

In what ways did
world war i affect the
lives of civilians



As both Britain and Germany were forced to direct all efforts of the nation's people and resources into the war, the war was no longer fought only on the battlefield - a new front was created. The home front. The lives of civilians were greatly affected as their countries economies and supplies suffered and the government extended their powers to control almost every aspect of their lives. As they experienced food shortages, a failing economy and deteriorating living and working conditions, the government also enforced harsh restrictions on their lives as well as introducing censorship and propaganda.

Britain's war time slogan ' Business as usual' rested on the belief that the war would be a decisive victory that would be over by the end of 1914.

Leaders, however, did not anticipate the turn of the war - and were ultimately fairly unprepared. Compared with that of Germany, the British industrial system in 1914 was out of date and inefficient; therefore, an enormous effort was required to prepare for effective war production.

Britain's expected victory was a victory designed for a war of movement, and by 1915 they had realized that without the large supplies of artillery and ammunition needed for trench warfare, effective offensive battles would not be possible.

As Britain geared up for Total War - channeling all activities of civilians and industry into the war effort, a growing demand for munitions, men, and machinery forced the government to intervene more and more in the management of the economy. Historian Arthur Marwick sums up the changes in this way - ' Old economic theories were abandoned, indelible outlines for

future social reform drawn, yet (during 1917 and 1918) working- class discontent and industrial unrest reached a peak.'

The Defence of Realm Act (DORA) gave the government almost unlimited powers to introduce any regulations it considered necessary for the war effort. The new laws imposed forced British citizens to live under strict controls - suspending civil rights for the duration of the war. Privately- owned railway companies and dockyards came under military control, police could arrest without a warrant, and workers could be directed to specific jobs.

By 1917, the British citizens were aware of the huge increase in the number of rules and regulations that controlled their lives. Under the Defence of Realm Act, civilians were not permitted on railway property without authorization, to buy binoculars without official permission, to fly kites that could be used for signaling, to send letters abroad written in invisible ink or give bread to animals.

The Ministry of Munitions was established in June of 1915 with the aim of organize British industry so that factories and workers could be ' coordinated into a gigantic arsenal for the paramount task of producing the guns and shells sufficient to meet the voracious and ever- growing demands of the battlefield'.

The first Munitions Act to be passed was the unpopular Leaving Certificate. Men or women in munitions factories were unable to leave their jobs unless first they obtained a Leaving Certificate. Without this they could not get work for six weeks.

In her book *The Home Front*, Sylvia Pankhurst quotes some example of penalties imposed on workers under the Munitions Act: ' a fitter fined 3 pounds for leaving his employment, seventeen strikers in Glasgow fined 10 pounds each, or thirty days in prison, employees in Liverpool fined 3 pounds each for being late to work on Monday after working long hours during the weekend.'

Total War brought major administrative and legislative changes to. The government transformed the British economy from one dominated by the principals of free trade and free market to one dominated by government controls and planning. The administration of the war had resulted in the formation of new government departments, a vastly increased Civil Service, and substantial increases in taxation.

Herbert Asquith and David Lloyd George used the Defence of Realm Act to increase the part played by the government in all sectors of community life. Both the Manpower Board and the Munitions War Act of 1915, and the Ministry of Labour Act 1916 extended government control over wages, hours, working condition, and the nature and volume of production.

Soon, Britain was faced with a severe food shortage crisis. By sinking Allied merchant shipping the Germans hoped to starve Britain into surrender. The Kaiser threatened: ' We will frighten the British flag off the face of the waters and starve the British people until they, who have refused peace, will kneel and pray for it'. In 1916 the Ministry of Food was established, which rationed food so that by 1917, meatless days were imposed, as well as restrictions on the number and quality of meals that could be served in hotels and

restaurants. Civilians were also urged to turn any spare land over to food production. By 1918, meat, sugar, butter, and eggs had all been rationed. Also, to conserve power, lighting was banned in entertainment places and restaurants after 10.30 pm. and nation-wide anti-waste campaign was launched.

As a result of the entire economy directed towards financing the war, prices rose dramatically so that between July 1914 and June 1918, the cost of living for an unskilled worker's family rose by 81 percent, while the cost of living for a skilled worker's family rose by 67 percent.

The effects of Total War were much more severe in Germany than they were in Britain. Although in comparison to Britain they had a large, well-trained army from conscription, and an efficient industrial complex, they were badly exposed over imports. A Royal Navy blockade on German trade routes took away almost 80 percent of Germany's export market - drastically affecting the economy, but more importantly, ceases imports of war products and food - of which one third was imported from other countries. Six months into the war, and already the Germans had on their hands a severe food shortage crisis. It was in Germany that the shortages were greatest, where civilian deaths from starvation greatly exceeded pre-war estimates.

The OHL (General headquarters) came to dominate decision making over both the military and civilian spectrum, which became most apparent when Hindenburg and Ludendorff took control from 1916 onwards.

