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Mothers, Wives, and Sisters...But Also Citizens: Defining the Duty of Female Civilians
Through the Publications of the Pankhurst Sisters during The Great War

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“It is felt to be right that women whose future liberty, no less than that of men, is at stake, shall assume such share as is justly theirs of the moral responsibility for the present war. It is for women, too, to do their part in appealing to the national unity and love of country, that have been assailed, though, happily, not destroyed by evil and unjust laws that for the well-being of the State must, when the war ends, be swept away.”¹

~ Christabel Pankhurst

During wartime, mobilization becomes a necessary and inevitable part of the nation which calls into action a diverse group of citizens who join in the war effort based on their qualifications and personal beliefs. These individuals must evaluate their situation, the motives of their country, the agenda of the war, and their place and position as civilians within their nation. Historians have researched and analyzed the duty of citizens during The Great War and how each nation and their various groups, such as blacks, women, and soldiers had to reach their own conclusions on where they fit in the war effort. Tammy M. Proctor focused on this in her book, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*, and stated, “Civilians managed, funded, supplied, and derided the war effort from their vantage points at the home front and at the battle front and in between, so their importance in the state’s ability to wage war cannot be underestimated.”² Therefore, it is imperative to understand the entirety of The Great War’s history by analyzing and delivering the narratives of all of the civilians involved.

Proctor argues that “the years between 1914 and 1918 witnessed the invention of the modern ‘civilian,’ the first mentions of the ‘home front,’ and the advent of a totalizing war strategy that pitted industrial nations and their citizenries against each other.”³ Therefore, as the

¹ Christabel Pankhurst, *The War*, ([London], 1914), 1.

² Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (NYU Press, 2010), 12.

³ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*, 3.

war engulfed Britain, suffragists Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst had to determine how they were going to approach the war effort and mobilize as citizens. Just as they differed in their political ideologies, these sisters would also contradict one another in their opinions of the war and the duty of the civilians. Using *The Suffragette*, changed to *Britannia* during the war, Christabel edited the publication to represent the nationalism expected of the British citizens and their role in mobilization and enlistment. On the other side, Sylvia created an opposing perspective to the war using her publication, *The Woman's Dreadnought*, eventually changed to *The Workers' Dreadnought*, which argued that civilians are not required to support a government during war when their own rights are not being fulfilled. Both sisters were true suffragists, striving for equality for women, but when presented with the issue of war each combined their diverse suffragist agendas with their opinion of the Great War and a civilian's duty.

Before the war, British suffragists, women fighting for their voice to be heard, had a long history of going against the traditions of their time to gain equality in their society. But in 1914, with the abrupt start to World War I, British suffragists and the Pankhurst Sisters, Christabel and Sylvia, had a choice of whether to continue their fight for equality or lay aside their needs to join the war effort in support of their nation. Just as with Proctor's broader analysis of how individuals worked to understand their wartime role as a citizen, each of these women, Sylvia and Christabel, developed unique opinions and perspectives of how a civilian should act and participate in the war effort. Christabel would align her patriotic argument of the citizen's wartime duty by partially setting aside her suffrage wants, while Sylvia presented an antiwar perspective and maintained her fight for women's rights and equity for the lower classes. Therefore, using their publications during World War I, *The Suffragette* and *The Woman's*

Dreadnought, these sisters illustrated their political definitions of a citizen's duty in a wartime society.

Suffragists and Civilians

The topic of British suffragists during World War I is not a new subject of study and previous historians have gathered evidence on how these women were involved in the war effort, whether in support of the war or from the anti-war persuasion. Angela K. Smith (2003), in her article "The Pankhursts and the War: Suffrage Magazines and First World War Propaganda," analyzed the differences between the Pankhurst women and their use of publications during the Great War to spread their political agendas, using *The Suffragette (Britannia)* and *The Woman's Dreadnought (The Workers' Dreadnought)*. Smith evaluated how Christabel and Sylvia both used literary means to convey their public opinion of the war, focusing on the devices used in each publication, such as patriotic fervor by Christabel in *The Suffragette* and Sylvia's ardent socialist radicalism in *The Woman's Dreadnought*. The differences of these sisters, that could be physically seen, were amplified within their publications. Smith observed how these women varied in their public appearances, specifically how Christabel always appeared feminine, and how each of their publications illustrated their personalities, especially with the bold print, patriotism of *The Suffragette* and the subtle, yet passionate, socialist agenda of *The Woman's Dreadnought*.⁴

Prior to Smith's research, in the 2001 article, "Suffrage Sisters in Old Age: unpublished correspondence between Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, 1953-1957," Richard Pankhurst discussed how the Pankhurst sisters, revolutionaries in the women's suffrage movement in

⁴ Angela K. Smith, "The Pankhursts and the War: Suffrage Magazines and First World War Propaganda," *Women's History Review* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 105-6.

