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MAIDSTONE AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

FRIENDLY ALIEN RECRUITMENT AND THE MILITARY SERVICE CONVENTION

As a county town with a long-established garrison, Maidstone was heavily involved in British army recruitment and training throughout the First World War. Shortly after the outbreak of war the *Kent Messenger* announced that 5,000 soldiers were quartered in the town, consisting of a 'good class' of man who had volunteered for the front and who exhibited 'good conduct in town.' The same report also confirmed that field camps were to be set up to deal with this expansion.¹ During the course of the war recruitment to the regular army progressed, by necessity, from the initial mobilisation of the reserves and voluntary enlistment, to the introduction of compulsory military service from the late spring of 1916. Britain's continental commitment and the nature of the fighting saw the army expand to an extraordinary and unprecedented extent; so much so that, by the end of the war, nearly four and a half million men from Britain and the Empire had passed through its ranks. This seemingly insatiable demand for manpower required the application of universal male conscription not only amongst the native population of Britain, but also amongst the resident friendly alien population. This was achieved by the enactment of the Military Service Conventions in June 1917, which presented all eligible males with the choice of being conscripted into the British Army, or of being repatriated to their land of birth (usually France, Italy or Russia) for service in that army. Maidstone's brief involvement with the mainly Russian conventionists came about with the establishment of alien training battalions in the local garrison, and this article seeks to describe and explain the origins and circumstances of this singular situation.

The question of the Russian friendly aliens was a particularly perplexing one for the government. This was because they were Jewish and had originally emigrated to Britain from the Russian Pale of Settlement during the pogroms of the early 1880's, mainly

¹ *Kent Messenger*, 15th August 1914.

settling in the East End of London in the parish of Whitechapel. Such was the extent of this immigration that, by 1905, it was estimated that over 100,000 were residing in these single parish alone, and the resulting social pressures had led to the introduction of the first Aliens Act in 1905. Despite the efforts at assimilation by the Anglo- Jewish establishment, the majority of these immigrant families retained their nationality; in any case their economic circumstances made it unlikely that they could afford to take up British citizenship, which came at a cost of £10, including the government fee (£5) and associated legal costs. Thus, when it came to war service, their exemption from the early acts of conscription, on grounds of nationality, meant that they were often perceived by many of the local, indigenous population as being willing to 'dodge the colours'. Indeed, some were persecuted for taking up the trade of British men who had gone off to the war. In fact, as friendly aliens, the matter of their nationality would not have prevented them from volunteering for military service, at any time, as the Army had regulations that permitted alien recruitment, subject to a ratio of one alien to fifty British citizens in any unit, and no commissions.² Furthermore, and as will be discussed later, special arrangements were made in 1916 to allow Russian Jews to serve together "in batches", but again this did not succeed in attracting any significant number of volunteers.³ As a result there was a growing rift amongst the Anglo - Jewish establishment, between those who supported the late arrivals and those who considered that they needed to join their British Jewish cousins who had volunteered for military service. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the *British Jewry Book of Honour*, records the names of over 50,000 British Jews who served in the First World War, making them the largest minority contingent in the armed forces.⁴ Some Anglo - Jewish leaders believed that this demonstration of patriotism, which reflected well on British Jewry, was in danger of being besmirched or overshadowed by the public disquiet over the reluctance of the Russian Jews to enlist. Perhaps, however, it is hardly

² Army Act 1908.

³ Army Council Instruction 1156, 8 June 1916.

⁴ Adler, Rev. M., ed., *British Jewry Book of Honour*, (London:Claxton, 1922). See also Pollins, Harold 'Jews in the British Army in the First World War', *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 37 (1995), pp.100-111.

surprising that there was such reluctance, as the prospect of serving in the Russian Army, or as its ally, with the pogroms a very recent memory, would have been anathema to these prospective soldiers.

