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## Introduction

HEW STRACHAN

In 1912, two years before the outbreak of the First World War, the London publishers, Methuen and Co., brought out 'a completely new edition, revised and brought up to date', of G. R. Porter's *The Progress of the Nation in its Various Social and Economic Relations from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*. Porter was a founder of the Statistical Society who, when the Board of Trade was restructured in 1834, was appointed to head its statistical section. He produced the first edition of *The Progress of the Nation* in 1836–8, and revised it twice, in 1846 and 1851, before his death in the following year.

Porter was writing when Britain's status as the first industrialised nation in the world enabled it to produce finished goods in greater abundance and more cheaply than other more 'backward' economies. Free trade paid, as it enabled Britain to secure export markets which others could not satisfy or at prices which they could not match. In 1846, the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, divided his own party, the Conservatives, to end agricultural protection by repealing tariffs on corn. What followed, in the words of the 1912 edition of *The Progress of the Nation*, was that 'we find the family budget of the ordinary well-to-do artisan in the towns now [contains] a range of items which only the rich could command in Porter's day'. The variety of imported food was not an unalloyed benefit, because 'the proportion of income that has to be spent on food is larger for the very poor', probably two-thirds in total, with 21 per cent going on bread and flour, and 18 per cent on meat, bacon and fish. But the point remained, that even the poorest could now eat meat once a week, tea was universal, and 'only in the remote agricultural districts' did 'the staple diet of the poor', bread and bacon or in Scotland oatmeal, still survive.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. R. Porter, *The Progress of the Nation in Its Various Social and Economic Relations from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, revised and brought up to date by F. W. Hirst (London: Methuen, 1912), pp. 435–6. For general accounts of the war which unite the military history with the social and economic effects, see Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell and Polity, 1986); and more succinctly John Bourne, *Britain and the Great War, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1989).



Figure I.1 Mars appeals to Vulcan, autolithograph for *The Daily Chronicle*, by Frank Brangwyn, 1916. Private collection: photo Abbott and Holder.

Porter's original text was divided into seven sections, but he then added an eighth to cover Britain's colonies. The 1912 edition abandoned coverage of the latter as requiring another volume. This book, on the British home front in the First World War, follows the same principle.<sup>2</sup> Both are the poorer for it, because Britain's relationship to its empire had fundamentally changed since Porter's third edition in 1851. Its control had been formalised, not least after the Indian mutiny, when the crown replaced the East India Company as the government of India. By 1912, Britain's trading relationship with its empire had also been cemented, partly in response to Britain's relative economic decline as other countries industrialised and did so in new sectors and with more up-to-date plant. Although absolute growth had continued across most sectors of the economy before 1914, Britain's gross national product had fallen behind those of the United States and Germany. Free trade was increasingly underpinned by a growing reliance on colonial markets. In 1872 British exports were valued at £315 million, of which only £66 million went to British possessions; by 1902 they were worth £343 million, £116 million of which represented exports to the empire. In 1910, India was Britain's major customer, taking goods valued at £45 million. Exports to Germany, its biggest trading partner outside the empire, were worth £37 million and those to the United States £31 million. Two of its next three leading customers, in rank order Australia, France and Canada, were dominions.<sup>3</sup>

By 1912 many imperialists recognised that, if the empire was to have a future, it would be as a federation built round these four so-called 'white' dominions. Canada had become self-governing in 1867, Australia in 1901, New Zealand and South Africa in 1907. Such ideas were developed by the 'kindergarten' of Alfred, Lord Milner, the High Commissioner in South Africa between 1897 and 1905, and from 1909 by the Round Table, a forum for the discussion of imperial politics. As a 'race patriot', Milner envisaged an empire dominated by the British who had built it, but in so doing he left India, the so-called 'jewel in the crown', out of account. He even turned down the opportunity to be its viceroy in 1905. In 1883, J. R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England* had accepted that Britain would grant India its independence, but he did not imagine it would happen in the foreseeable future. By 1917,

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lucas, *The Empire at War*, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1921–6) remains the only overall survey of colonial home fronts, but there are relevant essays in Ashley Jackson (ed.), *The British Empire and the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2016), and recent accounts of specific dominions include Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2013); David Mackenzie (ed.), *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Steven Loveridge, *Calls to Arms: New Zealand Society and Commitment to the Great War* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014); Bill Nasson, *WW1 and the People of South Africa* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Porter, *Progress*, p. 527.

however, India was represented in the Imperial War Cabinet in London, and on 20 August the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, announced that it was British government policy increasingly to associate Indians ‘in every branch of the administration . . . with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire’.<sup>4</sup> When the great powers met to make peace in Paris in 1919, India joined the ‘white dominions’ in sending its own delegation.

It was war which helped change this narrative. The empire had no united governance and no single ministry in London, but if it had a common identity, it was in part due to defence. As Milner put it when he left Johannesburg in 1905: ‘When we, who call ourselves Imperialists, talk of the British Empire, we think of a group of states, independent of one another in their local affairs, but bound together for the defence of their common interests and the development of a common civilisation, and so bound, not in an alliance . . . , but in a permanent organic union’.<sup>5</sup> The Committee of Imperial Defence, a sub-committee of the British cabinet, was formed in 1902; a colonial conference was held in 1907, and in 1909 was followed by another convened specifically to discuss defence; the newly created general staff of the British army was re-branded as the Imperial General Staff in time for the next imperial conference, held in 1911.<sup>6</sup> When Britain went to war, it did so as an empire.

In 1912 the revised edition of Porter highlighted not the role of empire, but the effects of free trade. Although British manufacturing, particularly of textiles, had stayed buoyant, British agriculture had not. It had suffered a steep decline from the 1870s, especially in the face of cheap corn from North America. By 1912 consumption of wheat per head of the population had grown nearly six-fold since 1840, but 84 per cent of it was imported, although domestic production of barley and oats still outstripped imports. The overall result was food whose prices were not only low but comparatively stable precisely because they drew on multiple sources of supply. ‘There is hardly a

<sup>4</sup> George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire at War: From Jihad to Victory, the Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War* (London: Little Brown, 2018), pp. 432–4; Judith Brown, ‘War and the Colonial Relationship: Britain, India and the War of 1914–1918’, in DeWitt C. Ellinwood and S. D. Pradhan (eds.), *India and World War I* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), pp. 19–47.

<sup>5</sup> A. M. Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics: A Study of Lord Milner in Opposition and in Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> The literature on these developments includes Donald C. Gordon, *The Dominion Partnership in Imperial Defense, 1870–1914* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Nicholas d’Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Politics: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900–1916* (London: Routledge, 1974); David G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

single article of common consumption for which we are not mainly dependent for supplies from abroad,' the 1912 edition of Porter concluded.<sup>7</sup> Nor was this a phenomenon confined to food: 'Nearly all our principal industries . . . depend largely or entirely for their raw materials upon foreign and colonial supplies'.<sup>8</sup>

Britain's security, both economic and social, rested therefore on a globalised trading system, which pivoted on London. Although British industry had become increasingly dependent on the colonies for its markets, and was still disproportionately reliant on textiles than on newer products such as iron, steel and chemicals, Britain's financial services dominated world trade. British banks provided the money, British insurers covered the risks, and British shipping carried the cargo. Furthermore, the bulk of this business was done in sterling: currencies were pegged to gold, which meant in effect that, because the Bank of England stressed its gold's convertibility, exchange rates were set against the pound.

