

History pre course materials

- Read the article on the impact of the WW1
- Identify all the main impacts of WW1 – write them down

Look at the following websites

- [6 Ways World War One Transformed British Society | History Hit](#)
- [Domestic impact of war - society and culture - Domestic impact of World War One - society and culture - Higher History Revision - BBC Bitesize](#)
- [How World War One heralded social reforms - BBC News](#)
- For greater context of the period we will be studying watch the following documentary series – The Making of Modern Britain by Andrew Marr. Episode 3 covers WW1 (our syllabus starts in 1918 but useful for context) but episode 4 onwards are very useful. [Andrew Marr's The Making of Modern Britain 3 - The Great War \(2009\)](#)
- *Write a page explaining what you believe was the greatest impact of World War One on Britain and why you think this was the biggest impact. You should include multiple impacts to assess against the one you think is greatest.*

Gerard DeGroot

A Lost Generation?

The Impact of the First World War

Did the 'Great War' produce any winners and losers in society? Gerard DeGroot examines the evidence.

The First World War was not a distant campaign fought by a professional army, but a conflict which involved all of British society. It was virtually impossible to avoid losing a relative or close acquaintance. Beyond the direct experience of loss, war also fundamentally changed work patterns, diet, health, entertainment and the availability of goods and services. The war had some profound (even positive) effects, but ultimately the forces of tradition were equal to the challenges of change.

Industrial policy and the state

Britain, like other combatant nations, expected a short war. Strategic plans were formed according to this premise. Existing stockpiles of ammunition and supplies were considered sufficient. Munitions factories would cope with demand by working at peak production. It was not expected that a massive shift to a war economy would be necessary. The Chancellor, David Lloyd George, in fact promised that the government would 'enable the traders of this country to carry on business as usual'.

Hindsight tells us that total war produces full employment, full production and inflation. Yet in 1914 the 'short-war mentality' meant that the government expected recession and unemployment, caused by a trade slump, a fall in demand and uncertainty in the stock markets. Ministers took steps to reassure the business community and to guard against social unrest by preventing a run on gold and protecting food supplies. These preparations were not entirely unwarranted. At least initially, unemployment did rise, especially in industries directly affected by the war like fishing, food production and luxury goods.

But before the government could react sufficiently to these problems the war solved them. After a few months it became apparent that the conflict would be costly and long. Britain had then to balance the needs of the military (in munitions and troops) against those of civilian society and industrial production. Much as it might wish, a country cannot allow unrestricted military

expansion, as eventually the requirements of its gargantuan force will no longer be met by the productive capacity of its ever-shrinking civilian population, nor by its ability to purchase commodities abroad.

Britain mobilised 12.5% of its men for the forces. Though lower than Germany or France, this figure nevertheless represented the limit of Britain's capability, given competing commitments. This level of mobilisation was established not through careful planning but through blind groping in the dark. Thus, the shift to a war economy was in no sense smooth; problems were attacked on an *ad hoc* basis according to the principle of the squeaky wheel.

The improvisation of a war machine was everywhere chaotic. Government intervention, lacking plan or direction, was often haphazard. But the expansion of production was impressive. Defence expenditure rose from £91 million in 1913 to £1,956 billion in 1918, the latter figure being 80% of all government expenditure. In

1914, 91 artillery pieces and 300 machine guns were produced. In 1918 the figures were 8,039 and 120,900 respectively.

The problem of manpower

Since the first priority was the nation's survival the military had first call on manpower. Britain rushed headlong towards economic catastrophe by allowing every willing man to don a uniform. As was evident in the response to War Minister Herbert Kitchener's call for volunteers, this was a popular war and a sense of duty ran deep. Unfortunately the more successful Kitchener was at raising an army the more of a failure he was, by implication, at equipping it. The shell shortage of May 1915 arose in part because the government failed to pay sufficient attention to the industrial implications of a large citizen army. Almost all supply problems during the war were essentially

Men queuing outside Lambeth Town Hall to enlist for the First World War.



manpower problems. If coal was scarce it was because miners had joined the army. If farmers became soldiers fields did not get tilled and food supplies dwindled.

Shortages of labour were made more acute by the unexpectedly massive losses on the fighting fronts. The war, like a ruthlessly efficient blast furnace, consumed men at a prodigious rate. The economy could not long withstand this drain on human resources. There was some flexibility within the system: luxury goods did not need to be made, services could be cut back and bureaucracies culled. But eventually shortages of labour began to develop in essential industries: raw materials, food production and munitions.