Anathema or not, the situation changed dramatically when the Tsar was deposed in the spring of 1917, and the provisional government was placed in power in Russia. With this obstacle removed, the political pressure to put the friendly aliens into uniform increased, resulting in the introduction of the aforementioned Convention. For the Russian Jews of the East End, the consequences were twofold. Firstly, after a long campaign led by Vladimir Jabotinsky, with support from Chaim Weizmann and Lloyd George amongst others, the British Government formed three battalions of infantry into which Russian Jews could be conscripted. These were the service battalions, 28th, 39th and 42nd Royal Fusiliers, the regiment of East London with its headquarters at the Tower of London, commanded by Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson, who had previously commanded the Zion Mule Corps at Gallipoli. Many of its officers and senior nco's were British Jews who had transferred in from other regiments. In a unique appointment Jabotinsky, himself a Russian national, was granted a commission as Lieutenant in the 38th.⁵ Secondly, Russian Jews who had passed through the conscription process and had not chosen to join the Jewish battalions, could elect to return to Russia or to serve in another part of the British army, in accordance with their medical grading.

At first glance, the simple statement of these choices may give the impression that the process of enlistment was straightforward. The evidence shows, however, that this was far from the case. Recruitment from this source, between the enactment of the Convention in June 1917 and January 1918 was very slow, with War Cabinet minutes of the 23rd January showing that only 4,000 men had actually been called up out of the total of 25,000

⁵ For the genesis of the three battalions, see Watts, M., *The Jewish Legion and the First World War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2004)

eligible Russian Jews.⁶ Reasons for the delay included large-scale use of the appeals procedure applied to the local conscription Tribunals, and administrative confusion over the status of both the Russian Jews themselves and the Jewish battalions. The effect of this 'lag' was severe upon these battalions; despite the 4,000 conscripts, strength returns at the Fusilier's depot indicate that only about 1,200 actually serving at this time. The research of Sharman Kadish has demonstrated that there were about 3,000 conventionists who opted to return to Russia during the course of the convention, which ties in with the military recruitment figures.⁷

It is at this juncture that Maidstone is first mentioned in the archives. On the 25th January, only two days after the War Cabinet had discussed the issue, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported on the concerns of the British Board of Deputies Foreign Affairs Committee, regarding '8000 Russian Jews not at present soldiers, who had been kept at Maidstone in a most deplorable condition.'⁸ Upon investigation, and given the figures revealed in the above paragraph, 8000 seems to be an implausible number. Even if the difficulty experienced during the war, caused by the failure of the public and some of the agencies of the state to distinguish between enemy and friendly aliens, is taken into account, it seems unlikely that the presence of such a large number would have gone largely unnoticed in a town the size of Maidstone. Furthermore, there were no civilian, internment facilities in the town, only a significant military encampment that, amongst other functions, provided basic training facilities for units known as Recruit Distribution Battalions. In the context of these units, which took in recent conscripts and prepared them for posting to the various regiments and corps of the army, a figure of 800, as opposed to 8000, would seem to make more sense. This explanation is supported by the following extract, taken from the *Kent Messenger* of the 9th February 1918. No apologies are made

⁶ NA, CAB 23/5 WC 329. War Cabinet Minutes 23rd January 1918.

⁷ Kadish, Sharman, *Bolsheviks and British Jews* (London: Cass, 1992), pp. 208-16. For some of the latest research on Jewish recruitment and the tribunal system see: Auerbach, Sascha, 'Negotiating Nationalism: Jewish conscription and Russian Repatriation in London's East End, 1916-1918', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July 2007), The University of Chicago Press.

⁸ *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 January 1918.

for quoting this report in full; it gives a flavour of the atmosphere in Maidstone at the time, and demonstrates contemporary attitudes to aliens:

More than usual interest was taken in Military movements in Maidstone last weekend, because they meant the removal of the organisation which had brought such a mixed population to the town during the last month or so – in other words, the 24th Recruit Distribution Battalion, which deals with the Russians, Russian Jews, Italians and other foreign elements called up under the Military Service Conventions. For a time Maidstone was a veritable gathering ground for the tailors, barbers waiters, old clo' men, [*sic*] and cheap jewellery vendors who go to make up the life of the East End of London in its most Oriental aspects. Many were unwholesome and cadaverous, a few no doubt crafty and repulsive; many again quite respectable, clean members of society; but Maidstone had to take them as they came, good, bad and indifferent, and the news that that the stream of them was to be diverted to another direction – not east but west – gave general satisfaction.⁹