The 1912 edition of Porter reflected this growth of, and these changes in, the British economy by abandoning the book's original seven sections and adopting a completely new organisation in thirty-eight chapters. They covered many of the same themes as those in this volume: family structures, female employment, housing, rents, crime, education, local government, agriculture, mining, iron and steel manufacture, shipbuilding, textiles, timber, food supply, shipping, currency, banking, debt and taxation. However, they contained a significant difference. The discussion of the British home front which follows rests on the ways in which each of these elements of national life and of British production responded to the challenges posed by the First World War. The war made demands of Britain as a whole, not just its navy and army. *The Progress of the Nation* discussed both services, but it assumed that war was an affair for them alone. In 1911, the year before its publication, the chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, had used his annual Mansion House speech on the state of the economy to warn the City of London about the possibility of a general European war precipitated by Germany. *The Progress of the Nation* effectively discounted such a danger.

The editor of the new version of Porter, F. W. Hirst, had also been editor of the *Economist* since 1907, and his staff compiled most of the additional material. Hirst did much to update the *Economist*: he made it more international in outlook by bringing in foreign contributors, and he widened its coverage to embrace politics as well as economics. He was also (in keeping with the traditions of the *Economist*) a convinced free trader and a Liberal closer in thinking to W. E. Gladstone and John Morley than to the 'new'

<sup>7</sup> Porter, *Progress*, p. 433; see also pp. 436–9.

<sup>8</sup> Porter, *Progress*, p. 527.



Liberals who had entered government in December 1905. He married a great-niece of Richard Cobden, who had been a Radical Member of Parliament and a prime mover of the Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840s. Hirst and his wife lived in one of Cobden's houses, and – like Cobden – Hirst remained wedded to Liberalism as libertarianism. His bookplate carried the words, 'Liberty above all things'. He rejected collectivism and social reform funded by redistributive taxation.<sup>9</sup> He was not a pacifist, because he recognised the right to national self-defence against invasion, but he opposed the South African War (as Lloyd George had done), and he saw the function of the armed forces in terms which directly reflected those expressed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. Agricultural societies could improvise mass armies after the peasants had sowed their fields, provided they were back in time to bring in the harvest. (This was a pressure that even in 1914 not all armies had escaped.) By contrast, industrial economies were not seasonally dependent, and so by taking away their workforce, war undermined productivity. They, Smith had argued, should follow the principle of the division of labour, and so maintain a professional army, small, well trained, and equipped with the sophisticated weaponry which industry could manufacture. In that way, the basic defence needs of the state could be met with minimal economic disruption.<sup>10</sup>

This was the approach to defence which underpinned the 1912 edition of Porter's work. Hirst railed against the failure both to pay off the debt created by the South African War in 1899–1902 and to return expenditure on the army and navy to the levels of 1897–8. Instead, not least thanks to the navy and its obsession with Dreadnoughts, joint defence spending had increased in the decade up to 1909–10 by £22.8 million, a rise of roughly 50 per cent. Hirst believed that cutting armaments would enable wages and profits to rise, pauperism to decline, and 'the health and intelligence of the nation' to improve. All this, he contended, could be done without danger; on the contrary, the country would be better prepared for war. 'It is positively unsafe, from the standpoint of a possible great war, to keep the instrument of taxation "at concert pitch" in ordinary times; the strength of the nation, in war as well as in peace, depends upon the soundness of its finances.'<sup>11</sup>

This was not a minority view. The Liberals, who had been in power since December 1905, albeit without a majority after the two elections of 1910, may have depended on Labour support and so more inclined to collectivist solutions than individualists like Hirst could support, but they had set out to curb

<sup>9</sup> For biographical details, see A. C. Howe, 'Hirst, Francis William (1873–1953)', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2095/101093/refodnb/3389/>; Mark Brady, 'Against the Tide: The Life of Francis W. Hirst', *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty*, 49:6 (June 1999).

<sup>10</sup> F. W. Hirst, *The Political Economy of War* (London: Dent, 1915), pp. 4–11.

<sup>11</sup> Porter, *Progress*, pp. 650–1.

defence spending. Both Jacky Fisher, when he became First Sea Lord in 1904, and the Liberal Secretary of State for War from December 1905, Richard Burdon Haldane, sought to use greater efficiency to achieve economy. In this Haldane proved more successful than Fisher. The First Sea Lord saw total spending on the navy fall from over £36 million in 1904–5 (it had been under £21 million in 1897–8) to £31 million in 1907–8, but it then rose again to approaching £36 million in 1909–10, and was estimated to exceed £44 million by 1911–12. This volatility in part reflects the point: Britain saw itself as a maritime empire, and that perception had political and popular purchase.

Both Fisher and Haldane had also designed their respective armed forces on the assumption that Britain would not commit a mass army to a war on the continent of Europe. The fleet was Britain's principal weapon in the event of major European war, and its benchmark was the so-called two-power standard, the capacity to match the next two ranking navies in the world. The British Expeditionary Force was designed in the first instance for imperial defence, most obviously – at least before Britain's entente with Russia in 1907 – for the protection of India. The decision to send the army to support the French was only reached on 5 August, after Britain had declared war on Germany.<sup>12</sup> When two days earlier, on 3 August 1914, Sir Edward Grey delivered his statement to the House of Commons on the situation in Europe, he deliberately left its employment open, taking pains to highlight its responsibilities in the wider world. He referred to a continental obligation, but it was the Royal Navy's commitment, spelt out in the Anglo-French naval agreement of 1912, to defend France's northern coastline. The strategy in the event of war which Grey outlined to the Commons was not so much continental as maritime and economic. 'For us, with a powerful Fleet', he said, 'which we believe able to protect our commerce, to protect our shores, and to protect our interests, if we are engaged in war, we shall suffer but little more than we shall suffer if we stand aside.'<sup>13</sup>

Grey's assumptions about the costs of British participation look staggeringly complacent because they are now counted in lives lost. Grey was thinking not of deaths in muddy trenches, but of the economic implications. Britain had been a neutral in every inter-state war waged since 1856, except for the South African War. Its livelihood had come to depend on Pax Britannica. When others had fought, Britain had, if possible, asserted its rights as a neutral to continue trading with both sides. By 3 August the war in Europe had already acquired a scale that made these conflicts poor precedents.<sup>14</sup> As Grey spoke,

<sup>12</sup> Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> Hansard, House of Commons debates, 5th series, vol. 65, 3 August 1914, cc. 1809–32.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriela Frei, *Great Britain, International Law, and the Evolution of Maritime Strategic Thought, 1856–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

stock exchanges were closing and runs on national banks were creating shortages of cash. 'We are going to suffer', he went on. 'Foreign trade is going to stop, not because our trade routes are closed, but because there is no trade at the other end. Continental nations engaged in war . . . cannot carry on the trade with us that they are carrying on in times of peace.' The sources of British strength as trumpeted by free trading Liberals like Hirst, its reliance on imports of food and raw materials, and its dependence on exports to balance its trade, would become vulnerabilities. If Britain itself were a belligerent, it would have to refashion its peacetime strengths into weapons of war. Those which came readily to hand for the task were those on which Britain's global trading system depended and on which it had relied in the past, the economy and the navy. As the chancellor of the exchequer, Lloyd George, put it on 8 September 1914, referring to the Napoleonic Wars, 'We need all our resources, not merely the men, but the cash. We have won with the "silver bullet" before.'<sup>15</sup>

The deployment of the British Expeditionary Force to France, although of enormous importance symbolically, and ultimately of long-term strategic significance too, was not the government's most pressing concern in early August 1914. Nor was it a 'war plan', beyond its implicit acceptance that the British army would fight alongside the French. A war plan had to be conceived on a grander scale, and to draw together all the levers of national power. Britain did not have such a plan in 1914, and nor did any other of the original belligerents. But Britain had some ideas about how the war might be fought which went beyond the narrowly naval or the purely military.