Britain, were faced with differing political opinions, Christabel, a nationalist and Sylvia, a budding socialist. These differences caused friction within the Pankhurst family, especially due to their opposing opinions of the war which were amplified by their differing political stances. Pankhurst illustrated this friction through personal correspondence between the sisters during the 1950s and the sisters reminisced about the war and their opposing views. In addition to Pankhurst, historian June Purvis has written numerous articles and books that have been centered around the Pankhurst sisters and their different approaches to suffrage, particularly during World War I. Purvis' methodology is focused on mainly biographical narratives, explaining the lives of the Pankhurst women, but a few of her most recent articles were focused on Christabel and her mother Emmaline and their success in developing a political party that supported women's suffrage near the end of World War I. In 2016 and 2017, Purvis wrote two articles focused on the Women's Party and the forgotten political movement of women that was overshadowed by World War I. Purvis analyzed the purpose of the Women's Party and how it was "to prepare women for their impending citizenship during wartime and after" and how the Pankhursts, Emmeline and Christabel, knew that a political party was needed for women even with a war going on around them.⁵

In 1979, Keith Curry Lance made the statement that "The case of the suffragette movement supports the hypothesis that strategy choices tend to become less expressive and more strategic as a movement develops."⁶ While Lance observed a broader timeline of the British

⁵ June Purvis, "The Women's Party: Winning the Vote Meant Millions of Women Needed a Party to Represent Them in Parliament. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst Founded One, with Limited Success," *History Today* 67, no. 12 (December 2017): 38.

⁶ Keith Curry Lance, "Strategy Choices of the British Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1918," *Social Science Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1979): 55.

Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) that began prior to World War I, his work advanced the argument that the war did not stop the women's movement but rather gave them ammunition for their political strategy. These previous works identify the political and strategical differences between the Pankhurst sisters, Christabel a patriot and Sylvia a radical, and their followers during the war, and other historians that have expounded upon these conclusions. Connecting information of the suffragists with their own publications through the analysis of Proctor's interpretation of civilians in wartime presents a unique way of defining how the Pankhurst sisters defined a citizen's duty in the war effort.

Pankhurst Sisters – One For, One Against

Nationalism is a powerful and passionate motivator in supporting a nation's mobilization for war; Christabel Pankhurst firmly believed in her nation's participation in the war when she set aside her struggle for equality to join the fight for her country. Christabel Pankhurst was the editor of *The Suffragette* where she had the control to include articles that connected to her beliefs on how civilians, specifically women, were to behave during the Great War. *The Suffragette* was an established publication in 1912 and was focused on the plight of women and their struggle for equality. Within this publication, Christabel would intertwine her own patriotic speeches among stories of how women were mobilizing in other countries in addition to the pre-war topics and the importance of women within society. Unlike Christabel, Sylvia Pankhurst, who was estranged from her family due to their political differences, she had to create her own publication, *The Woman's Dreadnought*, to illustrate her perspective on Britain and her distaste for the war. Both publications illustrated opposing perspectives on the citizen's duty during wartime: *The Suffragette* representing patriotic support and *The Woman's Dreadnought* representing the need to political change in Britain and the anti-war perspective.

From the patriotic perspective and as the war pressed on, *The Suffragette* was renamed *The Britannia* in 1915 to represent the nation they were loyal to and to also create a united front that was not solely focused on the suffragist agenda.⁷ One of Christabel's first speeches, which was partially included in *The Suffragette*, established the agenda she would enforce throughout the war in how a female citizen should behave. Due to her leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Christabel included the political essence of women's suffrage but was sure to direct her listeners to support Britain's involvement in the war because of the freedoms they protected. She stated "Therefore, if the women of the world are to preserve and to increase the liberty they already enjoy, this country of ours must be victorious in the present war."⁸

The speech from Christabel was published in the final issue in 1914 of *The Suffragette* which conveyed a profound sense of obligation to mobilize as citizens of Britain. When *The Suffragette* began to publish under the title *Britannia*, it was evident that Christabel and her peers had done research into how a female should mobilize and support the troops during the war. Authors were not limited to women in *The Suffragette*, and in the first issue of 1915 Stephen Graham wrote an article about Russian women supporting the war and mobilizing to help their men in the war. He wrote about how Russian women were fighting for the patriotic goals of Russia which appealed to women and their emotions. For a "women's faith—that which a man and a woman realise together but which separately they cannot easily realise—enables men to face death and the mutilation worse than death calmly. It gives men fortitude."⁹ Through

⁷ Angela K. Smith, "The Pankhursts and the War: Suffrage Magazines and First World War Propaganda," *Women's History Review* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 104.