Labour shortages were attacked in three ways: firstly, by managing output; secondly, by transforming production processes to use the workforce more efficiently; thirdly, by tapping surplus labour. Controlling output meant that market forces no longer determined what was produced. The government gradually asserted control over 'non-essential' industries. But manifold difficulties quickly arose. The government lacked the expertise, confidence or will to intervene, especially since those with power (the industrial oligarchy) stood to lose most from expanded state authority and were most inclined to resist it. Ministers usually appealed first for voluntary restraint, then turned to polite cajoling and only reluctantly resorted to regulation of the business community.

Technological improvements increased productivity. Assembly lines were introduced,

Their country needed them too: women working in a munitions factory during the war.



standardisation was imposed, and the pace of electrification quickened. Huge new factories allowed Britain to exploit economies of scale. Improved productivity meant that while output increased massively during the war, the size of the industrial labour force increased by just 100,000. Most of the technology existed before the war, but producers had not been motivated to introduce it, partly because secure imperial markets had encouraged inefficiency.

But science could achieve only so much. By far the greatest manpower savings were achieved through labour management. In the half-century before the war trade unions had amassed significant power for the workers by carving out small

monopolies for individual trades. These protected workers from being undercut by non-union labour, but were complex and inefficient. Under the terms of the Treasury Agreement of March 1915 most unions accepted the principle of dilution, which allowed previously skilled trades to be performed by semi-skilled or non-skilled labour. Production processes were reorganised so that the skilled workers only performed tasks that genuinely required skill.

The government sought not only to manage but also to control labour. The Treasury Agreement and the Munitions of War Act, passed in 1915, restricted the freedom (and power) of the worker by introducing compulsory bargaining and prohibitions on the right to strike. The 'leaving certificate' curtailed the ability of a worker to move to a better job. Coercive laws nevertheless could not stop determined workers from striking; industrial action increased during the war, once the initial mood of co-operation evaporated.

Conscription, introduced in early 1916 after much deliberation, was in theory another way to manage labour. It was not simply about moving men into the trenches; it also allowed the government to select those whose removal from the work-force would be least detrimental to war production. Unfortunately the government seldom used this power well.

The new labour laws paved the way for the introduction of substitute workers, many of them unskilled or previously unemployable males who suddenly found themselves in secure, relatively well-paid employment. But the most significant new source of labour was women. Contrary to myth, women who entered industry were almost



all working-class and most already had jobs, or expected at some point to work. In other words, waged labour was nothing new for them. What was different was the *type* of jobs performed. Most women found better pay and more secure employment in war industry, but the conditions were hard and sometimes dangerous. Though they gained some status from war work it was generally accepted that after the war they would give up their jobs to returning soldiers.

Housing and food

The need for labour meant that the construction industry virtually ground to a halt. Since working-class housing was already in a poor state before the war, the situation grew even more appalling during 4 years of enforced neglect. Housing shortages developed in areas affected by the wartime industrial boom. Workers left towns and villages and converged on cities, where shortages were already acute. Rampant overcrowding resulted, with a consequent rise in diseases associated with poor housing — tuberculosis, bronchitis, rheumatic fever, etc. The government could do little to alleviate poor conditions beyond promising improvements when victory came.

Gripped by a short-war mentality, the government did not at first foresee a food problem, and therefore did nothing to stop the exodus of farm labourers into factories and the military. Agricultural production was also affected by the fact that horses were commandeered by armies and factories making farm machinery were converted to the production of military vehicles. Chemicals used for fertilizers were suddenly needed for explosives manufacture.

Although the food supply was severely restricted, however, the British did not suffer the shortages common on the continent. This was ironic, given that before the war Britain could feed itself from home production for only 125 days per year. Its salvation was the navy, which insured a reasonably steady flow of food imports. Yet at the height of the German U-boat campaign in 1917 Britain was reduced to just a few days' supply of sugar and a week or so of meat.