In the aftermath of the South African War, Britain had become increasingly aware that its dependence on imported food made it critically reliant on the Royal Navy to keep open its trading routes in time of war. A royal commission on food supply, set up in 1903, was confident that the navy could protect British trade, but recommended that, in order to keep the merchant fleet at sea in the event of war, a scheme of national insurance be prepared to indemnify shipowners against losses. To call what followed a 'war plan' would be to dignify a more ad hoc and improvised response, but it prepared the ground for just that economic and societal mobilisation to which Grey somewhat falteringly pointed in August 1914.

First, Britain realised that, if it was vulnerable to an attack on trade, so too was Germany. The latter's growth enabled it to enter global markets at competitive prices, and its burgeoning population depended on imports not just for raw materials but also – as Germany's population moved from the land to the cities – for food. Britain's Naval Intelligence Division planned to

<sup>15</sup> David Lloyd George, *La victoire en marche* (a translation of *Through Terror to Triumph*) (Paris: Henri Didier, 1916), p. 20.



blockade Germany. That was the offensive side of economic warfare. It would take time to have effect, and in the interim Britain would need to defend itself and to sustain its allies. The blockade carried implications for defence, including the arrangements for shipping insurance. The two elements confirmed the maritime underpinnings of Britain's strategy in the event of European war. The plan's main driver was Charles Ottley, who in 1908 moved from the Directorship of Naval Intelligence to become the secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence. He took with him, as assistant secretary, a Royal Marine captain, Maurice Hankey, who succeeded Ottley as secretary in 1912. Hankey later described the planning in which Ottley and he were engaged as involving four principal elements, economic pressure applied by the fleet against Germany, the securing of supplies for Britain, cooperation with the dominions, and the drafting of a 'war book'. The latter, approved by the Committee of Imperial Defence on 14 July 1914, was a compendium of instructions for government (including the insurance arrangements) to come into force on the outbreak of war. Its roots lay in a memorandum for the Committee of Imperial Defence drafted by Ottley in November 1909 and called 'the War Organization of the British Empire'; it had pointed out that the actions to be taken on the outbreak of a major conflict were matters not just for the Admiralty and the War Office, but also involved 'the Foreign Office, Colonial Office, India Office, Customs and Excise Department, Post Office, High Court, Home Office, and Board of Trade, and possibly other departments'.<sup>16</sup>

None of this meant that the Committee of Imperial Defence had fully anticipated the levels of economic and social mobilisation the war would require of Britain. Hankey's biographer, Stephen Roskill, highlighted both its 'failure to study the mobilisation of industry and scientific research for war, including the allocation of man power and scarce materials,' and its neglect of 'the high-level administrative machinery needed to replace conventional peace-time procedures'. His overall conclusion, albeit one written with the knowledge of two world wars, not just one, was that 'the scale and nature of the national effort required in total war entirely escaped its attention'.<sup>17</sup> Even if it had proved more perspicacious, the Committee of Imperial Defence had no executive powers. It was an advisory committee of cabinet, and one of three major organisations engaged in making strategy. Another was the army's general staff, and it got some of what it sought on 5 August 1914. The third was the Admiralty.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914–1918*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 87, 120, 122; see also Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Collins, 1970), pp. 84–5, 89–142.

<sup>17</sup> Roskill, *Hankey*, vol. 1, p. 141.

Neither of these two service organisations spoke with a single voice. Some soldiers thought the army should act in concert with Belgium, not France, and others (including Douglas Haig) thought Britain's small professional army should be held at home to act as a cadre for the much bigger force a continental war would demand. The navy was far from convinced that economic warfare should take priority over fleet action, and nor did it have a coherent view of what economic warfare should target.<sup>18</sup> Had it resolved both issues, it would still have had to persuade the Foreign Office that a blockade which sought to curtail the trading rights of neutral powers, including the United States, was in Britain's best interests, and to convince the Board of Trade that locking wartime Britain out of lucrative markets, even those of enemy states, was the most appropriate way to fight a war, especially if Britain's contribution to Allied strategy was to provide the 'silver bullets'.

These were issues that would be resolved – often messily and over time – in response to challenges that emerged after the outbreak of the war, not before. The theme for most Britons on 4 August was dramatic change, but the government's public utterances stressed continuity. That, after all, had been Grey's point to the Commons on 3 August: that Britain as a trading power would be as affected, whether it was in or out of the war. The Liberal government, however rocky its hold on power looked before the crisis, was not broken by its decision to enter the conflict. On 31 July 1914 it was about to split; by 2 August it was united. It lost only two members of the cabinet and none of the principal offices of state changed hands. H. H. Asquith remained as prime minister, and did so until December 1916. There was no Liberal opposition to the vote for war credits on 6 August. Discontented backbench Liberal MPs opposed to the war or the manner of Britain's entry found themselves isolated, while Liberal imperialists in government now enjoyed the support not only of Irish nationalists but also of the Conservative party, whose leader, Andrew Bonar Law, pledged to back Asquith on 2 August.

By the time the government did confront a crisis that threatened to bring it down, ten months had elapsed, and it was not over the decision to go to war, but over how the war should be fought. On 9 May 1915 the British contribution to an Allied offensive on the western front, an attack on Aubers Ridge, failed. The commander-in-chief in France, Sir John French, told Charles Repington, the military correspondent of *The Times*, that it was not his fault but that of those in charge of war production at home. He complained of a

<sup>18</sup> Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, part 3 is the best introduction to pre-war thinking on food and blockade. Nicholas Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) argues that an economic war designed to cause financial collapse was the settled pre-war option, but it was lost sight of when the war broke out; the evidence to support this proposition, and for this degree of co-ordination, is far from self-evident.

shortage of artillery shells, so undermining the prime minister – who under pressure from the navy had reassured an audience in Newcastle on this very point the previous month. *The Times* published Repington's report on 14 May. On the next day, Jacky Fisher, who had been recalled as First Sea Lord in August 1914, resigned, frustrated by his differences with the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, and having turned against the Dardanelles campaign, of which Churchill had been the major advocate. Paradoxically, the result was to strengthen Asquith, not topple him. Neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives wanted the election which was due in 1915. In forming a coalition government, Asquith evaded possible defeat at the polls and side-stepped the Liberals who opposed a deal with the opposition. Although he brought both Conservatives (eight in all) and Labour (a single representative) into office, the Liberals continued to hold all the major posts. No leading Liberals canvassed Asquith's removal in May 1915; that was left to Bonar Law, whose only reward was the Colonial Office.<sup>19</sup> Over the next eighteen months, Asquith's government took all the key decisions to mobilise the nation for war, and it did so with public as well as parliamentary consent. When Lloyd George became prime minister in December 1916, much of the hard work had been done.<sup>20</sup>

This was not how it seemed, especially – but not only – to Conservatives. In June 1915, F. S. Oliver, an Edinburgh-educated Liberal Radical by background, whose business interests included the London drapers, Debenham and Freebody, published *Ordeal by Battle*, a book which enjoyed an instantaneous success. Oliver was one of a group, including Milner, which campaigned for 'national efficiency'. It called for a new political party and endeavoured, without much success, to draw in ministers from both Liberals (especially Lloyd George) and Conservatives. *Ordeal by Battle* damned the outgoing Liberal government but had nothing good to say of its replacement. In the words of the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'the book is a plea for national service in its widest sense, the complete organisation of Britain with a view to victory'.<sup>21</sup> It castigated Asquith in a phrase of his own coining, 'wait and see', and dismissed him as a war leader.