⁸ Pankhurst, *The War*, 6.

⁹ Stephen Graham, "Russian Women and the War," *The Suffragette*, April 16, 1915, Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

Christabel's inclusion of this article, it illustrated her acceptance of how the feminine role in the mobilization for war had a connection with the compassionate and influential emotions of women. A single page in this issue was dedicated to women rallying for the war effort using their various skills, the WSPU implored women to use their positions as teachers and nurses, as well as those with practical skills and monetary donations, to "rally to their country's call."¹⁰

This aligns with Proctor's analysis of the home front during wartime, because Christabel used articles that persuaded women to support the war using their personal and feminine skills.

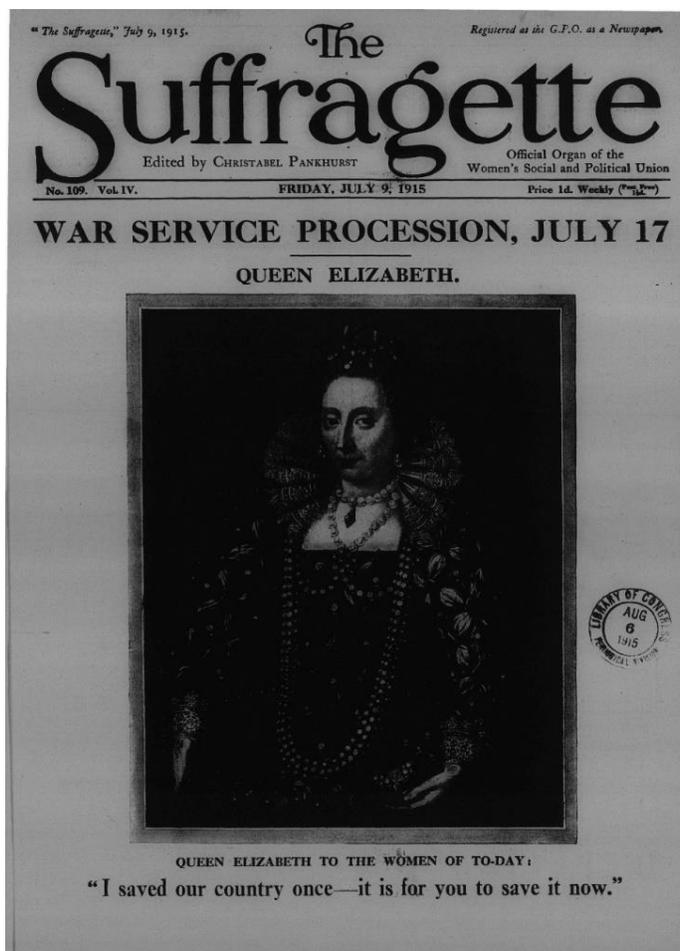
Proctor stated that "women throughout the combatant countries enlisted as nurses and nurses' aides in local hospitals, joined charitable and humanitarian organizations, provided services for refugees, wrote letters to soldiers, and lobbied for other roles in the wartime establishment."¹¹

A theme that was in each issue of *The Suffragette* focused on how women should remain loyal civilians of the British Crown but also informed citizens. Every issue included articles that brought news of the war to the women of England, informing them of the Belgium atrocities and the German agenda. Therefore, a year after the start of the war, *The Suffragette* title officially changed to *Britannia* which had the phrase "For King For Country For Freedom" above the title. Although, before the change of title, one of the last issues under the name of *The Suffragette* included an important cover that illustrated the reasoning behind Christabel and the WSPU's change of the title.

¹⁰ "Rally to Their Country's Call," *The Suffragette*, April 16, 1915, Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

¹¹ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*, 98.