Government intervention dealt with supply and consumption. As regards the former, the first response was to increase imports. At home, steps were taken to secure replacement farm labour. The fertilizer problem was partially resolved by the development of new sources of nitrogen. Pasture was converted to arable land, thus increasing grain production at the expense of meat. Ersatz substitutes for coffee, eggs, milk, butter and a host of other commodities were found, much to the disgust of the consumer. The process of adaptation can be traced through the humble loaf of bread, the staple of the working-class diet. As the war progressed, the milling



process became less wasteful, with the loaf darker and less digestible. Rye, oats and barley were sometimes added, while fat, salt and sweetening were removed.

Consumption could be controlled by making food less appealing: tinned fish instead of fresh, brown bread instead of white, etc. Regulations were passed stipulating that bread could not be sold until it was at least 8 hours old, and local authorities enforced 'sweet-free' days. But the main instruments of control were price fixing and rationing, both of which were adopted reluctantly since the government did not want to annoy producers and shopkeepers. But since average real wages declined by 15% in Britain during the war, the rising price of food angered workers, who also resented having to queue for scarce food. When the level of worker discontent grew sufficiently serious the government took action, introducing price controls on some commodities in 1917 and rationing in early 1918.

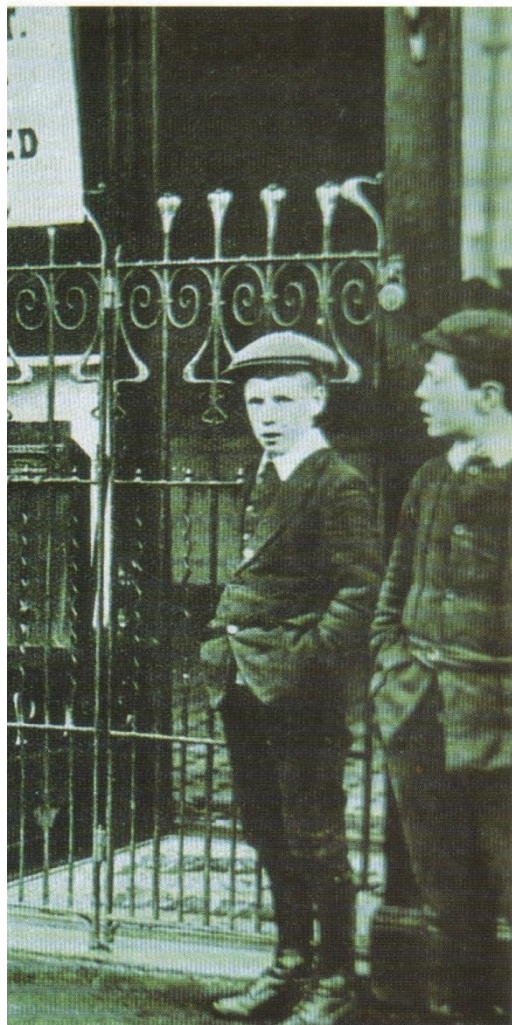
The health of the nation

With the notable exception of soldiers, war was good for the health of Britain. Improvements in living standards were not uncommon. Granted, the old and infirm did suffer. But many families experienced a rise in disposable income and,

therefore, a better standard of living. Many people emerged from the war healthier than they entered it.

Government controls improved nutritional standards. Less refined food saved labour and production costs, but also meant a more nutritious (if less desirable) end product. Whole-wheat bread was more healthy than the pre-war white loaf. Shortages of meat sometimes led to a reliance on more nutritional fish, beans and pulses. Consumption of butter and sugar declined drastically, leaving the consumer unhappy but more healthy. Shortages of sugar and grain forced reductions in the potency and availability of alcohol, with obvious beneficial effects.

Though wages did not keep pace with inflation, not all workers suffered equally. Many who had struggled to feed families due to unsteady, poorly paid employment suddenly found themselves earning unheard-of wages. Often a family pulled in more than one income, as the mother or an older child found jobs in war industries. The removal to the forces of the male breadwinner meant his income fell, but it often also meant that the biggest drain on family income was now fed, clothed and housed by the state. Thus, in some cases the amount spent on food per family member actually increased during the war, with a



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The Home Front: food shortages were common during the Great War.

resultant rise in health standards.

Dietary changes, full employment, disintegration of the housing stock, to name but a few factors, meant that families were buffeted in different directions as far as health standards were concerned. Much depended on the individual family's circumstances. If the family had children of working age, if war-related work was available and capricious illness kept at bay, the war might have meant improved health. If, however, father was away at the front and mother had to look after a number of small children in a damp, dingy flat on an income ravaged by wartime inflation, the result might mean serious diet-related illnesses and even death. What is certain is that the British were neither universally nor uniformly enfeebled by the war.

