

# The British Home Front during the First World War

The First World War 1914 - 18 was Britain's first total war. A total war involves or affects all of society - not just the armed forces. It was the first war to deeply affect most people back home in Britain.

Previous wars had been remote from everyday life for most ordinary people. They were usually fought far away by small professional armies. All that ordinary people knew about the fighting was what they read in the newspapers or heard from soldiers who had taken part.

This war was different. It touched almost everybody's life in one way or another, whether they were soldiers or civilians, men or women, adults or children.

The government put an enormous effort into planning, organising and controlling life in Britain so that everybody would play their part.

## Recruitment and conscription

When war broke out Britain had only a small professional army. It needed a large one very quickly. The government began recruitment, with posters, leaflets, recruitment offices in every town and stirring speeches in Parliament. The recruitment campaign was highly successful. Half a million signed up in the first month. By 1916 over two million had been enlisted..

There was already a strong anti-German feeling in the country. The press strengthened it further with regular stories of German atrocities - babies butchered in Belgium, nurses murdered and, most famously of all, the German factory where they supposedly made soap out of boiled-up corpses. There was little truth in these stories, except the killing of nurse Edith Cavell.

In 1916 the government decided to introduce conscription for the first time. All men aged between 18 and 40 had to register for active service. They could be called up at any time to fight. The government did this because the number of volunteers was falling and the demand for troops was increasing. The dead and wounded needed replacing.

---

A 1914 recruitment poster. It featuring Lord Kitchener, a former successful general who became Secretary of State for War and the figurehead of the recruitment campaign.



---

Another problem was that the volunteer system was damaging Britain's agriculture and industry. For example, so many miners joined up that there were reports of their having to be sent back to provide essential supplies of coal. The volunteer system was also seen as unfair. Not all parts of society took an equal share of the burden. There was a feeling that some groups avoided the war altogether. Some of the fittest and most able men were not volunteering at all.

Not everyone welcomed conscription, however. Fifty MPs, including leading Liberals, voted against it in Parliament. Another group were opposed to the war for religious or political reasons. It would be against their conscience to fight so they were called conscientious objectors or 'conchies'.

Conchies had to appear before a TRIBUNAL and prove they had a genuine reason for objecting to war and were not just cowards. Some conchies were sent to prison, where they were often badly treated. Others actually went to where the fighting was and worked in field hospitals or as stretcher bearers.

## **DORA (Defence of the Realm Act 1914)**

In 1914 the government passed the Defence of the Realm Act which came to be known as DORA. It gave the government wide-ranging powers to control people's daily lives.

It allowed the Government to:

- **seize any land or buildings it needed**
- **take over any industries which were important to the war effort.**
- **control what the public knew about the war through censorship.**
- **control the coal industry so that the mines could be run to support the war effort rather than for the private profit of the owners.**

## **The munitions crisis**

In 1915 there was a great shortage of shells, bullets and weapons on the Western Front. New soldiers had to train with wooden sticks instead of rifles as there were not enough rifles to go round.

There were reports that soldiers in the front lines were rationed to three rounds of ammunition a day. The artillery were short of shells. The 'munitions crisis', as it was known, became a national scandal exposed by the *Daily Mail*, which was Britain's highest-circulation newspaper.

As a result of these problems, a coalition government (a government of Liberal and Conservative politicians) was established - so all parties could work together to support the war effort. Lloyd George was made Minister of Munitions.

Under DORA, Lloyd George introduced a range of measures to 'deliver the goods'.

These included

1) measures to force skilled workers to stay where the government needed them instead of going to where they could get the best pay. The trade unions protested.

Many of the bosses of the companies supplying the government were making huge profits out of the war, so the unions wondered why workers could not do so as well.

2) measures to bring women into the workforce. Trade unions again resisted this, they were worried about the effect of women workers on their members' wages. They argued that women worked for lower pay than men.

The trade unions refused to co-operate until the government gave a clear promise that women would be paid the same as men and that a woman worker would not be kept on in the job when / if the male worker came back. Lloyd George agreed to this.

He also opened the government's own munitions factories, which employed a large number of women. By the end of 1915 the situation had improved. The British army was well supplied with munitions for the rest of the war.

## **Feeding the country**

The government also needed to make sure that Britain had enough food. Under DORA it was able to take over land and turn it over to farm production. In February 1917 it set up the Women's Land Army to recruit women as farm workers. By April 1917 German U-boats were sinking one in every four British merchant ships. Britain had only six weeks' supply of wheat left. The situation was desperate.

As food supplies ran short, prices went up to double what they had been in 1914. Richer people bought more than they needed and held on to it. Poorer people could not afford even basic foods, such as bread. Shops closed early each afternoon as they had run out of things to sell. In important industrial areas such as South Wales there were serious strikes over poverty-level wages.

