

TOPPLING THE MIGHTY



Leon Kuhn's vision of the demolition of Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square — the other pictures on this page are Leon Kuhn's reworkings of the statues and the text is by Colin Gill

A new book by **Leon Kuhn** and **Colin Gill** uncovers the hidden history of London's many statues and landmarks—shedding light on the brutality of the British political elite at home and abroad. *Socialist Worker* joined them for a summer stroll through the city centre that casts a rebellious eye over imperialism's foremost figures

2 Frederick, Duke of York (1763–1827), Carlton House Terrace, just off The Mall

Frederick—the “grand old Duke of York” immortalised in the nursery rhyme, was the son of George III and the brother of George IV. Frederick combined gluttony with a disastrous military career.

In 1793 his forces besieged Dunkirk, with a view to fulfilling George III's plan to restore the city to the British. The siege failed. The following year the duke was on the losing side again, as the French swept foreign armies out of Flanders.

The British prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, pressed the king to recall the duke and the king agreed because “everyone seemed to conspire to render his situation hazardous”.

But in 1799 the king appointed Frederick commander in chief of the whole British army.

The duke promptly went to the aid of an army trying to drive the French out of the Netherlands.

That army was making progress until the duke arrived with reinforcements and took command. Collapse and humiliation came within a few weeks.



Though a pillar of the Tory party, the duke kept clear of politics, except for the question of Catholic emancipation.

He campaigned furiously against all concessions to Catholics, insisting that it was their agitation that had caused his father's madness. Frederick finally dropped dead in 1827—to the delight of all in Ireland.

1 Queen Victoria (1819–1901), memorial in front of Buckingham Palace

When Victoria came to the throne in 1837 it was like a breath of fresh air to the middle class compared with her extravagant, arrogant and stupid uncles, two of whom had preceded her as kings.

But the working class was not so convinced.

The Chartists' 1842 petition to the queen demanded she pay attention to “the great disparity existing between the wages of the producing millions and the salaries of those whose comparative usefulness ought to be questioned, where riches and luxury prevail among the rulers and poverty and starvation among the ruled”.

Victoria displayed some signs of sympathy for liberal causes in her earlier years, but this disappeared as her reign drew on.

In 1867 she complained that the Irish had never “become reconciled to English rule, which they hate—so different from the Scots, who are so loyal.

“We shall have to hang some, and it ought to have been done before.”

By the end of her reign she had re-invented herself as the Great White Queen as the prime minister, Disraeli, drove through a murderous imperial expansion across the globe.

Her attitude to British military incur-



sions into Sudan echoes those who justify troops in Iraq today:

“A blow must be struck or we shall never be able to convince the Mohammedans that they have not beaten us.”

3 George IV (1762–1830), north east corner of Trafalgar Square

When George III was declared mad in 1811 his eldest son became prince regent. The future George IV celebrated by inviting 2,000 guests to a banquet that cost a quarter of a million pounds—at least £20 million in today's money.

It was a spectacular inauguration to his career as Britain's most reviled and hated monarch ever—some achievement, considering the rival contenders.

The prince reacted against his father's dull and homely values by staking his right to an unbridled life of pleasure. He gambled excessively, and often drank three bottles of claret before sitting down to an enormous dinner.

For working people the useless, wasteful life of the king's eldest son contrasted sharply with the hardships of early industrial society. When the famines of the 1790s lowered their deathly shroud over workers, when laws against basic freedoms were signed by the king, a cartoon of his son being taken home drunk from a brothel expressed the indignation felt by the poor.



The rich, in contrast, united behind the monarchy after the French Revolution broke out in 1789. Expenditure on royal palaces shot up. The prince's fantasy of oriental splendour materialised as the Brighton Pavilion, while his London home, Carlton House, was filled with mementos of the French monarchy.

