

Introduction

The impact of the First World War on European political and economic history is a subject which has occupied historians virtually since the guns were silenced in 1918. A vast literature, at once complex, subtle and acrimonious, has emerged about the perennial political questions of war guilt, civil-military relations, and peace-making, the insoluble military problems of tactics and strategy, especially on the Western Front, and the fundamental economic problems of the mobilisation of men and material for war production and of the economic costs of the conflict.

It is only recently, however, that historians have begun to probe the social history of the war years, as a subject standing on its own, rather than as providing necessary background information for the analysis of political and economic developments.

In this field, as in others, French historians have taken the lead. This is in part a function of historiographical trends, in which the *Annales* school has been highly influential. It is not at all surprising that French cultural historians were among the first to examine trends in public opinion in wartime,¹ or to conduct the first systematic investigations of the true nature of war enthusiasm in 1914 and of social stability in the four grim years which followed,² or to provide the most profound and moving account of veterans of the First World War.³ But the richness of recent historical literature about the war period produced by French scholars is also a reflection of the wealth of documentary information, especially from police files, but also from other sources, which are readily available for scrutiny in French archives.

The fact that the vagaries of inclination and evidence have produced a number of fundamentally important works on the social history of wartime France should not detract, however, from similar though scattered contributions made by scholars working on the history of other combatant

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nations. We have valuable studies of social tensions and social inequality in Germany,⁴ of class relations and the workings of social policy in Britain,⁵ as well as a growing literature on working-class life in general⁶ and on women's history, in particular.⁷

Indeed, it is precisely because there is a range of disparate and important research currently under way on the social history of the war period that we organised a conference on this subject, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, in Cambridge in 1983. The essays collected here were first presented to this conference and then substantially revised in the light of the ensuing discussion. Not all the original contributions, however, have been included in this volume. Our aim has been to provide a fully comparative framework, and to do so required that each major topic be examined in more than one country. Some essays of real importance on themes not taken up systematically in other parts of the book were, therefore, omitted, or published elsewhere.⁸

Essentially, the issues raised by these papers address the question of the destabilising effects of the First World War on domestic life in a number of combatant countries. The obvious way to begin such a discussion is to examine the direct consequences of wartime mobilisation on the material conditions of the people. Chapters 1 and 2 in part one introduce demographic data on this and related themes. They provide an explicitly comparative perspective which enables us to grasp some of the key similarities and differences in the responses of the populations of the major combatant countries to the upheaval of war.

The chapters in part two provide further documentation and discussion of the effects of the war on conditions of life and standards of living. The contrasts in the degree of deprivation suffered by civilian populations on opposing sides are vividly documented for the Central Powers by the essays of Sieder on Vienna, Scholliers and Daelemans on occupied Belgium, Triebel on Germany, and for the Allies by Fridenson for France, and by Dewey and Reid for Britain.

These essays form the foundation for the third and fourth parts of the book, which deal with the role of women in wartime economy and society, and with the efforts of diverse groups, working both within and outside government circles, to promote the stability of the family in wartime. Two central conclusions emerge here. The first is the relatively minor degree to which the sexual division of labour was disturbed by the war. Robert shows conclusively that the war represents not the opening of new opportunities for women, but rather the end of a trend of high female participation rates in extra-domestic employment in France. Similarly, Thom and Daniel offer strong correctives to the view that the war transformed the pattern of women's industrial work in Britain or Germany. It is only in the service

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sector, that is in white-collar jobs, that we can see the long-term effects of the war in diversifying the occupational distribution of the female labour force.

The second salient argument which arises is the similarity in the pronatalist outlook and policy initiatives of many groups in the major combatant nations concerned with protecting family life from the corrosive effects of the war. Huss's illustrations of the messages contained in pronatalist postcards, Soloway's discussion of the language of the British eugenics movement, Weindling's study of social hygiene and the German medical profession, and Osborne's description of parallel German efforts to promote childbirth as woman's 'active service' all point in the same direction: towards the emergence in wartime of a broadly based campaign to ensure that the war did not undermine traditional patterns of authority within the family or the traditional sexual division of labour.