Following strikes in 1917, the government agreed to raise the wages of industrial workers. In May it started a system of voluntary rationing. The royal family led the way by announcing they were aiming to reduce how much bread they ate 25%, they called on all people in Britain to do the same.

In November the government introduced laws to control the price of bread - 'The Ninepenny Loaf'. It published many posters encouraging people to be economical with bread. It circulated recipe books with recipes which used less flour, but, food remained in short supply, so in early 1918 the government introduced compulsory rationing of sugar, butter, meat and beer.

Every person had a book of coupons which had to be handed to the shopkeeper when rationed food was bought. There were large penalties for anyone who broke the rationing rules.

On the whole, rationing was widely welcomed as a fairer system of sharing out the available food. By the end of the war, as a result of rationing, the diet and health of many poorer people had actually improved in comparison with pre-war days.

**DEFENCE OF THE REALM. E.P. &**  
**MINISTRY OF FOOD.**

## BREACHES OF THE RATIONING ORDER

The undermentioned convictions have been recently obtained:-

Court	Date	Nature of Offence	Result
HENDON - -	29th Aug., 1918	Unlawfully obtaining and using ration books -	3 Months' Imprisonment
WEST HAM -	29th Aug., 1918	Being a retailer & failing to detach proper number of coupons	Fined £20
SMETHWICK -	22nd July, 1918	Obtaining meat in excess quantities - - -	Fined £50 & £5 5s. costs
OLD STREET -	4th Sept., 1918	Being a retailer selling to unregistered customer	Fined £72 & £5 5s. costs
OLD STREET -	4th Sept., 1918	Not detaching sufficient coupons for meat sold -	Fined £25 & £2 2s. costs
CHESTER-LE-STREET	4th Sept., 1918	Being a retailer returning number of registered customers in excess of counterfoils deposited - - -	Fined £50 & £3 3s. costs
HIGH WYCOMBE	7th Sept., 1918	Making false statement on application for and using Ration Books unlawfully - - - - -	Fined £40 & £6 4s. costs

Enforcement Branch, Local Authorities Division,  
**MINISTRY OF FOOD.** September, 1918.

A leaflet produced by the government in 1918.

### Propaganda and censorship

The government thought it very important that civilians should support the war effort. So DORA also gave the government the right to control the newspapers and other mass media that might influence people's how people thought.

### Good news only

The British people were told only of great British victories or heroic resistance. When the British battleship HMS *Audacious* was sunk in October 1914, it was simply not reported.

It was not until November 1916 that the government allowed journalists (and then only ones with permission) to be at the front line. Reports

focused on good news. The newspaper owners and editors themselves were the keenest supporters of the war effort. For example, Lord Beaverbrook, the *Daily Express* owner, was in the Government from 1916, and became Minister for Information (or propaganda) in 1918. He and other newspaper owners became an important and central part of Britain's war effort. After the war, 12 leading members of the newspaper industry were given knighthoods as rewards for their wartime services.

The government also censored information from the soldiers at the frontline. The soldiers even censored themselves. There is much evidence that soldiers home on leave chose not to tell relatives the truth about what was going on at the front because they did not want to worry them.

## **Forced censorship**

Some independent papers did publish more balanced news or even anti-war articles. At first, they were put up with by the government. However, as the war continued papers like the pacifist newspaper *Tribunal* were closed down. Socialist newspapers such as the *Daily Herald* were monitored carefully by the censors.

The censors also stopped sensitive information from leaking out to the enemy. In 1916 alone, the government Press Bureau and the Intelligence services examined 38,000 articles, 25,000 photographs and 300,000 private telegrams. Even magazines for railway enthusiasts found themselves in trouble for revealing too much about Britain's transport network.

## **Books and other publications**

Leading writers - HG Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling - all signed a Declaration by Authors in support of the war. Most of them produced patriotic publications and took no payment for them. The history department at the University of Oxford produced a five-volume explanation of why Britain was right in going to war (it became known as the Red Book because of its cover). The Red Book sold 50,000 copies.

## **Propaganda for children**

Propaganda was aimed at children too. Toys were made that were intended to encourage support of the war effort, and there were many patriotic books and comics. In these books and comics, the German enemy

were always cowards and could not be trusted, however the British soldier or 'Tommy' was always modest, brave and successful. We know that these books and magazines sold well because they were regularly reprinted. In fact, many of them were still being reprinted in the 1920s and 1930s and given as school prizes.



**A selection of toys and games from 1914 to 1918.**

## Films

British film makers produced 240 war films between 1915 and 1918, most made voluntarily by the film makers themselves.

The British Topical Committee for War Films was a group of film companies who got together to make and sell films to the War Department.

Their patriotic film *For the Empire* reached an estimated audience of 9 million by the end of 1916. The Committee made some of the most famous films of the war, including *The Battle of the Somme*.