The KRA (Raw Materials Board) was established after Walter Rathenau

persuaded the War Ministry in August 1914 to set up the department as <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-did-world-war-i-affect-the-lives-of-civilians/>

needed to make up for the lack of economic planning that had gone into the war, and in order to co- ordinate programs to ensure supply of vital food and raw materials.

This included regulation of supplies - of which aimed at rationing and controlling production of resources. The Central Purchasing Agency was established in Berlin to buy grain from neutral countries. In 1915, the Imperial Grain Office was created, as was the Imperial Potato Office. Also, by 1915, bread became rationed as was fats, sugar, meat, and potatoes - many of which ended up disappearing completely.

The OHL also introduced synthetic manufacturing, which replaced natural or imported products. For example synthetic nitrates, which solved problems of importing from Chile.

Substitutes such as ersatz were introduced and used for products like coffee - which contained roasted barley, rye, chicory, and fig. Bread went through various stages and by 1918 contained large amount of sawdust and chalk.

The Kriegsernährungsamt was the agency charged with feeding the nation, as well as controlling, rationing, and prices. The German economy soon became closer to resembling a socialist state. In 1916 the Supreme War Office was established, which had direct control over all war matters. From December 1916, the Auxiliary Service Law controlled the bulk of Germany's Industrial Labour Force, making any males between the ages of 17 and 60, if not enlisted in the army, subject to a kind of labour conscription.

However, despite the government's many efforts, production continued to drop and shortages increased. For example, from 1913 to 1917, agricultural production had dropped by 50 to 70 percent and Industrial production by 30 to 40 percent. The nitrate began to be used for munitions, and therefore became unavailable for fertilizer. Horses needed to be used in the war effort for army transport, and was not available for farmers to use to plough the fields. The years of 1916 and 1917 saw bad seasons and poor harvests. Potato crops in effect became destroyed and turnips became a standard part of the diet - leading to the infamous title of the ' Turnip Winter'.

Production continued to drop despite the effects of Total War due to low vitality and morale of the labour force, which made it difficult to maintain production. By 1917, the people of Germany were eating only half the individual's daily calorie requirement - and soon opposition to the war dramatically began to surge with widespread social discontent and political unrest developed.

To finance the war, the Minister of Finance Karl Helferrich ordered the print of more notes, which created critical inflation problems. Helferrich also went on a borrowing spree of war bonds, which lead Germany into an enormous national debt. The inflation problem did not stop, however, after 1918 - and by 1923, Germany was experiencing hyper- inflation.

Propaganda was used at the start of the war in Britain to promote patriotic support for the war and to encourage men to enlist. Later in the war, it was used to maintain national sacrifice and unity on the home front.

British propaganda depicted Germans as savage barbarians. They labeled Germany responsible for the war. Photographs in newspapers were also used in the propaganda campaign. Shots could often be rigged, for example battle- front scenes were set up to give positive view of the front- line. Another example of this kind of propaganda was a photograph in the Daily Mirror of 25 July 1915 showed German cavalry officers gloating over their spoils following an episode of pillaging in Belgium.

They are seen laughing and holding valuable silver items, obviously plundered from an innocent Belgian villager's home. In fact the same picture had appeared in the Berliner Lokanzeiger on 9 June 1914, two months before the war. It was actually a picture of German officers who had just won an equestrian competition. There was a Secret War Propaganda Bureau, which was the official government branch responsible for propaganda at the beginning of the war, before being passed on to the Department of Information and then at the end of the war the Ministry of Information, created by Lloyd George.

Britain used the church itself in its propaganda campaign - with the idea of self- sacrifice as a way to salvation. In sermons the idea of God ' on our side' was reinforced - illustrating the Germans as evil and worse still, un-Christian. Dr. Arthur Winnington- Ingram was one such bishop known for frequent pro- war sermons.

In Germany, propaganda echoed that of Britain. The German soldiers were presented as heroes, saving the fatherland from destruction. However,

German propaganda was not as effective as Britain, so there was a need to introduce censorship.

German censorship included controlling information that was received from the front line - and when the civilians discovered the amount of German casualties in 1918 there was a genuine shock.

The authorities also tried to ban peace moves in the press - and the government never told the German people about the 1915 peace demonstrations in Berlin. International peace efforts were also censored and civilians were also denied information about low troop morale, casualties and desertions.

The impact of World War I on both the British and German home- fronts as each nation entered into a state of Total War - was immense. In Britain, as the Defence of Realm Act extended government control over wages, hours, the nature and volume of production, and almost every aspect of civilian lives, the citizens suffered greatly amid a failing economy and deteriorating living and working conditions as prices rose and food shortages worsened. In Germany, the effects of Total War and the impact of the war were much worse.

With major blockades on both war supplies and food, the civilians suffered greatly with both living conditions and their civil liberties and freedom. As the war demanded increased effort, the strain on the civilians continued to grow - and from the effects of Total war to the impact of censorship and propaganda, both the Britain and German home- fronts found themselves

involved in the First World War more than they ever could have possibly imagined.