Another phrase which entered popular debate – 'business as usual' – was also used to attack the government, although in this case it had not been minted by the prime minister. It first appeared on shop windows after the

<sup>19</sup> Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War July 1914 to May 1915: A Prologue to the Triumph of Lloyd George* (London: Cape, 1971), p. 267.

<sup>20</sup> John Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict 1915–1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> F. S. Oliver, *Ordeal by Battle* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 'some press opinions', inserted at the back of the July printing. See also Stephen Gwynn (ed.), *The Anvil of War: Letters between F.S. Oliver and His Brother 1914–1918* (London: Macmillan, 1935).

outbreak of the war as a demonstration of resolve, a statement to customers that trade would continue however great the adversity. That was precisely what Grey and Lloyd George wanted if the economic and maritime foundations of British Liberalism were to contribute to the war effort. But in making 'business as usual' a slogan, as Lloyd George did on 4 August 1914, the government suggested that it had not adapted sufficiently to the war, was reluctant to take the radical steps which circumstances demanded, and remained too wedded to the principles of free trade when war demanded state intervention. These charges were in many respects unwarranted, but Asquith's administration could not simply and publicly deny them without generating second-order economic and political problems.<sup>22</sup>

The government in August 1914 may have been a Liberal one, but it had moved beyond doctrinaire individualism well before the war's outbreak and its attachment to free trade did not prevent it from interfering in the workings of the market after it. In the opening week of the war, Lloyd George stepped in to steady the banks and to restore liquidity: 'business as usual' was propped up by the chancellor of the exchequer, not the workings of *laissez faire*.<sup>23</sup> The government also started buying up food stocks on the global market, commencing with sugar on 12 August 1914, but it had to do so covertly, both to preserve the neutrality of those countries from whom it purchased goods and so as not to force up prices, which domestically it fixed. Initially the war caused demand to fall, and so employers, especially in businesses that were not war-related, laid off workers. But then the war (and the state with it) generated its own demand, and by November 1914 full employment put workers in a strong negotiating position. Wages did not keep pace with prices, and in February 1915 strikes on Clydeside forced the government to arbitrate between employers and unions, a role it had persistently refused to accept in the years immediately prior to the war. In order to ensure production, it settled on wage increases which averaged 10 per cent and so threatened an inflationary spiral fed by rising prices, climbing wages, and then too much money chasing too few goods. In March 1915 Lloyd George convened a meeting at the Treasury, at which employers were not present, when trade union leaders in the munitions industries accepted the principles of 'dilution' (the introduction of unskilled labour to the workforce), compulsory arbitration and suspension of the right to strike. Within six months, the government had intervened in

<sup>22</sup> David French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning 1905–1915* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982), pp. 85–119; David French, 'The Rise and Fall of "business as usual"', in Kathleen Burk (ed.), *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914–1919* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982), pp. 7–31.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Roberts, *Saving the City: The Great Financial Crisis of 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) is the most recent account.

three markets, those of money, food and labour, and all before a coalition government was installed.

The Treasury agreement rested on the Defence of the Realm Act, which had been passed on 8 August 1914. Initially intended to tackle espionage, in practice it gave the government 'wide and undefined powers' in order to ensure 'the public safety and defence of the realm'.<sup>24</sup> By the war's end hundreds of regulations had been passed under its authority, including those enforcing licensing hours and introducing British summer time, but also those cracking down on dissent, protest or pacifism.<sup>25</sup> The very fact that it was a Liberal government that behaved so illiberally was what made its actions acceptable. The fissures in British society present before the war had not disappeared, but the idea that the war was an emergency requiring extraordinary responses could command the centre ground more easily when it was presented in terms of reluctance rather than enthusiasm. 'The fact is', a former War Office official who became assistant secretary at the Ministry of Food later in the war, wrote in 1924, 'that in the great majority of cases, what was lawful and what was not lawful did not so much matter; what mattered was the extent to which any measure commanded general support and was applied impartially all round . . . Similarly, many devices which were legally unsound or doubtful, were enforced without difficulty and accepted without demur, provided that they had behind them the weight of popular opinion and the patriotic support of the most influential men of the trade.'<sup>26</sup>

As prime minister, Asquith had to find this middle ground, and so angered both those who thought he was not going fast enough and those who felt that the economic and political tenets of Gladstonian liberalism were being forfeited to a British version of Prussian militarism. As leader of the Liberal party, even when he became a coalition prime minister, he could not trumpet what he was doing without offending yet further the party's disgruntled libertarian wing. The latter was now politically powerless, but it was vocal. Charles Trevelyan and Sir Arthur Ponsonby broke with both government and party in August 1914, to join Labour and help found the Union of Democratic Control. The latter was a body dedicated not to opposing the war (it was a bit late for that), but to demanding democratic accountability for foreign policy. After the formation of the coalition, their anxieties multiplied. On 27 May 1915, Trevelyan wrote to Ponsonby, 'When you have reached the depths of dishonesty of Asquith and Grey over the French alliance, you are capable of any immorality'. What most worried him was that the formation of the

<sup>24</sup> E. M. H. Lloyd, *Experiments in State Control at the War Office and the Ministry of Food* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> On this, see Brock Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Lloyd, *Experiments in State Control*, p. 64.

coalition would lead to conscription. Two days before, F. W. Hirst had asked C. P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, 'Do you feel as much stirred as I do about the wickedness and folly, and shame of introducing compulsory service? I feel that this, with Protection, the Censorship, and military bureaucracy would make England no place for people like me.'<sup>27</sup>

Scott did not agree, and by 1916 he would reluctantly support conscription: he saw Germany as aggressive and imperialist, and believed that, because the Royal Navy was not sufficient to defeat it, a mass army was required. Thanks to Lord Kitchener, whom Asquith had appointed secretary of state for war on the outbreak of the war (to give the job to a soldier was another illiberal but immensely popular decision), Britain had immediately set about the formation of a mass army through voluntary recruitment. Within six weeks of the war's outbreak almost half a million men had enlisted in the army and by the end of 1915 approaching 2.5 million. The effect was to draw skilled workers from key industries in unsustainable numbers. By mid-1915, mining had lost 21.8 per cent of its workforce, iron and steel 18.8 per cent, engineering 19.5 per cent, electrical engineering 23.7 per cent, shipbuilding 16.5 per cent, small arms manufacturers 16 per cent, and chemicals and explosives 23.8 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

The coalition government therefore found itself in a triple bind. First, the loss of labour and the conversion of industries to war production had undermined the balance of trade. The concentration of the remaining labour force in war production left few to manufacture goods for export. In 1910–13 the annual average value of British imports already exceeded that of exports by £137 million; by 1915 the excess had nearly tripled to £368 million, and by 1918 it would more than double again to £784 million (at current prices).<sup>29</sup> In his reshuffle in May 1915, Asquith had moved Lloyd George to the newly established ministry of munitions, and appointed Reginald McKenna chancellor of the exchequer. Despite being less collectivist in his economic thinking than his predecessor, McKenna introduced both import duties and a new excess profit tax in his September budget, a further blow to free trade orthodoxy. That, however, was not his only concern. To pay for its imports Britain was having to transfer gold, to control the sterling-dollar exchange rate. By November 1915 the pound had fallen to \$4.56 against a pre-war par of £4.86, and Britain and its allies had so flooded the United States with their treasury bills that the market for Allied stock was satiated. Here was the second problem, and one where economic and strategic considerations overlapped. British industry supplied Russia from 1914 and Italy from 1915, and

<sup>27</sup> Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928* (London: Collins, 1970), pp. 124–5.