By placing the Queen of England on the cover, Christabel implores the women of Britain to realize their duty in helping protect their country and the potential for their equality. The



iconic image of Queen Elizabeth illustrated a woman in power that was working on saving their country and that the women of England needed to step up to this same role. With this cover, an evolution of how the publication was going to define the duty of British women during the war began, one that would take the militant strategies of the suffragists and utilize them in defense of their country. Women were not meant to have a passive role in wartime England, in fact women were continually uplifted as an important factor in gaining

victory. In the article, "A Public Duty," Christabel outlined the necessary actions of citizens in England, which insinuated that loyalty was expected of all and her opinion that any British citizen with German blood should remove themselves from positions of power. This article implied that Christabel was giving limitations to anyone that had any connection, even if simply biological, to the central powers to make sure the government was not compromised by the Kaiser's influence.¹² It was not enough to Christabel that citizens support the war effort through

¹² Pankhurst, "A Public Duty," *The Suffragette* IV, no. 111 (July 23, 1915): [225].

their physical involvement in the war effort, but also their emotional and social support through the discrimination towards anyone with a connection to the enemy.

As Christabel was supporting the war by encouraging her followers to join in the mobilization effort and utilize the skills and financial situations they had been blessed with, her sister Sylvia was condemning British involvement in the war. In the first issue of *The Woman's Dreadnought* after Britain proclaimed war, Sylvia proclaimed that women should not give up the fight for suffrage because if women had been given the right to vote than war would have been avoided. She stated that "all the women of the world need votes. They need a powerful voice in moulding the policy of nations. Today all the women's organisations of the World call for peace, but the men-made Governments of Europe rush heedless on to war."¹³ For Sylvia, a citizen's duty during World War I, specifically the women, should be focused on finding equality within society so that they would have a say in these profound political decisions. *The Woman's Dreadnought* used voices of women from all over the world to show the distaste for the war and the lack of say that women have had in their nations' involvement. Sylvia included a statement from an American suffragist, Mary Johnston, who proclaimed that "no woman in any country has had a voice as to whether that country should go to war or remain at peace."¹⁴ Unlike Christabel, Sylvia never stopped focusing on suffrage for women and utilized the war as a way of demonstrating that women had no rights of citizenship and therefore should not support the war. These sentiments were stated alongside Sylvia's focus on labor rights for women as well,

¹³ Sylvia Pankhurst, ed., "War - At Home and Abroad," *The Woman's Dreadnought*, no. 21 (August 8, 1914).

¹⁴ Mary Johnston, "What People Say In Other Countries," ed. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Woman's Dreadnought*, no. 41 (December 26, 1914).

and how until women had equality and rights then their duty was not to their nation but to themselves.

When *The Suffragette* was retitled as *Britannia* in 1915 to show the patriotic zeal of Christabel and her followers, Sylvia used *The Woman's Dreadnought* to expand her audience beyond women to the workers of Britain and the support of labor unions and fair wages. In fact, instead of focusing on a citizen's duty, she was focused on defining the duty of Britain to its citizens. At the end of 1915, Sylvia challenged Britain with choosing a course of action in the war, "either to fight for supremacy as the biggest bully in Europe, or to endeavor to build up a more brotherly relationship between the people of the various countries, and the establishment of a fair system of arbitration." Although, she also included a third option which accused Britain of using propaganda and false promises to encourage citizens to do their duty during the war.¹⁵ Sylvia ends this issue of *The Woman's Dreadnought* with a Christmas greeting that made her agenda clear that the workers, particularly women, are the hope of the world. From Sylvia's perspective, patriotism was not enough when it came to the war, which could be interpreted as a stab as her sister Christabel's use patriotic appeals in *Britannia*. Sylvia went as far as to include a political image that illustrated the effect "patriotism" was having around the world, using the religious symbol of the crucifixion.

By the beginning of 1916, in the thick of World War I, each Pankhurst sister had clearly established their political opinion of the war, the audience they were attempting to reach, and their definitions of a citizen's duty to its country and the country's responsibility to its citizens. Christabel Continued to use her publication, *Britannia*, to push the concept of patriotism as

¹⁵ Sylvia Pankhurst, "Let Us Choose," *The Woman's Dreadnought*, no. 21 (December 11, 1915).

something a true citizen should feel. The division of ideals between the sisters was seen after the rebellion in Ireland in April of 1916, which even led to an apology from Emmeline Pankhurst, their mother, regarding Sophie and her unpatriotic actions and conduct.¹⁶ Her mother's disapproval did not stop Sylvia from continuing to speak out against the British government and



