

The death of emily davidson history essay



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The death circumstances of one of the most popular British suffragettes remains a mystery even for the modern historians of the XXI century. Some sources show the event as a clear act of suicide, while other present it in the light of an accident, or even an attempt of assassination.

In order to examine this event in a historical way, I am going to base my interpretations on the researched sources in form of speeches, cartoons, films, extracts from books or diaries or opinions of other historians. I will analyse the reliability of given sources and adjust them to my final conclusion.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

At the beginning of the XIX century in Britain women were still treated as second-class citizens, especially in relation to rights equality with men.

Demands for women to be given suffrage in general elections grew around 1900 because they could now vote in local elections and because of the serious advances they had made in other areas. In 1903 a feminist movement known as Women's Social and Political Union led by Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst was set up. The suffragette campaign aimed at establishment of franchise on the same basis as men as well as reforms to improve social conditions. In contrast to suffragists, suffragettes believed in "Deeds not Words". To seek government's attention they used all possible violent methods, which included vandalism, bombing of parliament buildings, hunger strikes as well as attempts to commit suicides. Such methods were not approved of by the government and so soon the suffragettes became very unpopular in Great Britain. The government used brutal methods to

suppress the feminist movement. The women used to be imprisoned, forced, or even sometimes stoned.

One of such loyal suffragettes was Emily Davison, who joined the WSPU movement soon after it was formed. She quickly became deeply involved in the actions and soon led many demonstrations in London to fight for women equality with men and their right to vote. Her death happened on the 4th of June 1913 as she went to Epsom racecourse along with many other suffragettes to watch the Derby. As the horses drew level with her, she slipped under the rails and ran out on to the course in an attempt to grab its bridle. The King's horse, Anmer, trampled her underfoot, its chest hit Emily and the impact fractured the base of her skull. She died short afterwards in the hospital without regaining consciousness.

I have collected several evidences, which would suggest, that this event was a conscious decision of committing a suicide by Emily Davison. According to my recent research, she was nine times imprisoned and tried to commit suicide before by jumping down an iron staircase at Holloway Prison, which is why people condemned her as mentally ill. She was an extremely passionate suffragette, ready to do everything for women's suffrage, and was a very close friend with Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst:

It was one of the best chances to help the cause by increasing the popularity of the movement. The presence of the media, journalists, the King and the Queen would focus the eyes of the whole world on the issue of the British

women. It could also act as a final impulse, which forced her to commit a suicide:

During examination of her body, the suffragette requisites were found, as they were taken to produce a great affair:

On the other hand, there have been many evidences found, which would suggest the accidental circumstances of the event. In the diary found in her coat pocket there were plans for days after her death. Similarly, one ticket for a suffragette meeting was found with her, which was going to take place soon after the horserace was finished. Additionally, she had a return ticket bought from Epsom to Victoria from the racecourse, which would again suggest her assumption to get back home after the race.

Some opinions claim, that Emily Davison was trying to cross the track and was hit by the approaching horse. Moreover one of her best friends admits, that the horserace was not planned to consist of a tragedy, and that Davison, who was so attached to her mother, would never commit a suicide without saying the last farewell to her and writing a letter to explain her decision to her:

My analysis is going to be based not only on written sources, but also on posters, photographs and a movie, which shows how Emily Davison died during the race.

EVALUATION OF SOURCES

Source B is an extract from the book *The Emancipation of Women of a British* historian of that specific period of history. The authors perspective is slightly

biased, criticizing the act of suicide. The source is partly valuable as it has a critical insight into the event, nevertheless presents a typical liberal of that time point of view of the author, criticizing the sacrifices of the suffragettes. It also sticks only to the version of a suicide, not considering the accidental form of the event. It appears that the purpose of producing this piece of evidence was simply the analysis of the event of a modern historian and looking at it from a new perspective, basing on more reliable sources from the right period. Nevertheless it has its limitations. The book has been published in 1970, which is 57 years after the death of Emily Davison. This means, that the source may not consist of all reliable information, as the historian hasn't witnessed the event himself.

Source D is the extract of a speech of Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter- Sylvia, who explains the probability of the accidental form of the event. The source is quite valuable as it shows different perspectives and explanations for the possible course of the event from the point of view of an eye-witness of the accident. The purpose of the speech could be mainly the discussion of whether Emily Davison's death was a suicide or an accident. It has been published in 1931, which is 16 years after the event, nevertheless this is not the limitation of a source, as it has been written by one of the eye-witnesses of the event. On the other hand it may be biased, as she was one of the suffragettes.