<sup>28</sup> R. J. Q. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions, 1915–1916* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> Gerd Hardach, *The First World War 1914–1918* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 143.



British finance secured the foreign borrowing of all its allies, including France, by 1916. If Britain could not maintain its trade, it would fulfil its role as the arsenal and financier of the Entente.

The third lock on Britain's position arose from the supply needs of the mass army which it had opted to create. It had to balance the manpower needs of the army with those of industry, and it had – when distributing the munitions which its industry produced – to balance the requirements of its own soldiers with those of its allies, and particularly in 1915–16 those of Russia.<sup>30</sup> Industrialised warfare depended on artillery and especially heavy guns: over the summer of 1915 the army in France planned on adding 4,240 heavy guns to its inventory, prompting the new ministry of munitions to increase its proposed output by 1,200 per cent. Meanwhile, despite Kitchener's efforts, the British Expeditionary Force was running short of men. Voluntary recruiting slowed over the course of 1915 while what the army euphemistically called 'wastage' went up. By October it needed 35,000 men a week just to maintain its existing strength. By February 1916 it was 250,000 men below establishment, and it anticipated being 400,000 below by April. McKenna's advisor at the Treasury, John Maynard Keynes, was not sympathetic to the army's problem, arguing in August 1915 that 'the labour forces of the United Kingdom are so fully engaged in useful occupations that any considerable further diversion of them to military uses is *alternative* and not *additional* to the other means by which the United Kingdom, is assisting the allied cause'.<sup>31</sup> For Lloyd George, this was a false antithesis: Britain had to do both, to use its economic muscle and to generate military power [see Fig. I.1]. Although national service was in large part about getting men for the army, it was also a device for managing the demands of the fighting fronts while not undermining the productive capacity of the home front. In January 1916, after a succession of incremental steps, the Asquith coalition undertook the war's biggest departure from liberal orthodoxy, introducing conscription for unmarried men and widowers. The legislation passed through the Commons comfortably by 403 votes to 105 (60 of whom were Irish nationalists, although the act did not apply in Ireland). Conscription for married men followed in March, without controversy.

For most of the population, conscription was overdue. They wanted equality of sacrifice, the sense that nobody should shirk his obligations and that all

<sup>30</sup> Keith Neilson, *Strategy and Supply: The Anglo-Russian Alliance 1914–1917* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Johnson (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, vol. 16 (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 10–11; see also Hew Strachan, 'The Battle of the Somme and British Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21 (1998), pp. 79–95; Martin Farr, *Reginald McKenna: Financier among Statesmen, 1863–1916* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 285–340.

families should bear the risks and travails of military service.<sup>32</sup> The reality was somewhat different. Lloyd George had talked airily of an army of 100 divisions, twice what McKenna had in mind, and significantly more than the general staff's target of seventy. The actual result in 1916 was sixty-two, with a further five for home service. The army's size peaked in 1917 and fell thereafter. Conscription was implemented not centrally but locally, by Military Service Tribunals. Owing to the destruction of most of their records, it is hard to form an overall picture of their behaviour, but the evidence for those we do have suggests that many gave strong support to local businesses and industries, granting exemptions from military service to up to a half of those who applied for it.<sup>33</sup> In Scotland, with its heavy concentration of war-related industries on Clydeside, the effect of conscription was to cut the number of men of military age joining the forces from 26.9 per cent to 14.6 per cent.<sup>34</sup> By the beginning of 1918, this had effectively become national policy. The ministry of national service, developed in September 1917 from what had been the national service department, prioritised shipbuilding, aircraft construction and munitions production over manpower for the army. Neville Chamberlain, the first head of the department, spoke in January 1917 of creating an 'industrial army', and his successor, Auckland Geddes, said his objectives as minister were the transfer of labour from non-essential industries to those of national importance, the provision of men to the army without detriment to that work, and the procurement of substitutes for those whom the army did take.<sup>35</sup>

F. S. Oliver, Milner and those like them were delighted, but some Conservatives were not. Although none had opposed conscription in parliament (whereas thirty-four Liberals had), some of the party's grandees had only followed Bonar Law out of national solidarity rather than shared ideology. Asquith had given the job of First Lord of the Admiralty to Arthur Balfour, former prime minister and the effective founder of the Committee of Imperial

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 108–11, and what follows in Chapter 4 on 'economies of sacrifice'.

<sup>33</sup> James McDermott, *British Military Service Tribunals 1916–1918: 'a very much abused body of men'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011) looks particularly at Northamptonshire; David Littlewood, "'Willing and Eager to go in their Turn"? Appeals from Exemption from Military Service in New Zealand and Great Britain, 1916–1918', *War in History*, 21 (2014), pp. 235–58; David Littlewood, 'The Tool and Instrument of the Military? The Operations of the Military Service Tribunals in the East Central Division of the West Riding of Yorkshire and those of the Military Service Boards of New Zealand, 1916–1918', Unpublished PhD dissertation, Massey University, 2015; Stuart Hallifax, 'Citizens at War: The Experience of the Great War in Essex, 1914–1918', D. Phil, Oxford University, 2011, pp. 227–90.

<sup>34</sup> J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Keith Grieves, *The Politics of Manpower, 1914–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 104, 149, 170.

Defence. Balfour favoured a naval and economic strategy, and so his position was closer to McKenna's than to Lloyd George's. More threatening to the coalition was the position of Lord Lansdowne. As Foreign Secretary he had engineered the entente with France in 1904, and he had also served as secretary of state for war and as viceroy to India. Brought into the Asquith coalition's cabinet as a minister without portfolio, Lansdowne had doubted the feasibility of conscription before the war. In November 1916, he wrote a memorandum which argued that Britain was running out of men and resources, and he called into question the extension of national service towards which 'national efficiency' pointed. At one level his timing was good: externally the American president, Woodrow Wilson, was about to launch a peace initiative, which might provide a negotiated route out of the war for both sides. Internally it was deeply provocative: Lloyd George, now the secretary of state for war, had just rejected the idea of negotiation and had called for a 'knockout blow' to win the war. Lansdowne could not see how that could be achieved and, given the losses on the Somme, felt Britain was destroying the very civilisation it was trying to preserve.<sup>36</sup>

Lansdowne's memorandum did not in itself bring down the Asquith coalition, but it was indicative of the splits which had been latent within it, and it infuriated Lloyd George, who ultimately was its beneficiary. He became prime minister on 7 December 1916 and could now redefine the government in terms which would brook no compromise, either with the enemy or internally with old Liberals or more traditional Conservatives. A year later, on 29 November 1917, this time in the wake of Passchendaele, Lansdowne put his views before the public, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*. Balfour, still in government but now foreign secretary, had seen a draft, and another Conservative, Lord Robert Cecil, who had become minister for the blockade in 1916, regretted the tone, but not the content. Lansdowne's principal supporters, however, came not from his own party, but from disgruntled Liberals. McKenna, who like Lansdowne had left government on the formation of the Lloyd George coalition, argued that a negotiated peace would reunite the Liberals. Their problem was that Asquith was still the party leader.<sup>37</sup> Those who distrusted Lloyd George included the generals, as they were to show in May 1918 when one of their number also wrote to the press to attack the prime minister, but they were not ready to turn back to a government of 'wait and see'. The opposition to Lloyd George was an ill-assorted group who had no individual around whom they could cohere and too many discordant views to present a common programme. Lansdowne now found himself aligned with

<sup>36</sup> R. J. Q. Adams and Philip Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900–18* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 23–4, 80–1, 101, 145–6, 182–3; Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, pp. 127–30.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, pp. 248–52.

figures like F. W. Hirst, who had been asked to resign the editorship of the *Economist* in July 1916 because of the depth of his opposition to the British direction of the war, but Hirst found it impossible to bring Lansdowne and Labour round the same table. Both wanted peace, but Lansdowne in order to preserve the old order, and Labour to tear it down.<sup>38</sup>

What worried traditional Liberals was the way in which the war was being used to advance not just collectivism but also protection. Asquith's failure to appoint Bonar Law as chancellor in May 1915 was said to have been because the Conservative leader favoured tariff reform. On the evidence of the 1910 elections, neither it nor imperial preference was a vote winner. The success of the City of London in providing financial services had buttressed Britain against its relative decline in the face of American and German competition, and workers saw protection not as a device to nurture new industries like optics and chemicals, but as likely to end the availability of cheap food.