*The Battle of the Somme* has generally been seen by historians as a propaganda triumph. It showed real scenes from the battle, including real casualties (13 per cent of its running time showed dead or wounded soldiers). It also included 'fake' scenes. The film did not tell its audience which was which.

It was released in August 1916 and was a huge success. Many people talked of it as their first chance to see what conditions were really like in the war - to get closer to the truth. By October 1916 it had been shown in over 2000 cinemas (out of 4500 in the country). Some anti-war campaigners approved of the film because it showed the horrors more truly than any previous film. But some people were shocked by its realism. The Dean of Durham Cathedral thought that it was wrong to exploit death and suffering to provide entertainment.

## **Did the propaganda work ?**

It is very hard to measure how successful the propaganda was. To be successful it would have to help support for the war to stay firm (and, even though hundreds of thousands of soldiers were being killed at the Front support for the war did, on the whole, stay firm). However, it is almost impossible to judge how far the propaganda was responsible for this.

### **Evidence to suggest propaganda DID work;**

- 9 million people saw the film '*For the Empire*'.
- Over half the population read a daily newspaper and newspaper readership increased during the war.
- The readership of the *Daily Express* went up from 295,000 in 1914 to 579,000 in 1918.
- The patriotic weekly journal *John Bull* was selling 2 million copies in 1918 and the *News of the World* was selling even more.

There is also a lot of evidence to suggest that most people supported the war of their own accord. Many ordinary citizens joined patriotic organisations such as the Fight for Right Movement, the Council of Loyal British Subjects or the Victoria League.

## **Did people support the war ?**

In the early years of the war the government faced very little opposition to the war. Some Socialists and pacifists protested against the war but the vast majority supported.

The famous writer George Bernard Shaw's anti-war pamphlet '*Common Sense About the War*' (1914) sold 25,000 copies, but he became the target of much criticism.



Ramsay MacDonald had to resign as leader of the Labour Party because he did not support the war while his party did.

Conscientious Objectors or 'Conchies' were mostly treated as cowards by the press despite evidence that many of them were brave individuals. (many served as medical orderlies, without weapons, picking up bodies on the front line). Perhaps it is not surprising that there were not many conchies. Only 16,000 out of a possible 8 million affected by conscription actually refused to enlist.

## **The Battle of the Somme 1916: a turning point ?**

From 1914 to 1916, then, the British people were remarkably consistent in their support for the war. However, many historians argue that the Battle of the Somme was a turning point. As the battle dragged on from July to November 1916, half a million soldiers died for just a few square kilometres of gained territory.

In the weeks after the end of the battle, the government faced some serious criticisms as politicians and soldiers questioned publicly for the first time the way the war was being fought.

The Battle of the Somme did seem to change the mood in Britain. If you had interviewed a British person about the war in late 1916, you would probably still have found a grim determination to finish the job that had been started, but very little sense of excitement about the war.

Criticism of the war effort left its mark on the government as well. In December the Prime Minister, Asquith, stood down and was replaced by David Lloyd George, who was one of the critics of the army leadership.

Even so, criticisms on the way the war was being run continued into 1917, one famous critic was the war poet Siegfried Sasson. He had been an officer on the Western Front for three years, twice wounded, and given a medal for his bravery. In 1917 he wrote a number of poems which accused the generals of being out of touch and incompetent. In July 1917 he went further when he wrote his 'soldier's declaration', which was read out in the House of Commons and was published in the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*.

The government tried to shut him up by sending Sassoon for psychiatric treatment in a hospital for victims of shell-shock. Sassoon later withdrew

his criticism, putting it all down to a nervous breakdown. He returned to France to fight in 1918.

Many Socialists also criticised the war from the start. But those who criticized the war were in the minority. Even in 1917, when people were prepared to question the war leadership, there was still very little doubt in people's minds that the war against Germany should be pursued to a final victory.

The end of the war in November 1918 was greeted as much with relief as with a sense of triumph. People were very aware by then of the human and financial cost of the war in Britain and in other countries, and were desperate to rebuild their lives and their country.

## **What impact did Propaganda have on the war effort? a summary**

### **It was effective because**

The public backed the war effort despite horrific casualties.

The press censored themselves and stayed solid in support of the war.

Very few people publicly criticised the war. Those that did were treated like traitors.

Millions of people flocked to see propaganda films such as *The Battle of the Somme*.

Newspapers that ran the news the government wanted printed increased their circulation.

Only a tiny proportion of eligible men refused to fight.

The government effectively controlled what could be reported about the war.

### **It was not effective because:**

Some people still criticised the way leaders ran the war.

16,000 people refused to enlist in the army.

The mood in Britain changed from optimism to grim determination.

The propaganda could not maintain the 'spirit of 1914'.

Some people saw through the propaganda and called for more truthful reports of the state of the war.