ANALYSIS

I am going to carry out the analysis of presented sources focusing on the arguments which would suggest a possible accident or a deliberate suicide to help the women gain suffrage.

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In Source B, Brooks claims that Emily Davison as one of the suffragettes was most eager to sacrifice her life for obtaining women suffrage, which once again states the greatest probability of her committing a suicide. It suggests that she was a very loyal suffragette ready to help the cause. This point has been supported by Source A, in which Christabel Pankhurst states that Emily Davison “waited her moment and rushed forward. Horse and jockey were unhurt, but Emily Davison paid with her life for making the whole world understand that women were in earnest of the vote.” She has presumably committed the suicide to propagate the struggle of British women in the world for gaining the right of franchise. This point has also been mentioned by Christabel Pankhurst in the ‘Unshackled’ that “probably in no other way and at no other time and place could she so effectively have brought the concentrated attention of millions to bear upon the cause.” This opinion suggests that the tragedy on the Derby Day could be a conscious decision of Emily Davison, to focus the attention of the government and the rest of the world on the treatment of British women. However, when analyzing the years after Davison’s death not much has changed. In the contrary more Bills to give women vote had been dropped and the Cat and Mouse Act was passed by the Government. Since Emily Davison’s death even more prosecutions of women took place and the attitude of the British towards giving the women vote worsened. The suffragettes were now seen as irresponsible women, who use foolish methods to achieve their aim: “except to confirm for many that a sensible idea had become exaggerated out of all proportion.”

Additionally, source C provides a specific piece of information, which could also be supportive of the point made by Brooks in Source B. During the

examination of Emily Davison's body " two suffragette flags 1 ½ yards long by ¾ yard wide" were found, " each consisting of green, white and purple stripes folded up and pinned to the back of her jacket on the inside." Source D supports this point stating, that " she sewed the WSPU colours inside her coat as though to ensure that no mistake could be made as to her motive when her body should be examined". Sylvia Pankhurst suspects a " final impulse" to resolve the situation, which could make the suicidal thought a conscious decision. As a result of that, the event could have been a suicidal act created on purpose in the most public place and area, in order to put the pressure on the Government to look upon the situation of British women.

On the other hand, there are many arguments showing that it could have been only an unfortunate accident. Because of an unpopularity of the suffragette movement, it has been claimed that someone from the crowd could have pushed Emily Davison onto the track. Nevertheless the movie clip, which shows the accident quite clearly, despite its bad quality, presents the running suffragette from the crowd and hitting the King's horse. Source D is the extract of a speech of Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter- Sylvia, who explains the probability of the accidental form of the event, which is probably at most supportive of this theory. She claimed that " a fellow-militant is whose flat she (Emily Davison) lived, had planned a Derby protest without tragedy(...)" It was supposed to be a peaceful event, accompanied with waving with a suffragette flag and trying to focus the attention of the media present. She also claims, that Emily Davison was very attached to her mother and that " she would not thus have died without writing a farewell message to her mother". Finally source C states that

The presence of the return ticket from the horserace to Victoria Station would suggest the aim of going back from the Derby, as well as having the ticket for a suffragette meeting, which was to take place soon after the race.

Those arguments on the other hand convey the possibility of the tragedy being a case of an accident.

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of presented sources can vary from person to person, and so it is a personal decision which of them one finds most convincing. While analyzing the evidence to answer my main question of Was the death of Emily Davison a suicide to help the cause or just an unfortunate accident? , I dealt with biased sources, which have their limitations. Nevertheless, some of them are more reliable than others, which allowed me to conclude on my interpretation of the event.

Sylvia Pankhurst's idea of the suicidal act being a " final impulse" turned out to be very convincing to me. In my opinion the suicide was not intended at first, that is why the requisites presented in source C were found on her person. Neither would she have time or occasion to write a farewell letter to her mother, when she decided to commit the suicide. The movie clip shows quite clearly Emily Davison running onto the King's horse, which could not be called an unfortunate accident. Additionally, Source B written by the British historian, claims that " she was the first to talk about dying for the cause". Even the circumstances of media presence were extremely favourable, which could have made the " final impulse" even stronger and the desire to die for the good cause: the suffrage of the British Women!.