Reulecke's essay on middle-class youth movements in Germany describes a radically different response to what contemporaries called the 'crisis' of the family in the period of the First World War. The search for a new kind of masculine loyalty antedated the war but took on a new urgency for some unsettled and romantic individuals. This quest for community turned away from the family towards the *Männerbund*, or heroic men's league. After a relatively quiet phase in the mid-1920s, such groups reappeared in a new and more sinister form. The adoption by the Nazis of facets of this phenomenon, replete with anti-feminine and anti-familial rhetoric, shows that one must not exaggerate the extent to which the war crisis led to a revival of the cult of the family. Those who survived the war spoke in discordant and contradictory voices. Some fled from the family and all it signified, but on the basis of the evidence presented in these essays, more returned to family life readily and with relief.

The demographic impact of these different campaigns for and against the family is very difficult to estimate. We know that nuptiality rates recovered after the wild fluctuations of the war, but in the cases of Britain and France, this may have had less to do with ideological currents than with changes in patterns of emigration and a narrowing of the age and social difference between marriage partners.⁹ We know as well that the decline of fertility which had set in well before the war continued at least for another two decades after it.¹⁰ And we know that despite an increase in the divorce rate after the war in a number of different countries, the family life-cycle after the war was not radically different from that before the outbreak of hostilities.¹¹

In effect, the cumulative and collective impression of these essays in the social, cultural and demographic history of the 1914-18 war is to reveal the dialectical or contradictory character of the conflict. First, it disturbed family life by military and industrial mobilisation; but secondly, it released social and political forces which helped restore family life in its older forms.

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Of course, counter-tendencies and exceptions may be noted. As Reulecke has shown, other forms of masculine bonding and association also emerged in this period. Many such developments were class-specific, requiring us whenever possible to move from the discussion of national to cross-sectional trends, as the essays by Reid and Fridenson on the effect of the war on the British and French working class demonstrate. The way forward is clearly towards more local and regional studies, of the kind presented by Sieder on working-class Vienna, through which the true texture of the war experience may be recaptured.

When such studies are available they will enable us to see to what extent the civilian populations of the major combatant nations sustained the war effort and, despite bereavement, deprivation, and stress of all kinds, still managed to preserve the fundamental features of pre-war family life. The inferences which may be drawn from these studies may go further still. Just as Charles Maier has shown that the power of industrial elites was first challenged and then reinforced by the 1914-18 war,¹² so the essays in this book suggest that the full effect of the war was to restore pre-war social forms rather than to undermine them. Perhaps it was only natural that the catastrophic human losses of the war led to a reinforcement of family life in its aftermath. Perhaps it was understandable that ex-soldiers, many of whom returned home defeated and disillusioned, insisted that their place within the family was preserved or even enhanced. Perhaps some women even welcomed the restoration after 1918; certainly few people asked for their opinion about an issue central to their welfare and their lives. But the weight of evidence from many quarters seems to point towards the view that, in terms of the social history of the European family, the First World War was more a conservative than a revolutionary force.

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Notes

- 1 P. Renouvin, 'L'opinion publique et la guerre en 1917', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 20 (1968). 1-17. J.-J. Becker, 1914. Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre, Paris, 1977.
- 2 J.-J. Becker, *The Great War and the French people*, trans. A. Pomerans, Leamington Spa, 1986.
- 3 A. Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française*, Paris, 1977.
- 4 J. Kocka, *Facing total war. German society 1914-18*, trans. B. Weinberger, Leamington Spa, 1984; L. Burchardt, 'The impact of the war economy on the

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- civilian population of Germany during the First and Second World Wars' in W. Deist (ed.), *The German military in the age of total war*, Leamington Spa, 1985.
- 5 B. Waites, *A class society at war*, Leamington Spa, 1987; M. Barnett, *British food policy during the First World War*, London, 1984; A. Marwick, *The deluge. British society and the First World War*, 1965; K. Burk (ed.), *War and the state*, London, 1983.
 - 6 P. Fridenson (ed.), *1914–1918: L'Autre Front*, Paris, 1977; J. Hinton, *The first shop stewards' movement*, London, 1974; D. Englander and J. Osborne, 'Jack, Tommy and Henry Dubb: the armed forces and the working class', *Historical Journal*, 21, 1978; D. Gill and G. Dallas, *The unknown army*, London, 1986; T. Wilson, *The myriad faces of war*, London, 1986.
 - 7 F. Thébaud, *La Femme au temps de la guerre de 14*, Paris, 1986; G. Braybon, *Women workers of the First World War*, London, 1981; J.-L. Robert, 'La C.G.T. et la famille ouvrière 1914–1918, première approche', *Mouvement Social*, 22 (1981).
 - 8 Original contributions to the 1982 conference not included in this volume were: by George Steiner, Clive Trebilcock, Jonathan Steinberg on the overall cultural, economic and political background to the war; by Joseph Ehmer on working-class family life; by David Hiebert on the psychological consequences of the war; by Eve Rosenhaft on juvenile delinquency in Germany; by Joan Austoker on the social hygiene movement in Britain; by Miklos Teich on German and British scientists and food policy; and by Adelheid Graf zu Castell, Reinhard Spree, Patrick Festy, and Madeleine Beard on demographic aspects of the war. Festy's article was published as: 'Effets et répercussions de la première guerre mondiale sur la fécondité française', *Population*, 39 (1984), 977–1010.
 - 9 J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British people*, London, 1985, ch. 8; L. Henry, 'Les Perturbations de la nuptialité résultant de la guerre de 1914–1918', *Population*, 20 (1966).
 - 10 A. Coale, 'The decline of fertility in Europe since the French revolution' in S. H. Behrmann (ed.), *Fertility and family planning*, Ann Arbor, 1965.
 - 11 Winter, *The Great War*; and J. Ehmer, 'Family life as a model of working-class life in Vienna in the period of the Great War', paper delivered to conference on The European Family and the First World War, Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1983.
 - 12 C. Maier, *Recasting bourgeois Europe*, Princeton, 1977.