¹⁶ Emmeline Pankhurst, "Britannia," *The Suffragette* 5, no. 29 (April 28, 1916): [171].

sympathizing with the Irish rebels' plight. To Sylvia, the treatment of the Irish and the involvement in World War I was going against the "democracy" that Britain had promised its citizens.¹⁷

Identity Politics and the Suffrage Question

As the war pressed on, each sister continued advancing their argument on what the duties of the citizens were in war-torn Britain. Sylvia maintained her socialist agenda, which focused on women's suffrage and fair treatment in the workplace which in her opinion was the duty of the country even during war. On the other hand, Christabel continued with her patriotic understanding of a citizen's duty throughout the war, which included speaking in agreement with the government, financially supporting the war through a victory fund, and helping to "cleanse" the government of potential threats towards Great Britain.¹⁸ Even so, in 1917, Christabel included more prominent articles regarding the female suffrage question, as if she were tired of convincing people of their patriotic duty without any concession from the government in favor of women's rights. Christabel printed a speech by her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst, who stated as much to Mr. Lloyd George,

I represent here this afternoon the Women's Social and Political Union. You will remember that at the outbreak of war our organisation abandoned all suffrage work, and the members devoted themselves to national service of every kind...I felt that my chief duty in coming here this afternoon was to implore you, with all the energy I possess, to take charge of this matter yourself as Prime Minister, and in that way make it a matter which can be settled with as little dispute and as little contention as possible. I want to say for members of my organisation, and I think for patriotic women generally, that we recognise that in war-time we cannot ask for perfection in any legislation...The two questions I have put to you this afternoon are these. It is to be a Government measure? Are women to be included in the Reform bill...I want to tell you that if it comes, I have

¹⁷ Sylvia Pankhurst, "The Compulsions," *The Woman's Dreadnought* 3, no. 6 (May 6, 1916).

¹⁸ "Britannia," *The Suffragette* 5, no. 71 (April 9, 1917): [355].

no doubt whatever that women will work with greater energy, greater enthusiasm, greater patriotism, for the security of their native land.¹⁹

This speech illustrated that these women understood the expectations given by Mr. Lloyd George regarding their patriotic duty during the war, but also that their desire was still there for women's suffrage and equality in the government. Proctor, throughout her research of civilians on the homefront, used the terminology of "identity politics" to explain this conundrum during the war. She purports that "as war made demands on society, the fragile bonds connecting people together often were severed, and differences became a focal point for the violence and bitterness of the war."²⁰ This was apparent in the Pankhurst family, and Proctor brought emphasis to this in her discussion of identity politics and how families were divided due to "different interpretations of war, sacrifice, and patriotism" because "war meant choosing sides and taking stands, and for individuals, the expression of individual loyalties was often the first hard task."²¹

Although, Christabel and *Britannia* promoted patriotism and loyalty to Britain as their citizen's duty, there was a wavering back to the original platform and focus on her identity politics of women's suffrage. In 1917, there finally appeared to be an overlap in Christabel's and Sylvia's platforms as they both projected their suffragist agenda. Sylvia went through similar changes in *The Women's Dreadnought* as she broadened her political identity from one not only focused on women, but also the workman's class, leading to a change in the publication's name to *The Workers' Dreadnought*. "Peace, Votes, and Food" was a headline in Sylvia's publication in April of 1917, and while Christabel was not of the anti-war perspective, such as was seen in

¹⁹ Christabel Pankhurst, "Women Suffragist Deputation: Mrs. Pankhurst's Speech," *Britannia* 5, no. 71 (April 9, 1917): [355].

²⁰ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*, 241.

²¹ *Ibid*, 240.

her speech “No Peace Without Victory,” votes were also a part of her agenda.²² Although at times the Pankhurst sisters’ platforms had similar arguments, it did not stop the familial and political animosity that the war continued to encourage as they fought to determine their citizen’s duty and political identity. Christabel was adamant that the neutral opinion and anti-nationalist perspective of the socialists was demoralizing to the British society and through her words one could tell the dislike for Sylvia and her “forsaking” of her civilian role during the war.²³

Near the end of 1917, Sylvia was busy using her now called, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*, to instill in the citizens a need to stand up to the government by utilizing protests and strikes to show their impatience with the war and their need for restitution. These actions allowed an opportunity for Christabel to use *Britannia* to argue against these acts of protest because of how they illustrated a removal of these individuals from their citizen’s duty during the war. An interview in *Britannia* by Mrs. Drummond, a leader in the WSPU, gave life to their argument as she stated, “our wish is to make the miner realise that it is his duty as a civilian—because he is the trustee of his industrial comrades in the trenches—to deliver the goods to them in order to protect ourselves.”²⁴ With the war as the common denominator between the two publications, each sister used it in the way their personal political agendas defined.