The mention of the diversion to the west is significant, as the depot for the Jewish battalions of the Royal Fusiliers had been established at Crown Point, Plymouth. As far as the numbers are concerned, War Office records show that the strength of the 24th recruit battalion was about 1,500; if half were Russian Jews then this would approximate to the 800 deduced from the report in the *Jewish Chronicle*, and this latter figure is also supported by a similar increase in strength of the Jewish battalions in Plymouth during February 1918. Thus the combination of this evidence and the likelihood of the original figure being an error in the *Jewish Chronicle*, seems to confirm that 800 is the correct number. Unfortunately, incontrovertible evidence, by way of records of the 24th recruit

⁹ *Kent Messenger*, 9th February 1918, 'Maidstone and the War.'

training (or distribution) battalion, is simply not available. The War Office maintained no such records, and it appears that administrative efforts were concentrated on the units to which these recruits were posted at the end of their induction and basic training.¹⁰

Returning to the nature and style of the comments made in the *Kent Messenger* with regard to the 'foreign elements called up under the Military Service Conventions', it should be noted, by way of contrast, that the same edition included the following account of the departure of British soldiers who had been posted out:

The lads in khaki who also took their departure on Saturday were bidden farewell with much regret on the part of the townspeople, and the regret was mutual. There were many handshakings at the recreation rooms on Friday evening, and many tokens of appreciation were given of the efforts which had been made to make them feel at home in the town.¹¹

Recalling that the Board of Deputies had expressed 'concern' over the conditions in which their recruits were being kept, it would seem likely that local and national official records might provide evidence that would either substantiate or allay their worries. However, a search through the Kent and Maidstone archives, and investigation into Home Office, War Office and Cabinet papers at the National Archives, failed to locate any evidence or records of complaints, incidents or difficulties between friendly alien recruits and the local community. Assize and Police Court records do contain a few reports of alien activity, relating to travel permits and registration under the requirements of the Defence of the Realm Acts, but these relate to enemy aliens married to British citizens and those with residential permits, such as Baroness Orczy of Bearsted. It should be remembered that, at the time, Maidstone, like 17 other boroughs in Kent, maintained its own police force and associated records, until incorporation into the county constabulary in 1943. It was hoped

¹⁰ The absence of this type of record was confirmed to the author by the National Archives.

¹¹ *Kent Messenger*, 9th February 1918, 'Maidstone and the War.'

that these records would have revealed reports of any incidents, arrests and related activity associated with friendly alien soldiers, but all Maidstone police records were pulped after its disbandment, in order to assist with the paper shortage caused by the war.

The concerns raised by the Board of Deputies may, of course, have related to the accommodation and living conditions experienced by the Jewish recruits. In a publication called the Maidstone Peace Souvenir, found in the Kent History and library centre, there is an article that states that: '75,000 troops were billeted in Maidstone during the war...the local population being 35,000.'¹² This does not mean, of course, that 75,000 troops were actually present at any one time, but it does demonstrate the significance of Maidstone's role in military recruitment and training, and the pressure placed upon local social resources. With specific reference to the 28th battalion, however, the article goes on to say:

28th Training battalion in conjunction with which there was established at Maidstone what was termed a pool for aliens of Allied nationalities called up for military service, which gave Maidstone for some months a polyglot population, drawn in large batches from the Metropolis and housed mainly at the Agricultural Hall and the Old Tithe Barn.¹³

It is unlikely that the old hall and barn would have made for the most comfortable of billets, and complaints may well have been made to the Board of Deputies. There are, however, no records showing that this matter went any further; the scale of expansion of the army meant that nearly all recruits suffered from poor living conditions and shortage of equipment and facilities during their training.

In conclusion, the existence of a 'polyglot' collection of alien recruits in Maidstone can be confirmed, and even the little evidence available shows that this was certainly a novel experience for the local community. It is also a local demonstration of the

¹² Kent History and Library Centre, K. 940.3(x) MAI, Maidstone Peace Souvenir 1919, published by the *South Eastern Gazette*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

international nature of the conflict, and of the extent of the demand for manpower required to maintain its prosecution.

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