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I
COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVES

1

Some paradoxes of the First World War

J. M. Winter

One of the aims of this book is to examine a previously neglected facet of the social and economic history of the First World War. All too often, the perspective adopted in studies of the conflict has been that of the rulers rather than that of the ruled, of those who fashioned military, economic and social policy rather than of the ordinary men and women who either joined up or who had to make a living, look after their families, and simply survive the varied pressures of war. The official view was promulgated in many of the 128 august tomes commissioned by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to describe the domestic war effort. Most of the authors were men whose wartime duties gave them a particularly intimate familiarity with the formulation and implementation of policy in wartime. And while these accounts are essential reading for any student of the 1914–18 conflict, they suffer from the drawbacks of all ‘official histories’, which usually reflect how history looked to the officials.

This book offers more a complementary than an alternative approach, in the belief that we must go beyond traditional administrative and political studies in order to reach hidden facets of the history of those for whom wartime social and economic policy was fashioned. It is primarily for this reason, therefore, that we have chosen the family unit as the focal point for a discussion of the impact of the First World War on European society.

In the essays which follow, two central themes emerge. They are, first, the way in which the expansion in the power of the state impinged upon virtually all areas of domesticity and community life; and secondly, the way in which a war that destroyed the lives of millions and crippled millions more, created conditions which acted not to weaken but rather to strengthen family ties and the institution of marriage. This opening chapter will discuss

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some demographic evidence which throws light on the first of these two salient themes.

It is a commonplace to speak of the growth of the power of the state in wartime. Scholars have long been aware of what are known as the concentration and displacement effects of war. That is to say, economic historians have charted the impact of war on the progressive absorption into central government of services and functions previously in private hands. They have shown as well that war changed the level of taxation the population had been prepared to tolerate in order to pay for those services. In other words, the centralisation of economic activity in wartime displaced upward the share of gross national product occupied by the state. Whatever the nature of decontrol following the Armistice or claims about the need to return to the *status quo ante bellum*, these structural changes have been irreversible.¹

Several of the essays in this book document the complex meaning of these changes for the working and domestic lives of ordinary people in the period of the 1914–18 war. This initial essay will introduce a demographic dimension to this discussion.

We shall argue that one of the central paradoxes of the war is that in the case of Britain, a conflict of unprecedented carnage created conditions – both political and economic – which accounted for a surprising and unplanned improvement in life expectancy among the civilian population. In France, some groups registered improvements; others did not. But on balance life expectancy among French civilians was about the same as it would have been had no war occurred. In a war which severely tested the endurance and economic strength of all combatants, this was no mean achievement, and contrasts sharply with a wide array of evidence about the toll the war took on civilian health in the Central Powers. Indeed, the success of the war effort in Britain and France to defend public health by defending living standards was, we shall argue, one of the prerequisites of military victory.

At the outset, let us note the limitations of this argument, which is intended to be suggestive rather than conclusive. In the space of an essay we simply cannot examine the broad range of demographic data on civilian health in the war period for any one combatant country, let alone for several. Even if space permitted, though, serious gaps in the statistical record preclude comprehensive analysis of the issues raised here. Our intent, therefore, is simply to explore the implications of the analysis of one essential source – life table statistics.

