Material) Pay close attention to the language and draw out by teacher questioning of the students the varied emotions that are being expressed in the extract. Introduce the enquiry question to your students and remind them, if necessary, that the armistice came into effect on the Western Front at 11 AM on 11 November 1918.

Source activity

In the Student Material you will find more source extracts and a worksheet. Either stick the sources up around your classroom and ask students to work in pairs to complete the worksheet, or give students a full set of the sources at their desks.

Discussion

When the worksheet is complete, lead a discussion by questioning your students about what they have read and their thoughts about it. Ideas that are likely to emerge are:

- Anger is a common theme to many of the sources, but it is expressed differently and there are other emotions too, varying from soldier to soldier.
- Immediately after the Armistice there seems to be a common feeling of numbness, followed later by anger and then by regret.
- These soldiers were victorious, from a country that had won the war, and yet their thoughts and feelings do not sound nationalistic or proud.
- There seems to be a sense of loss, a feeling that no one understands, and a sense of isolation from the country to which they were returning.
- There might be common elements here with soldiers returning home from wars today.

Assessment task

A couple of assessment suggestions are given here:

- Students could be asked to write a letter to an appropriate public figure in which they explain the varied emotions that ex-soldiers are likely to be feeling and suggest steps that can be taken to make their adjustment back to civilian life easier. This could be set in the 1918-20 period, or it could be written about ex-soldiers today.
- An interpretation by a historian: "The post-war world spoke of a 'Lost Generation', ... the survivors proceeded into the life that followed with a sense of inexplicable escape, often tinged by guilt, sometimes by rage and desire for revenge." from *The First World War*, John Keegan, Pimlico (1999). Using the evidence from the sources that you have used in class,



explain how far you agree with John Keegan's interpretation of the emotions of the survivors of World War 1.

TEACHER NOTE 4

Again, there is some frustration and desperation in this source. The man is angry that his experience is not being acknowledged. There is resentment towards older people who were not there.

TEACHER NOTE 5

This man's anger seems to run out of control easily. Could he have post traumatic stress of some kind?

TEACHER NOTE 6

Here there is anger, once again, but also resilience, defiance, courage and determination.

TEACHER NOTE 7

Here with the anger there is pride and determination.

TEACHER NOTE 8

The anger is channelled against war here, there is a confusion still and a sense of trying to understand and adjust to living with the consequences of the war.

Any assessment method used should enable students to demonstrate that they can use the source material to make a historical judgement about the question: 'How differently did individual soldiers experience the end of World War 1?'

Student material with annotations

Introductory source material

Lieutenant Richard Dixon, Royal Field Artillery

'An unreal thought was running through my mind. I had a future. It took some getting used to – this knowledge. There was a future ahead for me, something that I had not imagined for some years. All that mattered was that the war was over and by some miracle I had come through it when some many better men had not.'

TEACHER NOTE 1

Sources for the worksheet completion activity with annotations for teachers

Guardsman Horace Calvert, Second Grenadier Guards

'I saw staff officers surrounded by a lot of troops and they were telling them that they wanted money paid every week, they hadn't been paid for weeks. The rumour was around that the last of the men called up would be the first to be demobilised because they were the key men to get the industry going. Chaps said they hadn't been home for four years and it was time they were allowed to go home. They were making a point and it was a forceful point. Everybody was in agreement apparently. There were two or three ringleaders, they were doing all the talking and waving everyone around to come and join them, there was two or three hundred there. It wasn't a mutiny – I would call it a disturbance! They managed to disperse them eventually.'

Private Harold Boughton

'I was so useful in this camp orderly room, that the captain wouldn't sign my papers; he wouldn't let them go through. While other chaps were getting discharged I was still stuck in this blooming camp. One day I filled up my discharge papers and slipped them in amongst several others. The captain, who very rarely read anything – he just signed it – he signed my papers and two or three days later my discharge came through. He was furious!'

