

WorldWarI(1914-1918)

By the turn of the century, it had become increasingly apparent to many, both in and out of government, that the possession of an Empire would not be enough to cure Britain's domestic problems. Gladstone, in particular, had the wisdom (and the courage) to admit that though the Empire was a duty and responsibility that could not be shrugged off, there could be little advantage, and possibly only future problems, in expanding it. For him, in contrast to the imperialist Disraeli, and later, the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, Britain's strength lay in its own people, in their own land. Foreign adventures could only waste the nation's resources, sorely needed to aid its own people.

In the heady day of Empire, William Ewart Gladstone had believed in peace with justice. He respected the rights of small nations to seek their own forms of government; hence his support of Home Rule for Ireland. He died in 1898, four years after being defeated in Parliament. He had relentlessly condemned the Conservative government's overseas policies. Sadly, though he recognised what was going on in Ireland, he had failed to see that a genuine nationalist movement had surfaced in Egypt, where Britain was forced to stay, once involved, until the middle of the next century. He had noticed, however, that Germany's support of the Boer farmers, in the way of arms and guns, boded ill for future relations between the two countries. A new rivalry developed over their respective navies. More than one historian has pointed out that the German navy was floated on a tide of Anglophobia.

It was thus that Britain's foreign policy, during the first few years of the new century, changed drastically. Instead of the old cordiality towards Germany and fear of a combined France and Russia, she now became friendly towards France and Russia and hostile to Germany. An Anglo-French agreement in 1904, mainly over their respective interests in Egypt and Morocco, alarmed the Germans. The new Liberal government's Foreign Secretary, Lord Grey, had no intention of dissolving its association with France (and with Japan and Russia, who were at war with one another in 1905).

The question now arose of what would be Britain's response should Germany attack France over a dispute concerning Morocco. The answer can be found in the summer maneuvers of the English army that assumed Germany, not France, would be the enemy. Germany also felt humiliated by the Treaty of Algeciras that temporarily settled the Morocco question, and felt surrounded by hostile powers, a feeling that grew alarmingly after the 1906 Anglo-Russian Entente. Its reply was to build up its navy, including the Dreadnought, a threat to England's long-held supremacy at sea. World War I broke out in August 1914, when Germany declared war on Russia. Trouble in the Balkans precipitated the outbreak of hostilities, but they had been stewing for a long time.

Perhaps the War came about as the result of a breakdown in the European diplomatic system -- the bad judgment of a number of individual politicians. Perhaps it was inevitable -- the result of the profound economic changes that had been at work that had caused a "structural failure" of European society. In England, domestic problems, as much as the crisis in the Ottoman Empire, had dictated foreign policy decisions. In any case, Britain was not willing to see Germany defeat France again; nor did she want to lose her position as the world's leading power. The troubles began in Bosnia.

Austria seized Bosnia in 1908; Italy then took Tripoli, Cyrenaicia and some islands to show

that Turkey could no longer defend what was left of her empire in Europe. Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany were all hungry for spoils in the area. When Greece allied with Serbia and Bulgaria (all satellites of Russia), to defeat the Turks, Austria became alarmed; her own empire contained many Slavic peoples. Germany, too, feared Russian expansion in the Balkans. A conference in London in 1913 failed to pacify the region, in which the late victorious Balkan states were now quarrelling among themselves. Serbia's successes further alarmed the empire of Austria-Hungary.

With the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June, 1914, all hell broke loose. The military chiefs of many nations were all ready to go to war. Historians have succinctly pointed out that an inexorable military machine quickly overwhelmed the improvisations of diplomacy. With the Kaiser's support, Austria declared war on Serbia. Germany declared war on Russia and on France, creating a huge dilemma for Britain: should she give full military support to France and her allies or to stay out of Europe altogether in a policy of complete neutrality. The latter policy would have opened the door for Germany, however, and when that country violated the neutrality of Belgium in August, Britain went to war on the side of France. The decision to aid Belgium, one of small-statured Lloyd George's "little 5-foot-5 nations," marked the beginning of the end for his country's world dominance.