The war changed these calculations. Optics and chemicals were central to the production of binoculars, range finders, explosives and munitions, and in August 1914 the government ended all patents granted to enemy subjects. By November the Board of Trade supported the opportunity which the conflict provided to put on a sound footing domestic production of goods which before the war had been imported from Germany. As the blockade tightened the regulatory framework to prevent trading with the enemy and to sequester enemy-owned businesses across the empire, it became more than an instrument to achieve victory in the war itself. Now it was also a device to establish a competitive advantage over Germany after the war was over.

In January 1915 a group of Conservatives formed the Unionist Business Committee. Built on the cohort of party members who had favoured tariff reform before the war, it also drew on businessmen from outside parliament. The committee's aims were to develop British domestic industries and to promote imperial preference. Its rhetoric fed specifically on the idea of Germany as an expansionist and economically aggressive power. Although influential, the committee did not dominate even its own party. In a Commons debate in May 1915, marginally more Conservatives voted for the government, and so for the principle of free trade, than for imperial preference. Thereafter, protectionism gained ground, but for reasons that were pragmatic rather than doctrinaire. The pressures of war made free trade less totemic both for Liberal ministers and for its principal institutional defender, the Board of Trade. McKenna's September 1915 budget, with its import duties, can be seen in these terms. In late 1915 a Board of Trade committee, set up by its president, Walter Runciman, another Liberal free trader, and staffed by City financiers,

<sup>38</sup> G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 765; Keith Robbins, *The Abolition of War: The "peace movement" in Britain 1914–1919* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), pp. 158–9, 161–2.

refined its plans to delay Germany's economic recovery after the war. A hardening of attitudes towards Germany was a more important common denominator than any overt swing to protectionism on principle.<sup>39</sup>

These trends were consolidated at an inter-Allied economic conference held in Paris in June 1916. Its immediate purpose was to bring the British and French conduct of the blockade into closer alignment, but the French minister of commerce, Etienne Clémentel, had a yet more ambitious agenda. He saw the pre-war system of international finance as enabling indirect German control of the French economy and wanted to convert wartime Allied economic cooperation into a post-war economic bloc. The British delegation included Bonar Law, to cover the interests of the colonies, and the forthright prime minister of Australia, Billy Hughes, who would put the case for imperial preference. It was headed by Runciman, who was by now both flexible on free trade and persuaded of the need to respond to Germany. Britain supported measures to stop Germany dumping goods, to deprive Germany of most-favoured status for five years after the war, and to put in hand measures to convert the Entente into a permanent economic partnership.<sup>40</sup> Although the Paris agreement proved to be a dead letter after 1918, the thinking behind its resolutions was indicative of the direction which the British government would take for the war's last two years. With Lloyd George more dependent on Conservative support than Asquith had been, his government could be more overt in its direct management of the economy. One task justified the coalition's existence, winning the war, and that aim created the consensus which kept him in power. Although some exploited the opportunity to rationalise and nationalise Britain's domestic structures in ways which were designed to have long-term effects, strategic necessity, not economic orthodoxy, was the driving force. Despite their ideological differences, enough Conservative, Liberal and Labour supporters agreed to hold the coalition, and so most of the country, together.

As a result of the war more broadly, and of economic and social mobilisation more specifically, the people of Britain came into direct contact with the state in ways that they had never done hitherto. Before the war national identity and citizenship were ill defined, fluid and – for most people – not very important. As Hirst put it: 'You could travel almost anywhere without a passport'.<sup>41</sup> During the war, over 6.1 million put on the state's uniform, and by 1918, 3.1 million more were working directly for the state in war-related

<sup>39</sup> Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'Or et le sang: les buts de guerre économiques de la première guerre mondiale* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), pp. 193–227.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233–71.

<sup>41</sup> F. W. Hirst, 'My journal', *Common Sense*, December 1914, quoted in Caroline E. Playne, *Society at War 1914–1916* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 24.

industries.<sup>42</sup> By the war's end most of those in employment were subject for the first time to direct taxation.<sup>43</sup> The combination of press censorship from 1914 and direct state propaganda after 1917 also meant that the public's views were as much subject to state manipulation as its labour was under state direction.<sup>44</sup>

This was a process of assimilation free of gender difference. In 1912, Hirst was particularly concerned to assess levels of female employment. In 1901 just under 4.2 million women, or 31.6 per cent of all women, were employed. In some occupations, including teaching, nursing and textile production, all of which would contribute to the war effort, women already exceeded men, but the biggest single employment for women was indoor domestic service, which occupied 1.7 million.<sup>45</sup> By July 1914, 3.3 million women were classified as employed, a noticeable increase since the figure excluded those in domestic service or who were self-employed or worked from home, but thereafter the numbers of women did not rise as significantly as the war's popular narrative has come to suggest. By April 1918, 4.8 million women were employed. These included new entrants to the workforce, predominantly married women or women from middle-class backgrounds, but much more important was that the war enabled about 70 per cent of women to change jobs. 'The dilution of labour' combined with the growth of war-related industries, especially in munitions, to encourage women to move from domestic service to the factory, or from one form of factory work to another. Women were distributed across more workplaces because of the war, and so permeated every aspect of national mobilisation (including in the home as *de facto* single parents), but as with men they migrated towards jobs that served the state. It was this attribute that secured public recognition [see Fig. I.2].<sup>46</sup>

The war had nationalising and homogenising effects that both broke down regional difference and, as people moved in or out of tight-knit communities, made them more aware of it. Much of the country's mobilisation was built on regional hubs, from the National Shell Factories to Military Service Tribunals, but local peculiarities were suffused with national commonalities. In late 1914, the 51st Highland Division, formed of Territorial soldiers from the north of

<sup>42</sup> Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, pp. 47, 72

<sup>43</sup> Martin Dauntton, 'How to Pay for the War: State, Society and Taxation in Britain, 1917–24', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), pp. 882–919.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914–18* (London: Macmillan, 1982); David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Stephen Badsey, *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda* (Warwick: Helion, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Porter, *Progress*, pp. 28–32.

<sup>46</sup> Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (first published 1981; London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 44–50.





**Figure I.2 Female workers feeding the charcoal kilns for refining sugar in the Glebe Sugar Refinery, Greenock.** Photo by George P. Lewis for the Ministry of Information, November 1918. Imperial War Museum Q 28350.