Fred Dixon

'I applied for a job at Whitehall, at the Ministry of Labour as a temporary clerk. I went before a man, he was chairman and a lot of bearded old men round a board. The old men were in the saddle again and you just didn't stand a chance. He said, "I'm sorry Mr Dixon, but you've had no experience!" Why, didn't I see red! I got up on my hind legs and said, "Pardon me, sir! But I've had more experience than anybody in this room, but the thing is it's been the wrong sort! When I joined the army in 1914, I told the recruiting sergeant I couldn't ride a horse and he said, "We'll bloody well soon teach you!" They did and they spared no pains over it!'



TEACHER NOTE 9
here the numbness felt at the news of the Armistice has not yet given way to anger or other emotions. There is fear expressed here too

TEACHER NOTE 10
there is anger here at the lack of understanding and awareness of most people back home. There is some hopelessness and a real sense of alienation

TEACHER NOTE 11
Harry Patch was the last surviving British veteran of World War One. In this much later memory, there is bitterness and regret. The anger is less raw

Apparently I could be fitted for war but I can't be fitted for peace! I shall know what to do another time gentlemen!" [TEACHER NOTE 4](#)

Albert Birtwhistle

'I think it sent me crackers a bit. One day the gaffer came, he said something to me and it just got right on top of me. I grabbed hold of him by the blinking lapel of his coat and I said, "I'll split you top to bottom!" Stupid of me. I think he thought, "Here's a crackpot come out from the war!" I calmed down after a while.' [TEACHER NOTE 5](#)

Joseph Pickard

'Can you ever imagine being without one? I never put the bandages back on; I got a piece of plastic to put across the hole, I just covered it, I didn't have any nose. All the kids in the blinking neighbourhood had gathered: talking, looking, gawping at you. I still had this little bit of plastic stuff as a nose. I could have taken the crutch and hit the whole lot of them! I knew what they were looking at. So I turned round and went back to the hospital. I was sitting one day and I thought, "Well, it's no good, I can stop like this for the rest of my life – I've got to face it sometime!" So I went out again – people staring – I used to turn round and look at them!' [TEACHER NOTE 6](#)

William Towers

'He eyes me up and down, he said, "I suppose you'll have to be living on people's generosity for the rest of your life?" I said, "Well it won't be your bloody generosity I want, goodbye!" And I walked away. I thought, "Well I'll show that fellow if nobody else – I don't want their generosity!" Do you know it spurred me on!' [TEACHER NOTE 7](#)

Lieutenant John Nettleton, Rifle Brigade

'We were told that this was "the war to end war" and some of us at least believed it. It may sound extraordinarily naïve, but I think one had to believe it. All the mud, blood and bestiality only made sense on the assumption that it was the last time civilised man had to suffer it. I could not believe that anyone who had been through it could ever allow it to happen again. I thought that the ordinary man on both sides would rise up as one and kick any politician in the teeth who even mentioned the possibility of war.' [TEACHER NOTE 8](#)

Sergeant Harry Hopthrow, Royal Engineers

'When the Armistice came, I found an enormous blank in my life, and wondered what I would do next, because, most of my skills were involved with wireless telegraphy in the army. There was a silence on my mind as to what the future was going to be.' [TEACHER NOTE 9](#)

Private K Hares, Oxon and Bucks Light Infantry

'When I went home to Weston-super-Mare looking for a job they didn't want to know me – they couldn't give a damn. They only had council houses for key workers, and I thought to myself, 'What the hell have I been all this time then?' We weren't key workers apparently, after all we'd been through. The British public never realised or appreciated what myself and all the other fellows had experienced.' [TEACHER NOTE 10](#)



Harry Patch, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

'Even ninety-two years afterwards, I still remember... Why should the British Government call me up and take me out to a battlefield to shoot a man I never knew, whose language I couldn't speak? All those lives lost for a war finished over a table. Now what is the sense in that?' [TEACHER NOTE 11](#)

Sources:

1. Extracts of soldiers' testimony adapted for classroom use from Max Arthur, *The Road Home*, Phoenix (2010).
2. Quote from John Keegan, *The First World War*, Pimlico (1999).