The length of the war, and its enormous toll on life and resources, was completely unpredicted. A German plan for a rapid victory in the West was thwarted by the combined French-British armies at the Marne. When the German offensive began down the North Sea coast of Belgium, the battles at Ypres managed to stem their advance, but at heavy cost. The years of trench warfare then began in a costly war of attrition with neither side gaining any real advantage.

At sea, the war produced one large-scale battle and a few smaller engagements. The action at Jutland, despite British losses, resulted in the German fleet heading for home, allowing the Royal Navy to continue to dominate the sea routes, to supply new fronts in the Eastern Mediterranean (with limited successes), and to impose an economic blockade upon Germany and her allies. In reply, the consequent German submarine campaign showed only too well the strengths of this new kind of weapon. The sinking of the Lusitania off Kinsale Head, Ireland in May 1915, however, had enormous consequences for the later stages of the war. In the meantime, in order to aid rapidly weakening Russia, the allies decided to strike at Turkey and the rear of Austria-Hungary by way of the Balkans.

Both Lloyd George and Winston Churchill argued for the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. The campaign was designed to attack weaker spots of the enemy's front by combining military and naval forces; to force Turkey to abandon her support of Germany, circumvent Bulgaria's entry into the war, and bring Greece into the side of the allies. In the campaign, failure to coordinate their activities, however, left great numbers of British, New Zealand and Australian troops stranded on the Gallipoli Peninsula unable to break through the Turkish defenses. All the objectives of the bold but totally mismanaged campaign were lost (much hostility resulted in the attitude of Australia and New Zealand that is still evident today in their progress towards republican status, despite lingering affection for the mother country). On the Western front, allied losses also caused great concern.

The German attack at Ypres, where gas was used for the first time, and the failure of the British counter-offensive, brought a government crisis in Britain. Lloyd George became minister of Munitions and Arthur Henderson, Secretary of the Labour Party was admitted to

the Cabinet, a decision that clearly showed the growing importance of organized labour. A German offensive at Verdun then blunted the allied plans for a simultaneous attack; and the Battle of the Somme ended in disaster for the allies, who lost around 600,000 men in futile attacks against a firmly entrenched enemy. At the same time, the Russian state began to show signs of collapse.

In late December, 1916, Lloyd George took charge of a coalition ministry in which he showed the energy and capacity for getting things done in a time of great crisis. The conduct of the war, the losses incurred, and the difficulties in Ireland (where the brutal suppression of the Easter Rising almost certainly turned that nation against Britain when a more just solution may have kept the nation loyal to the Crown), needed drastic measures. Military deadlock, the successful U-boat offensive, as well as the onset of revolution in Russia, provided a new test of character of the British people.

The introduction of an organized convoy system put a huge dent in the success rate of the German submarines in sinking allied supply ships. British efforts were rewarded by the entry of the United States into the War in April, 1917. The great French offensive early 1917 failed hopelessly. It was followed by an equal failure of Haig's offensive in Flanders and the misery of the mud at Passchendaele Ridge. The Italians were then overwhelmed by the German-Austrian army at Caporetto before stabilizing their line with help from British and French troops. To make matter worse for the allies, the new Russian revolutionary government made peace with Germany, freeing nearly fifty German divisions for service on the Western front.

Things then began to change. German intrigue with Mexico (still simmering over the loss of much of its territory to its powerful northern neighbor) along with the unrestricted submarine warfare of 1917 brought the USA into the war. President Wilson's "Fourteen Points," set forth in an address to Congress, had a great impact on world opinion at the time when all belligerents except the US were exhausted by the war effort. In the spring of 1918, the Germans planned their great offensive to capture the Channel ports. In spite of early successes, however, attrition had taken its heavy toll. Aided by their new weapon the tank, British forces turned the tide at Amiens, a battle that German Commander Ludendorff decided was critical.