Duties of the Citizen versus Responsibility of the Nation

In February of 1918, with the war still waging on in the background, women’s suffrage was finally granted in Britain, but even so, Christabel knew the fight for those rights and her country was not over. Christabel proclaimed to the women of Britain,

²² Sylvia Pankhurst, ed., “Peace, Votes, and Food,” *The Woman’s Dreadnought* IV, no. 5 (April 28, 1917).

²³ “Be Not Deceived-Evil Communications Corrupt Good Manners,” *The Suffragette* 5, no. 63 (December 22, 1917): 325.

²⁴ “Campaign Against Strikes,” *Britannia* VI, no. 21 (October 26, 1917): [161].

To-day we have got the vote. But to-morrow we shall have neither a vote nor a country to vote in unless we win the war...The vote that we now possess and must defend on the Home Front or against the foreign enemy is more than a right; it is a trust. The vote is a means of raising social conditions of the masses the people, and of so arranging the nation life that the United Kingdom may become a pioneer among the nations by its prosperity, harmony, and spiritual advance. The vote is a weapon to be used bravely and faithfully in the great Crusade which our Country and our Allies are engaged. We call upon all women to whom this ideal citizenship appeals to unite with us under the flag of the Women's Party!²⁵

The patriotism and nationalism that Christabel expected from the women of Britain was the ultimate duty of them as citizens during the Great War. Finally, they had won the vote, but it was not enough because in the mind of Christabel their citizen's duty was to unit for Britain's crusade in the war. Sylvia, on the other hand, was not convinced with these actions of parliament, and cried out for women and workers to look to the future,

Women have won the vote; no, let us correct ourselves, some women have been given the vote. The new measure only enfranchises from four to six million women out of a total of more than thirteen million...The soldier lad of eighteen years will be a voter, the mother who maintains her children cannot vote till she is thirty years of age, and only then if she or her husband is a householder or latchkey voter, and if neither he nor she has been so unfortunate as to be forced to ask the Poor Law authorities for aid...No, the new Act does not remove the sex disability; it does not establish equal suffrage.²⁶

Sylvia felt that it was the nation's responsibility to give equality to all adult citizens, and that the war was needless and taking away the government's focus on its people.

November 1918 brought the end of the Great War, and while peace was being determined, both sisters would continue with their personal agendas when it came to women and worker's equality in Britain. Christabel, throughout the war, had set aside her focus on women's suffrage to fulfill her duties as a wartime while Sylvia felt that it was Britain's responsibility to their citizens to give them equality instead of fighting in a senseless war. Proctor had stated that "equity, fairness, and shared sacrifice were all ideals during the war, but government policies

²⁵ Christabel Pankhurst, "A Call to Women," *The Suffragette* VI, no. 35 (February 8, 1918): [289].

²⁶ Sylvia Pankhurst, "Look To The Future," *The Workers' Dreadnought* IV, no. 47 (February 16, 1918), <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002236/19180216/010/0002?browse=true>.

often made a mockery of such sentiments, leading to disillusionment.”²⁷ Christabel, following the lead of her mother, Emmeline, knew that the citizen’s duty during the war was to halt one’s identity politics and adapt to their patriotic duty to their nation while Sylvia felt that the government’s role in the war was a mockery to the lack of democracy that was a part of Britain’s society.

The Great War brought to the international front the argument of rights and privileges that should be found in a nation which in turn brought conflict amongst nations, social classes, individuals and even families. Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst represent those personal differences in political ideals and definitions of citizenship within a wartime society. While the division in this family came before the start of the war, it was amplified by the conflict and their unique publications became permanent reminders of the social needs and wants that were not completely stopped due to the war. Patriotism, the ultimate expression of a wartime citizen’s duty was prominently displayed in *The Suffragette/Britannia* by Christabel while Sylvia illustrated that the needs of the people still existed during the war in her publication, *The Women’s Dreadnought/The Workers’ Dreadnought*. The question then becomes, where does the line begin between a citizen’s duty to their nation when thrust into a global war and the country’s responsibility to their citizens and the rights they are entitled to within that country?

²⁷ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*, 89.

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