

The Home Front

World War I was a total war that involved not just military might but civilian support as well, creating a home front that ran parallel to the actual war fronts where the fighting took place. In most cases, the war strengthened the central governments, which took control of coordinating the countries' resources with the needs of the armies. This control included conscription – mandatory military service – of recruits and government supervision of private businesses to turn their enterprises to war production. Laissez-faire capitalist notions could not be tolerated, and civilians had to give up their personal needs and wants to the common cause. To ensure that civilian support was constant, the governments churned out war propaganda – information campaigns that inspired nationalism as well as hostility toward the enemy. For example, Germans were depicted in cartoon-like English and French posters as primitive, war-mongering monsters, and German propaganda pictured Russians as semi-Asiatic barbarians. Governments also established wage and price controls, and sometimes determined workers' hours. Freedom of speech and the press were curtailed in the name of national security, and bad news from the war front was censored.

Original Document: The Balfour Declaration

After the fighting on the Western Front settled into stalemate, the British tried to defeat the Central Powers by subverting internal support for the weakest member of the alliance, the Ottoman Empire. They gained cooperation from Arab nationalists within the empire, and the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Arthur Balfour, responded positively to Jewish nationalists called Zionists – who wanted to carve a Jewish homeland out of the Ottoman Empire in Palestine. Below is the statement from the Foreign Secretary, called the Balfour Declaration:

“His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of that object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

The British were concerned with the immediate need to win the war, and did not foresee that the statement would contribute later to conflicts between Palestinian and Jewish settlers.

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An important consequence of the war effort was the large-scale filling of jobs in the labor force by women. Since most able-bodied men volunteered or were drafted into the army, women worked in traditional male jobs, such as managing their husbands' farms and businesses, working in factories, and serving as postal employees and police officers. Especially crucial to the war effort were the several million women who worked in munitions plants, making shells and working with explosives. Many middle and upper-class women, who had long been confined to their homes in Victorian polite society, reported that the experience of directly supporting the war effort was liberating. Women who had seldom ventured into the business world often found themselves relying on themselves rather than their husbands or fathers, and these feelings almost certainly pressured legislatures to pass women's suffrage measures after the war was over. For working-class women, the war brought fewer changes, since many were working outside their homes before the war began. Their wages did rise, and most of the governments promised equal pay for equal work, but the wage gap between men and women never closed. When the war was over and the men returned, traditional roles resumed, but some important changes were put in motion, with voting rights extended to women in Britain in 1918, Germany in 1919, Austria in 1919, and the United States in 1920.