

What ways were the
lives of people at
home affected by the
first world war



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The First World War introduced many new opportunities and experiences for the lives of the people at home. Some of these changes benefited people and some did not.

A lot of women had to become stronger and take on tasks like never before. Acts such as DORA were introduced, as were propaganda and censorship among others. People were suddenly face to face with new ideas and prospects. Women were a major group of society that were affected and arguably the most. Everything about their lifestyle changed.

The one area in which it changed the most was in employment. Before the war, few women worked as domestic servants only and were generally seen to look after children and the house. But with an ever increasing number of men needed to fight the war, thousands of job vacancies arose with nobody to fill them except women. This wasn't a problem for government departments who immediately employed 200, 000 female clerks. However the manufacturing industry created problems. Employers were very reluctant to take on female workers.

Especially as they were taking 'men's jobs'. They didn't think that the women were capable of such labour and feared trouble from the unions. The unions didn't like the idea of women employees; they feared that when the men came back from the war, women would have replaced them in their jobs. To overcome this, the unions forced employers to pay the women workers the same amount as men. However soon the men would have to change their minds about female employees.

The shortage of engineering workers became desperate by 1916. Especially as more munitions and supplies were needed and thousands of men were leaving their jobs to fight. So by the end of the war almost 800, 000 women had been employed to work in engineering industries. Men's attitudes changed towards women's work and there is a large amount of evidence to support this fact; one source from the trade journal, *The Engineer*, shows this.

It describes an employer explaining that the work done by women is 'not of the repetitious type' and it 'taxes the intelligence of the operative to a high degree'. It then continues saying that the work is done to a 'high pitch of excellence'. Another source that supports the changing ideas of men is Source E, a report about MPs, published in December 1917. It shows that only 55 MPs did not vote for women over 30 to have the right to vote in the next general election.

Men are finally appreciating the hard work that women are doing; they have shown themselves to be capable and responsible under the strains of the war. Because of this approximately 9 million women gained the right to vote. Another big change for women was their social lives. Suddenly women would go out at night alone or with other female companions.

This idea is supported by evidence from Source G, a report from *The Daily Mail* in April 1916. Suggesting women were dining in the 'restaurants of London' and then 'cigarettes follow'. This sort of social life was extremely unusual; women wouldn't have dared to go out minus the company of a

male friend nor was it likely that she would smoke cigarettes. However the latter may be happening to further the male role but also to relieve stress.

Source H, written by a Corporal in 1916 explains how women were in pubs and buying the men drinks suggesting they are independent but also again agreeing with the idea that women are taking on men's roles. The women are earning their own money and rewarding the men. It also raises the question that soldiers aren't earning well. The war, as well as affecting the lives of people, also produced many Acts and organisations to change peoples' lives. One of these was recruitment and conscription. When the war broke out in Britain, there was only a small professional army.

But Britain needed a much larger one and fast. So the government began a massive recruitment drive with posters, leaflets, recruitment offices in every town and speeches made by the government. The recruitment campaign was highly successful. Half a million men signed up in the first month- partly due to recruitment but also to the strong feeling that the war was going to be finished by Christmas. The recruitment posters were used as propaganda to encourage an anti-German feeling but also were patriotic for example Source B, a recruiting poster from 1914 showing Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War. It appeals to your sense of pride to the nation: 'Join your country's army!' and 'God Save The King'.

Also the word 'you' is written in very big letters showing that Lord Kitchener is pointing at you, saying "your country, your responsibility". These posters were affective, proved by Source C, which shows a huge queue of men from all classes standing outside a recruitment office in December 1915. But buy

1916 the government had to introduce conscription- Source D from 1916. All men between the ages 18 and 40 who were unmarried had to register for active service.

This was later extended in 1916, so every man of military age had to register. By doing this it meant that the number of volunteers was falling but demands for troops was still rising because the dead and wounded needed replacing. The volunteer system was causing problems, which were helped solved by conscription. Britain's agriculture and industry were suffering because so many miners joined up. Some even had to be sent back from the war to provide essential supplies of coal. Another problem was that not all parts of society took an equal share of the burden.