Health statistics are, however, notoriously bad at measuring grief and stress and the physical ailments associated with these conditions. A woman whose family income rose because of the war and who was suddenly able to feed her family better would not necessarily have felt that the war had been good to her. She might still have had to deal with constant, corrosive anxiety if a

loved one was in danger at the front. Or, worse, she might have to confront the death of a husband, father, lover or son.

Long-term consequences

Those who believe that total war produced a deluge of social change usually focus on two groups: women and the working class. Women, so the argument goes, gained status by moving into jobs vacated by men. This status was supposedly converted after the war into political gains and greater equality. The workers likewise supposedly made advances due to the war. Wartime shortages of labour increased the power of the working class, making it more cohesive and assertive. Government was forced to negotiate with trade unions on a more equal basis. A mixing of the classes (especially in the trenches) is said to have encouraged greater harmony between classes and more awareness of working-class conditions.

But positive effects have been grossly exaggerated. Take the case of women. During the war they were but temporary men — cheap labour. The fact that women could be paid so much less for basically similar work increased antagonism between the sexes and, needless to say, did nothing for gender equality. Women never attained the status of skilled workers, the real source of power in the labour hierarchy. Without that status they were expendable, in the same way that unskilled or semi-skilled men were before the war. Women who took up 'male' jobs understood that they were to surrender these jobs once the war ended, and usually did so willingly. The number of female industrial labourers in 1921 was lower than in 1911.

There is also a serious flaw in the argument that women gain status by taking over men's jobs. Status in a patriarchal society is calculated according to a male-orientated measure of importance. If a job becomes 'woman's work' its status declines, as does the pay attached to it. For instance, clerical work was predominantly a male occupation before the war. Due to wartime labour shortages women became clerks and secretaries, with the result that the status of these jobs declined. Few men wanted to return to clerical work after the war, therefore women remained at their typewriters and were paid less.

War reinforces the fundamentally masculine role of warrior and the feminine role of helpless maiden. Women, as sweethearts, lovers or prostitutes, satisfy the sexual and romantic fantasies of men home on leave, roles not conducive to gender equality. During the war motherhood became more important because lives became more precious. Women were encouraged to pay closer attention to the needs of their children and to have more of them. While there was a great deal of

male pressure behind this cult of motherhood one suspects that many women welcomed a return to a nurturing role, in which their proficiency was acknowledged. Marriage and birth-rates rose dramatically, a process of regeneration in which women were willing partners.

The advancement of workers after the war was also limited. No matter how much the workers' consciousness may have been raised by the war, their power was, as always, subject to the vagaries of the trade cycle. Thus, while the immediate post-war boom offered opportunities for the newly assertive working class, when boom turned to bust, the workers were enfeebled. Whatever else might be said about the turbulent inter-war years, they were not a time of notable worker solidarity or power.

In any case, class consciousness is not exclusive to workers. The middle class also had its consciousness raised. Those on fixed incomes were badly hit by inflation. Others resented having to bear the cost of the war through ever-increasing taxes. Since this war was particularly deadly for officers, the middle class suffered disproportionately high death-rates. A sense of adversity forced this once amorphous class to become more cohesive and combative. The most profound example of this attitude was their objection to funding social improvements which the workers felt were their due reward for war service.

Postscript

The psychological effects of this war are perhaps the most profound and the least understood. Some 720,000 British men were killed. Demographers argue that post-war baby booms and changes in emigration patterns quickly rectified these losses. But not in the hearts of those who suffered a loved one's death. The 'lost generation' did not consist of those who died, but those condemned to go on living. It is as well to bear in mind the scourge of ubiquitous death when considering the apparently positive benefits of total war.

Further reading

- Constantine, S. (ed.) (1995) *The First World War in British History*, Edward Arnold.
- DeGroot, G. (1996) *Blighty*, Longman.
- Turner, J. (1988) *Britain and the First World War*, Unwin Hyman.
- Wilson, T. (1986) *Myriad Faces of War*, Polity.
- Winter, D. (1978) *Death's Men*, Penguin.
- Winter, J. (1985) *The Great War and the British People*, Macmillan.

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