Scotland, was quartered in Bedford to complete its training before moving to France. For the town's residents, unfamiliar with the Scottish rites to see in the new year, Hogmanay 'got somewhat confused with the tales of the St. Bartholomew Massacre', and as a result 'there was urgent talk as to how the wild Highlanders could be controlled during this most dangerous festivity'. More seriously, many of the Highlanders, having lived in remote rural communities, had not developed any immunity to measles and eighty-five died.<sup>47</sup>

Britain was a base in the First World War but largely for British forces only, and not – as it was to become in the Second World War after the fall of France – as a staging post or jumping off point. Forces that came to fight in Europe from overseas, the Indians in 1914, or the Australians and New Zealanders after Gallipoli in early 1916, went straight to France, landing at Marseilles. The same applied to the American Expeditionary Force after the entry of the United States in 1917; it crossed the Atlantic directly to Brest or Le Havre. The Canadian Corps spent the winter of 1914–15 on Salisbury Plain,

<sup>47</sup> W. N. Nicholson, *Behind the Lines: An Account of Administrative Staffwork in the British Army 1914–1918* (London: Cape, 1939), pp. 38, 42, 51.

but otherwise the British population only saw the soldiers of its empire when they were convalescing from their wounds or in London on leave. The Royal Navy too, for all that Britain's maritime industries were central to its war effort, was comparatively invisible. The reorientation of Britain's maritime defences from the south coast facing France, to the east and the North Sea to face Germany, meant that the navy's principal anchorage was at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Because the battle cruisers were based at Rosyth on the Forth, dark blue uniforms were in evidence on the streets of Edinburgh, but khaki – for all Britain's maritime pre-eminence – was the dominant colour across the British Isles. Although the fear of a German invasion peaked in the first winter of the war, it never entirely disappeared. In January 1918, there were about 1.5 million soldiers in Britain. Some were recovering from their wounds or under training, and many were there to deal not with Germans, but with domestic dissent, labour unrest or renewed Irish insurrection.<sup>48</sup> To that number must be added the Volunteer Training Corps, a forerunner of the Home Guard in the Second World War, which most of those granted temporary exemptions from conscription were required to join.

These fears of danger within, as well as the threat from without, provide a corrective to any narrative that argues that patriotism and national unity had obliterated social division and economic difference. This is not to deny that the shared hardships of war, and the principle of equality contained in the introduction of conscription in 1916 or of rationing in 1918, did not have unifying effects. Nothing in the war matched the disruption to industry of 1912, when almost 41 million working days were lost to strikes. That peak had already fallen to under 10 million by 1914, when 326,000 workers struck. But these trends were definitively reversed after 1916. In 1918, 923,000 workers struck and 5.9 million working days were lost. Trade union membership doubled between 1914 and 1920, to exceed 8 million and embrace almost half the workforce.<sup>49</sup> With revolution in Russia in 1917, these trends reinforced the fear that social discontent could be converted into political action. As the end of the war approached, the Fabian, Beatrice Webb, was imbued with a sense of foreboding, 'of an old order seriously threatened with dissolution without any new order being in sight'. Victory had created expectations which she felt were unlikely to be fulfilled – those of the returning soldiers and sailors, those of workers on full employment and earning high wages, and those of the new women voters. 'The Bolsheviks

<sup>48</sup> Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent*, pp. 271–302.

<sup>49</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 110, 123; John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 396; Gregory, *The Last Great War*, pp. 288–9.

grin at us from a ruined Russia and their creed, like the plague of influenza, seems to be spreading from one country to another.<sup>50</sup>

The fear of the Boche was becoming the fear of the Bolshevik. In 1917–18 John Buchan wrote the third of the Richard Hannay spy stories, *Mr Standfast*. Although it appeared in serial form during the war, the book itself was not published until 1919.<sup>51</sup> That Buchan found the time was extraordinary: he was appointed director of the Department of Information in 1917 and in February 1918, when it was converted into a fully-fledged propaganda ministry under Lord Beaverbrook, its director of intelligence. The concerns of his job are evident in the plot of *Mr Standfast*, a case of fiction matching fact. Much of the action is set in Britain itself, and its underlying message is not just the need for perseverance, as its title's reference to *Pilgrim's Progress* infers, but also unity within Britain even when appearances suggested the opposite. Andrew Amos, one of the book's supporting cast, is a Glasgow shop steward, a representative of the unofficial trade union movement on whom the strikes were blamed. He is also an old-fashioned Gladstonian Liberal determined to defeat the Germans. Similarly, Launcelot Wake, encountered in a thinly disguised Letchworth Garden City, is both a pacifist and ultimately a patriot. *Mr Standfast*, with its message of cross-party respect and social solidarity, is a portrayal of the challenges facing the British home front in 1917–18.

The novel's climax is staged on the western front. Like other propagandists, Buchan knew by 1917–18 that what happened in battle and what happened at home were interdependent. During the war, soldiers wanted news of home and looked forward to the day when they would return.<sup>52</sup> Those at home went to extraordinary lengths to discover how their loved ones, if they had been killed in action, had died, and in the process exposed themselves to harrowing revelations and grim realities.<sup>53</sup> For both sides in these relationships, postal services were central to the maintenance of morale, and the interplay between home and the front could have mutually reinforcing effects, whether they were beneficial or disruptive. What those at home were not prepared for was how difficult those who had been in battle would find the readjustment to the routines of peace. What soldiers, who had been absent for so long, could not

<sup>50</sup> Diary entry of 4 November 1918, in Margaret I. Cole (ed.), *Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1912–1924* (London: Longman, 1952), p. 134; see also 11 November 1918, p. 136.

<sup>51</sup> Ursula Buchan, *Beyond the Thirty-Nine Steps: A Life of John Buchan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 213–15.

<sup>52</sup> A point evidenced in their songs: John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Trail: What the British Soldier Sang and Said in the Great War of 1914–1918* (revised edition, London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), pp. 19–20; on the interactions, see also Hallifax, 'Citizens at War', pp. 297–9.

<sup>53</sup> Eric F. Schneider, 'The British Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau: A Case of Truth-Telling in the Great War', *War in History*, 4 (1997), pp. 296–315.

appreciate until they returned was how much both their families and their parent societies had also been changed by war.

In particular, they too had been in the front line. On 16 December 1914 German battle cruisers had raided the Yorkshire coast, bombarding the ports of Hartlepool (which was defended), Scarborough and Whitby (both of which were not). The dead totalled 140 and the wounded about 372, and many were women and children.<sup>54</sup> On the night of 31 May 1915, the German navy switched to airships, launching the first Zeppelin raid on London. In all there were twenty-six raids on the capital. The last was delivered on the night of 19 May 1918 by the army, using Gotha bombers. The reach of German airpower threatened the whole of the east coast, from Cromarty in the north to Essex and Kent in the south, and extended westwards into the Midlands. More than half the casualties, 1,394 killed and 3,349 wounded, were inflicted on London.<sup>55</sup> A great many, but not all, of them were civilians. In H. G. Wells's *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, another fictional portrayal of the home front, written in 1915 and published in September 1916, the aunt of the eponymous hero is injured in a Zeppelin raid on an Essex sea-side town. 'Five minutes before, Aunt Wilshire had been sitting in the boarding-house drawing-room playing a great stern "Patience" . . . Five minutes later she was a thing of elemental terror and agony, bleeding wounds and shattered bones, plunging about in the darkness amidst a heap of wreckage.' She suffers a protracted death in hospital, and Mr Britling, with an image of the German crown prince in his mind, rages, 'we will teach them a lesson yet!'<sup>56</sup> His desire for vengeance may have been fictional, but in 1915 an eleven-year old girl wrote after a night-time Zeppelin raid, 'I felt I could fly to Germany and do the same thing to them.'<sup>57</sup> By late 1916 boroughs in Essex were passing resolutions calling for reprisal raids.<sup>58</sup>

Nor were enemy attacks the only risk of sudden death to which the war exposed those at home. Munitions production was inherently dangerous work:

<sup>54</sup> John Buchan, *Nelson's History of the War*, vol. 5 (London: Thomas Nelson, 1915), pp. 78–86.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Castle, *The First Blitz: Bombing London in the First World War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2015), p. 191; Joseph Morris, *The German Air Raids on Great Britain 1914–1918* (London: Sampson Low, nd), p. v says 1,413 were killed and 3,408 wounded, and gives a full list of localities, pp. 263–8; L. E. O. Charlton, *War over England* (London: Longmans, 1936), provides a map showing 'the shadow of the airship raids', between pp. 8, 9. Frederik C. Gerhardt, *London 1916: die vergessene Luftschlacht* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019), p. 167 uses British official returns to give much lower figures: 557 dead and 1,358 wounded.