4 Field Marshal Earl Haig (1861–1928), Whitehall, near Banqueting House

Haig was the spitting image of the upper class officers portrayed in the film *Oh What a Lovely War*—decades behind advances in military technology, useless at strategy and preferring, in the words of AJP Taylor, “an unsuccessful offensive under his own command to a successful one under someone else's”.

As commander of the British forces in France in 1916, Haig decided to break through the German lines at the Somme. He ordered his soldiers over the top on 1 July.

They were to advance in line, but the mud and the 66 pounds of equipment on their backs made them a sitting target for the German machine guns that Haig had proclaimed “much overrated”.

The 60,000 British casualties, including 20,000 killed, were the heaviest loss in the shortest time by any army in the First World War. The Somme was followed by an equally disastrous battle at Passchendaele in Belgium the following summer. In all Haig sacrificed over 700,000 British soldiers, dead or wounded.



In the first part of the war, thousands upon thousands of volunteers flocked to the recruiting offices to fight for whichever was supposedly their country.

For many it was the hope of escaping the misery of their grim working lives that led them to sign up. When a large number of them were dead, others were conscripted.

COMPETITION

WHICH London statue would you nominate as the first to be pulled down?

Send your choice, with reasons why, to reports@socialistworker.co.uk—the best answer wins a copy of Leon Kuhn and Colin Gill's book.

Topple The Mighty is published by Friction Books and costs £6.99.

You can get copies from Bookmarks, the socialist bookstore—phone 020 7637 1848 or go to www.bookmarks.uk.com

Smashing statues through the ages

Leon Kuhn spoke to *Socialist Worker* about the history and symbolism of toppling statues

OUR BOOK *Topple The Mighty* involves two parts of a whole. The first part goes through some of London's statues, using them as a “coat hanger” to talk about what these people really did and who they were.

The second looks at the history of attacks on statues in London. This is something I've been researching for a number of years and was the main inspiration for the book.

Of course there are lots of historical incidents of statues being attacked around the world—it's an incredibly powerful symbol of the fall of a regime.

For instance, in 1958 the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq was marked by the toppling of statues of British general Stanley Maude and his placeman, King Faisal.

This incident had a farcical sequel in April 2003, when a handful of Iraqis with the help of a US army vehicle pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdous Square, Baghdad.

The idea was to stage a media event that would give legitimacy to an illegal war.

Tony Blair declared himself “delighted” when Saddam's statue was destroyed.

But he was not so content when demonstrators on the May Day 2000 march attacked some statues in Parliament Square and Whitehall.

He condemned their actions as “nothing to do with convictions or beliefs and everything to do with mindless thuggery”.

But the act of damaging a statue is not and never has been meaningless.

What Blair probably did not know was that there was a period of around 140 years, spanning the reigns of Henry VIII through to Oliver Cromwell, when the destruction of statues

was required by law, or at least openly encouraged by the authorities.

Statue breaking reached a high point with the English Revolution and the destruction of the Cheapside Cross in 1643.

Following the execution of Charles I, the council of state ordered the smashing of the royal statues in St Paul's Cathedral and the Royal Exchange.

The statue of Charles I on horseback that's now at the north end of Whitehall near Trafalgar Square was hidden in the basement of St Paul's church in Covent Garden during this period.

To have an effigy of the executed king at that time was tantamount to treason.

After the restoration of Charles II to the monarchy in 1660 we see the first furtive appearances outdoors of commemorative statues on London's streets.

These were originally in the gardens of the aristocracy, which eventually became London's squares.

The number of statues increased dramatically through the 19th century, aided by the spread of British imperialism and the belief that free access to art would result in moral progress and social order.

But the ruling class's representation of history has never gone unchallenged.

There was a daring attempt to topple William Pitt's statue in Hanover Square on the day it was erected in 1831.

This is part of an iconoclastic tradition that stretches through to today, with graffiti attacks on Bomber Harris's statue in 1992, the events of May Day 2000, and Paul Kelleher's cricket bat attack on a marble statue of Margaret Thatcher in July 2002—which left her head on the floor of London's Guildhall Gallery.