In the end many people welcomed the government taking control and introducing conscription. However this was not the case for everybody. Fifty MPs voted against it in Parliament. There was also a group of people who didn't believe in war and didn't want to fight for religious or political reasons. These people were named 'conchies'. Some conchies were sent to prison, where they were badly treated.

Others were sent to work in field hospitals or as stretcher barers. In 1914 the government passed the Defence of the Realm Act later known as DORA. This gave the government huge control over people's lives. DORA was allowed to seize any land or building it needed and take over any industries that were important to the war effort. The government was allowed to control what the public knew about the war through censorship.

DORA was used to solve many problems. The first thing the government did was to take over the coal industry so that mines could be run to support the war effort instead of supporting the pockets of the owners! The first major problem solved by DORA was the munitions crisis. In 1915 there was a chronic shortage of shells, bullets and armaments on the Western Front. Soldiers in the front lines had their ammunitions rationed. New soldiers had to train using wooden sticks.

The munitions crisis soon became a national scandal exposed by the Daily Mail. So under DORA, Lloyd George, Minister of Munitions, introduces a range of methods to 'deliver the goods'. To solve the problem of shortage of skilled workers in important industries, Lloyd George forced workers to stay where the government needed them and not where the best pay was. This caused uproar with the trade unions. The other element Lloyd George wanted was to bring women into the workforce. Lloyd George then opened the governments own munitions factories, which employed a large number of women.

So by the end of the 1915 the situation had drastically improved and Britain were well equipped for the rest of the war. Another huge problem helped solved by DORA was the food shortage. The people of Britain needed feeding so under DORA, land was taken over and used for farm production. Many women were recruited as farm labourers.

In April Britain only had 6 weeks supply of wheat left and food prices were almost double what they had been in 1914. German U-boats were sinking one in every four British merchant ships. Rich people brought excess

amounts and hoarded it and the poor couldn't afford even the basic goods such as bread. The government decided to raise the wages of industrial workers.

In May a system of voluntary rationing was introduced, helped by the Royal Family who announced they were to cut their consumption of bread by a quarter. Many posters were published to encourage people to be careful and economical with bread. But this wasn't effective enough. Early 1918 introduced compulsory of sugar, butter meat and beer.

This actually improved the diet of poor people compared to the pre-war days. Propaganda and censorship were introduced to control what the public would hear or see about the war. The government was worried about the influences it would have on people's opinions towards the war. Effective war time propaganda aims to keep up morale, encourage civilians to support the war effort and create hatred and suspicion of the enemy.

Newspapers were censored so that people could only read about the good news and the increasing numbers of deaths and casualties were not recorded. Films such as the Battle of the Somme were made among others to encourage support of war effort and toys were made so that the German was always the enemy and was cowardly and treacherous. Overall the evidence shows that the war benefited some people but not others. Women gained the right to vote and work and became seen as more equal to men than before but some women were still treated badly and forced to work in such terrible conditions that they suffered from diseases and in some cases brain damage. The poor seemed to have benefited from the war the most

because as Source A, written in 1990 by a historian, suggests there was in 'improvement in people's diet and a decline in the death rate'.

This being because many of the poor found themselves in permanent employment'. However the rich did not benefit as a cartoon from 1917 about 'The Brown Family's Four War Christmases' suggest. The family starts off looking forward to the war with one soldier and male servants. Then as the years go by their clothes deteriorate and food gets considerably less so that by the end of the war the family members are part of the war effort.

The sources and information suggest that people were affected by the war in nearly every way possible. Large things affected them politically, socially, industrially, food shortages and smaller things like only being able to fly certain types of kites and not being able to buy a stranger a beer. But also completely out of the ordinary things like censoring newspapers and women in the workforce. It seems like the government controlled every action taken by a person and that is why the lives of people at home during the first world war were so drastically affected.