<sup>56</sup> H. G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (London: Cassell, 1916), pp. 290–1; italics in the original. On the effects on attitudes, see Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Julian Walker, *Words and the First World War: Language, Memory, Vocabulary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) p. 244.

<sup>58</sup> Halifax, 'Citizens at War', pp. 120–1.

106 men were killed and 66 wounded by an explosion at Faversham on 2 April 1916; 69 people were killed and 400 injured at the Brunner, Mond and Co chemical factory in Silvertown on 19 January 1917; and 134 killed and an unknown number injured at a National Shell Filling Factory at Chilwell on 1 July 1918. The chemicals used in the manufacture of TNT were poisonous. The fact that their most visible effect was jaundice led to the female munitions workers being called ‘canary girls’; 52 died from the effects in 1916, 44 in 1917, and 10 in 1918. These are all official figures, and they probably conceal significant under-reporting for reasons of public morale. ‘Certainly hundreds, perhaps upward of a thousand’ were killed in the manufacture of munitions [see Fig. I.3].<sup>59</sup> Those in the armed forces who were killed or even died from disease at home were duly commemorated by the Imperial War Graves Commission; those who were civilians were not, and even today they tend not to be numbered in the conventional reckonings of Britain’s war dead. Their most obvious memorial is that to eighteen school pupils killed in the first daylight raid in Poplar on 13 June 1917.

The war changed language, as it changed so much else, and those changes could be assimilated and become permanent. The phrase ‘home front’ is conventionally seen as one such innovation.<sup>60</sup> However, since its first employment was not until April 1917, and even then seems to have been unique, it is doubtful how regularly it was used during the war itself.<sup>61</sup> In any case such phrases, for all the public recognition of munitions workers or the Women’s Land Army, could also be ironic. The soldiers regarded only the slang which they coined as legitimate, thus reflecting their belief that their experience of the war was the defining one.<sup>62</sup> The point about the ‘home front’ was in part exactly that: it was not really a front, and yet it might still rupture – as seemed increasingly likely in 1917–18. In the dominions ‘home front’ was rarely used, not least because many of their soldiers were first generation settlers for whom ‘home’ meant not the country to which they had emigrated and whose uniform they wore, but Britain.<sup>63</sup> In other belligerent countries, whose soldiers similarly tended to lead the way in developing a new argot, and who were also

<sup>59</sup> Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 9–10, 80–86; for Faversham, see Brian Dillon, *The Great Explosion: Gunpowder, the Great War, and a Disaster on the Kent Marshes* (London: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>60</sup> As cases in point: John Williams, *The Other Battleground: The Home Fronts: Britain, France and Germany 1914–1918* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1972), p. 1; Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, pp. xv, 38.

<sup>61</sup> *The Times* used it; see Walker, *Words and the First World War*, p. 211.

<sup>62</sup> Walker, *Words and the First World War*, pp. 236–9, 263–5.

<sup>63</sup> Loveridge, *Calls to Arms*, pp. 44, 192; however, note the title of Steven Loveridge and James Watson (eds.), *The Home Front: New Zealand Society and the War Effort 1914–1919* (Auckland, 2019) in New Zealand’s Centenary History Programme. I am grateful to Ian McGibbon for discussing this point with me.



**Figure 1.3 On munitions: dangerous work (packing TNT)**, lithograph by Archibald Standish Hartrick, from *The Great War: Britain's Efforts and Ideals*, no. 59, published by the Fine Art Society for the Department of Information, 1917. National Museum of Wales.

concerned about the resilience of those at home, they spoke of 'the rear', not the 'home front'. The 'rear' was still the source of supplies and succour, but it was self-evidently not a front.

In 1939, a Canadian, Frank P. Chambers, published a book which combined both thoughts. Its title was *The War behind the War 1914–1918: A History of the Political and Civilian Fronts*. Given the date, *The War behind the War* could have been read as a warning from the past for an imminent future. In 1939, unlike 1914, Britain did have a war plan. In many respects it made explicit what had been largely improvised a quarter of a century before: it proposed to blockade Germany, although this time with greater precision in the hope of quicker effects, and it intended to draw on the resources of the empire on the assumption that the war would actually be a long one. The weight was once again on sea power, and only a small army would go to Europe. Still called the British Expeditionary Force, it was made up of ten divisions (as opposed to six in 1914), and so, as in 1914, it was secondary to



the army of France. But in other respects, there were innovations: the Royal Air Force had been created and planned direct attacks on Germany, shadow factories had been identified for the conversion of industry to war production, and conscription introduced so that the allocation of manpower could be done 'scientifically'.

That was an adverb used by Sir William Beveridge in a lecture he delivered on 29 February 1940 on the lessons he had drawn from the First World War. In 1914–18 he had managed first labour and then food, and after the war he, together with Hirst and Keynes, had served on the British editorial board of the Carnegie series, the *Economic and Social History of the World War*. Hirst wrote the summary volume on *The Consequences of the War to Great Britain* (1934) and Beveridge those on insurance (1927) and food control (1928). Beveridge's lecture stressed the bottlenecks in the war economy and the importance of coordination in resolving them. 'It is a waste of power', he wrote, 'to have more men in the firing line than one can supply with guns to fire, more guns than shells, more or fewer shells than fuses, more or fewer ships than crews to man them, more munitions or food bought abroad than one can find ships to carry, more ships waiting in port for cargoes than there are cargoes ready bought for them to bring.' The state might apply 'total strength' in war but without coordination it would not extract the best advantage from that effort. He called the war on which Britain had embarked in 1939 'totalitarian war', a description he also thought applied to the sort of war waged by the Lloyd George coalition. Here at least was one lesson learnt.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Beveridge had learnt another lesson. Political rights, which had been granted to men and women with the extension of the franchise in 1918, were not sufficient reward for economic and social mobilisation in a democratic state. The Beveridge report, which in 1942 proposed a plan for universal social security, 'provided' in the verdict of A. J. P. Taylor 'against past evils', those of abject poverty and mass unemployment.<sup>65</sup> Although these had been major problems after 1918, they would not be after 1945. F. W. Hirst condemned 'the Beveridge Hoax', but for him too the First World War remained the reference point. In 1940 he told Basil Liddell Hart that he remained 'a constant Lansdownian'.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> William Beveridge, *Some Experiences of Economic Control in War-Time*, Barnett House Papers, no. 23 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 1, 27–8.

<sup>65</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 565.

<sup>66</sup> Howe, 'Hirst, Francis William'.