These data are useful in two ways. They permit spatial comparisons, and they enable precise modelling of the way the war deflected pre-war demographic trends. The disadvantage is that similar data are not available for all combatants. German and Austro-Hungarian data are not as complete as

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those we have used with respect to Britain, France, Belgium (and in the case of non-combatant Sweden). It is therefore impossible to make precise comparative statements about the differing impact of war on the populations of the Central and Allied Powers. What we can offer is an indication of the nature and direction of the wartime deflection of pre-war mortality trends.²

Our aim, therefore, is to examine the impact of the wartime state on the survival chances of civilian populations by a simple exercise in comparative demographic history. The structure of our argument is straightforward. First, we present demographic data on mortality rates in wartime Britain and France. Secondly, we contrast them with similar data which describe the deterioration in survival rates in Belgium and in Germany during the war. Thirdly, we examine evidence on mortality patterns in neutral Sweden. Fourthly, we comment on the light this analysis throws on the workings of the war economy in France and Britain, before turning to the more problematic cases of the Central Powers.

It is important to reiterate the real variation in the quality and reliability of the data used in this study. They are most useful in helping to illuminate the British and French experience of the wartime state. Data on Belgium may deepen the discussion, but they cannot contribute decisively to our overall argument. This is essentially for three reasons. First, the invasion, defeat and occupation of Belgium by the German Army were bound to upset vital registration in such a way as to require us to place a substantial margin of error around any calculations using wartime data. Secondly, it is unclear precisely what constituted the 'state' in occupied Belgium. The German Army undertook many key tasks, but some remained in the hands of civilian authorities. Since the Germans claimed initially that they were in Belgium simply to make war on France, we cannot adopt either an 'imperial' model (like British India) or a 'collaborationist' model (like Vichy France) to describe the way political authority operated in Belgium. And thirdly, the fate of an occupied country, milked by Germany of material and human capital, is no sure guide to the demographic situation in Central Europe.

We have already noted the fact that the available German data are incomplete. Still, they do enable us to sketch the outlines of the story of the war's effects on mortality trends, and confirm the overall contrast between conditions on the two sides of the front lines. More systematic studies are required, though, before we may conclude confidently that the underlying source of demographic trends in Germany and Austria-Hungary was a failure of the war economy of the Central Powers as a whole.

However, the preliminary findings reported here are consistent with the view advanced by many scholars using non-demographic evidence that it was precisely on the level of defending civilian living standards that Britain and France succeeded whereas Germany and her allies failed.³ On both

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sides, the state took on primary responsibility for the welfare of the home population. In Central Europe, the manifest inability literally to deliver the goods undermined the war effort, discredited ruling circles and brought down governments which had entered the conflict with powerful and widespread support. In Britain and France, in part because of the international economic resources they could muster, in part because of their ability to withstand the German blockade, and in part because of the effectiveness of war administration in distributing goods and services as between civilian and military needs, the state succeeded in fielding mass armies without prejudicing civilian living standards. Our demographic analysis tells one side of this story; it is hoped that future studies of a similar kind will illuminate the other.

Mortality patterns in wartime

One of the most difficult problems in assessing the impact of war on life expectancy is to establish a reliable guess as to what mortality levels would have been like had there been no war. Elsewhere we have provided a series of estimates of mortality levels for England and Wales which enable comparisons between a ‘war estimate’ of actual mortality in 1914–18 and a ‘peace estimate’ describing a counterfactual situation: the likely pattern of mortality over the war years on the basis of a progression of pre-war trends. The difference between these two estimates is a rough approximation of mortality attributable to the war.⁴

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The data on Britain are abridged life tables reflecting the mortality experience of 1913–17 of the working-class male population insured by the Prudential Assurance Company. Unfortunately, no such data exist for the British population as a whole. Still, it is possible to use these data in order to estimate the impact of the war on male life expectancy at ages 16–60 among a sizeable part of the working class.

This exercise enables us to construct reliable estimates of the age-structure of British war losses in the 1914–18 conflict. It also led to the surprising finding that in 1916 and 1917, at ages above which men were likely to see active military service, that is, after ages 40–5, war-related mortality in Britain was either negligible or *negative*. In other words, the survival chances of older men in wartime Britain were actually greater than they would have been had the war never occurred. Figure 1.1 describes the two estimates of actual and hypothetical mortality levels; Figures 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate war-related deaths at ages 16–60 and 40–60 respectively. Positive figures clearly indicate war losses at ages at which men were eligible for