

Organizing for Total War

The Great War involved full mobilization of each nation's resources and populations. Despite modern industrial, military, and bureaucratic techniques, most nations found the burdens of fighting the war an enormous strain, fueling a revolutionary situation.

Government and Economy

Pressures of total war forced the abandonment of laissez-faire practices. Governments moved quickly to oversee wartime production to ensure an adequate supply of materiel. To appreciate the demands of the Great War, you may consider that at the battle of Verdun more projectiles were dropped than in all previous warfare in human history combined! Many combatant nations managed production via bureaucratic centralization—that is, running the war effort as one large industry: In Germany, industrialist Walter Rathenau (1867-1922) helped Germany deal with severe shortages and maintain adequate supplies by overseeing production in the War Ministry. When Britain experienced a shortage of shells in 1915, future Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1863-1945) was made Minister of Munitions to avoid shortfalls. Because of such policies, large businesses and labor unions benefited, as governments found it more efficient to award government contracts to and oversee large enterprises.

To pay for the war, governments exercised three options: raise taxes, depreciate currencies, and borrow money. Raising taxes could only go so far; as the war dragged on, governments grew fearful of placing any additional demands on an already strained populace. By the end of the conflict, France and Britain had borrowed significant amounts from the United States, making it a creditor for the first time in its history. All nations appealed to their citizens' patriotic duty to purchase war bonds. In all, the war cost the nations involved over \$350 billion. Inflation acted as a hidden tax and resulted in currency depreciation, a situation that rendered a return to prewar economic stability impossible when the war finally ended.

Nationalist Unrest and Agitation

Almost every nation experienced internal ethnic conflicts, and their enemies attempted to exploit them. For example, the German government gave aid to Irish rebels wishing for independence from the British in the Easter Rising of 1916. Though British men and resources were diverted, the

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attempt failed. Not to be outdone, the Allies promoted the creation of independence committees for various minorities within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially for the Poles and Czechs, an effort that yielded the dissolution of the empire by 1918. Most famously, the British sent Colonel T.E. Lawrence (“of Arabia,” 1888-1935) to promote the cause of Arab nationalism within the Ottoman Empire. Though these efforts did not play a decisive role in the outcome of the war, they did set up future conflicts in the **Middle East**, often over the new strategic resource of oil.

The Home Fronts

The First World War represents the culmination of the trend toward mass politics in the previous half-century. Governments called on citizens to sacrifice for the war effort by enlisting, buying war bonds, and rationing. Rationing went furthest in Germany. By 1916, the Kaiser had turned the government over to the famous generals Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) and Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934), who quietly established a military dictatorship, part of which involved allotting families ration books for a particular number of calories per day. By the end of the war, many Germans agonized over eating sawdust bread and shortages of essential fats and oils.

Because of the manpower shortage, many women entered the workforce outside the home for the first time. In Britain, industrialists employed women in the production of TNT and shells. Neglect of safety conditions led tragically to the poisoning and infertility of thousands of female laborers. These “women with yellow hands” demonstrated the potential public role of women and helped to earn them the vote in many nations after the war ended. The Provisional Government of Russia even formed a military unit, the Women’s Battalion of Death, which saw action at the front and in defense of the state. Among other groups, skilled workers gained the most, as they won wage increases and recognition of union collaboration in production. Nonetheless, strikes did occur. Governments often responded with the promise of improved conditions and the threat of violence if the strike continued. By the end of the war, union discontent broke out into open rebellion, helping to bring down teetering governments in the Fall of 1918. On the other hand, small business owners, those in traditional crafts, and the lower middle-class often found themselves struggling with competition from large businesses favored by government officials.

Freedom is often the first casualty of war. Though states worked to build positive support for their war efforts, they were also quick to crush dissent.

Early in the war, the British Parliament passed the Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), which in addition to regimenting the lives of British citizens, censored the press and allowed the government to requisition war supplies from private citizens. All states, including the United States, established stricter laws against treasonous activities and dissent against the government. Germany used spies to infiltrate radical unions, while many governments simply jailed the most outspoken opponents of the war effort.

Propaganda and Genocide

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World War I elevated mass politics to a new level with its need for mobilization. Governments employed propaganda to motivate citizens both to sacrifice and to view enemies as less than human. Using the firstworldwar.com site below, peruse some of the propaganda posters from various nations and place them in historical context, considering how and why they might have motivated combatants and citizens (CTX).

Propaganda came of age during the First World War. To motivate citizens, governments employed both positive patriotic appeals with national symbols and negative attacks on the enemy, portraying the war as a battle over civilization against a brutal and inhuman foe. Demonizing the enemy seemed a logical culmination of mass political pressures in the previous half-century—anti-Semitism, xenophobia, extreme nationalism, and glorification of struggle. A tragic culmination of this logic was the first genocide of the 20th century. In 1915, the Ottoman government feared that its Armenian Christian minority might aid the Russian war effort. Several hundred leaders of the Armenian community were executed, while thousands of Armenians were deported to camps with inadequate facilities, where between 500,000 and 1.5 million died from neglect, disease, and starvation. Even today, the Turkish government rejects the notion of an Armenian Genocide, though most independent scholars classify the event as such.