Britain's seizure of Palestine from the Ottoman Turks (aided by the successes of the famed Lawrence of Arabia), was followed by the Balfour Declaration of November 11, 1917 that favored the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Further allied successes on the Eastern front, the defeat of the Bulgarians, the capitulation of Turkey, a victory by the Italians at Vittorio Veneto, a mutiny of the German fleet at Kiel and a revolt by the German people against their military leaders, all convinced the German high command to enter into peace negotiations. The abdication of the Kaiser was followed by the imposition of severe armistice terms by the allies at Compiègne. They were accepted on November 11, 1918; what had been the costliest war in human history was over.

The cost to Britain was the loss of an entire generation, one whose contribution to national life was to be sadly missed during the political mismanagement of the postwar years. The blood baths of the Somme and Passchendaele could never be adequately described by the nation's poets and prose writers, most of whom had been conscripted into the army when the regulars, as a fighting force, had ceased to exist. So many of Britain's physical and intellectual best were killed off in the endless fighting to gain a few yards of muddy ground.

During the War, there was also unrest at home, particularly in the industrial belt of Scotland where Intense labor conflict gave the name "Red Clyde" to its shipbuilding region. A series of episodes took place there that have since assumed legendary proportions, almost on the scale of the Jacobite rebellion. The conflicts, pitting management's use of semi- or unskilled labor against the militant unions, produced such well-known activists as James Maxton, John Wheatley, John Maclean and Emmanuel Shinwell. The troubles culminated in the George Square riot in Edinburgh of 1919 that practically ensured the Labour Party's national victory in the General Election of 1922. They have been regarded by many in the Labour Movement as forming part of the "glad, confident morning" of Scottish socialism.

As noted earlier, however, it was the Liberal Party under Lloyd George that was most effective in bringing needed changes to Britain. The introduction of salaries for M.P.'s in 1911 meant that the Labour Party could now field many candidates from the ranks of the trade unions. Scotsman Keir Hardie, the socialist ex-miner, had been elected to Parliament by the Merthyr constituency (South Wales) in 1891. In the hallowed halls of Westminster, he defiantly chose to wear his cloth deer-stalker hat (transmogrified by legend into a working man's cloth cap) in place of the usual top hat.

It wasn't only conditions in industry that were being transformed by the growth of Labour. There were also many changes taking place in British agriculture during the early years of the century. A rapid increase in population due to a declining death rate meant that farmers were unable to meet the increasing demand for butter, cheese, margarine and lard (used for cooking until the switch to vegetable oil right up until the 1960's), and a reliance grew upon Denmark for these products. English farmers turning to market gardening and fruit growing. Fuel shortages in 1916 motivated Parliament to pass a "summer time" act, advancing clocks one hour to make the most of available light. Farmers protested in vain.

To meet domestic demand, imports of US pork, Argentine beef and New Zealand lamb continued to rise, but a significant contribution to raising protein levels of urban English diets came with the introduction of the fish and chip shop. It utilized the product of fast, deep-sea trawlers that packed their catch in ice and rapidly shipped it to British markets. A new addition to the British diet was baked beans, first test marketed in Northern England by the American Heinz Company in 1905, but which became a staple of British diets beginning in 1928 when the first canning factory began at Harlesden, near London. War and democracy

In 1901 Britain had a constitutional government, but it was not a fully-fledged democracy. In 1918 it became a democracy, with the introduction of universal adult male suffrage and votes for women aged over 30.

World War One determined the timing of democratic change.

What mattered more by then was the fact that the country was engaged in the greatest war of modern times, one in which Britain's military deaths were more than twice those it would suffer in World War Two.

World War One may not have initiated democratic change, but it determined its timing. Ironically, the war's demands also weakened the exercise of constitutional government, albeit temporarily.

Freedom of speech was curtailed by the Defence of the Realm Act in 1914. Elections, due in 1915, were deferred until the war was concluded. And the formation of a coalition government in the same year all but silenced parliamentary opposition.

When Britain entered World War One, it did so in the name of 19th century liberal values - the rights of small nations and the rule of law.

What justified these claims, which became the touchstone of British propaganda, was Germany's invasion of Belgium, as its army bypassed France's eastern defences by swinging round them to the north.