

Great Britain

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Summary

Great Britain was with its Empire the most powerful of the major belligerents, the most politically and socially stable, and the best able to endure the strains of the war. Its great naval, financial and diplomatic strengths were critical to the Allied victory. Its unprecedented creation of a mass army was a major strain, and victory required progressive government involvement in economic and social matters. The immediate effect of the war was to slightly flatten the country's social structure, but other effects are disputed. In political and military terms Great Britain was a substantial winner from the war, and except in relation to the United States it emerged stronger than before.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Great Britain in 1914](#)
- [3 Business as Usual and Mobilising for War](#)
- [4 The Asquith Coalition and the Strain of War](#)
- [5 The Lloyd George Coalition and the Paths to Victory](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

There is an extremely large history of Great Britain's experience of the First World War. But partly because of its size and evolution, this has been mostly separated into studies of British politics and the grand strategy of the war; the social, economic and cultural history of Great Britain; or the military and naval history of the British war effort. Even for such a well-documented country, there are also genuine problems with the survival and interpretation of evidence. Due to recent historical discoveries and changes in methodology, it is now possible to summarise these previously largely separated themes of the British war experience in relation to each other, which is how they were actually experienced at the time. After an introduction, this article follows a broadly chronological framework, describing the interaction of the political, social, economic and military events that made up the British experience of the war.

Great Britain in 1914

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was in many respects very different from other major belligerents of the First World War. In terms of landmass, Great Britain (excluding [Ireland](#), which had its own and rather different experience) was smaller than any other major power; even [Italy](#) was larger. In terms of population, the 1911 national census recorded just over 43 million people, with just under 36 million in England, 4.8 million in Scotland and 2.4 million in Wales.¹ As one of the world's dominant producers of goods and services, Great Britain was heavily industrialised, with about 80 percent of its population living in [towns and cities](#), and produced only about one-third of the [food](#) needed to feed itself, being dependent on imports for food and many [raw materials](#). Great Britain also dominated world trade, with ownership of at least 45 percent of all [merchant shipping](#).² The country was the political centre of what was by far the world's largest global [empire](#), many of whose inhabitants also called themselves British, or English. Access to the resources and manpower of the British Empire and to global markets was among the many critical advantages that Great Britain held during the war. British financial power, including its extensive financial credit, was another formidable potential weapon: London was the centre of a global financial system that had developed in complexity in the decades before the war. Consequently, Great Britain's entry into the war on 4 August 1914, followed by the Pact of London of 5 September which transformed the Entente powers into the Allies with a commitment not to make a separate peace, also made it far less likely that the Central Powers could win a long war, although it did not absolutely guarantee an Allied victory.

Politically, the British considered their country to be a democracy, and it was called one by its enemies. As a constitutional monarchy under [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#), it had a largely unwritten constitution made up of precedents and compromises, the most recent only in 1909-11. Effective political power resided in the House of Commons, which was directly elected; approximately 60 percent of men (although no women) had the vote, and by convention the leader of the majority party in the Commons formed a government as prime minister, heading the Cabinet, the main executive body; in 1914 the prime minister was [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#) of the Liberal Party. The House of Lords, an unelected second chamber, was dominated by the opposition party, the Unionists (or Conservatives), who still largely represented a traditional aristocracy and upper class. Political power and representation for the lower classes came increasingly from organised [labour and trade unions](#), represented in Parliament by a small but growing Labour Party. A pattern of serious and sometimes violent political disputes just before the war suggested a politically divided country, with the underprivileged asserting their demands for recognition. This included a wave of organised labour unrest, the emergence of a violent faction within the women's

suffrage movement, and the threat of a civil war in Ireland. But increasingly the legitimacy of these demands was being recognised, and the war accelerated this process. On Great Britain's entry into the war, the leaders of these and other disadvantaged groups around the Empire mostly concluded that Great Britain would be on the winning side, and that their best chances lay with practical demonstrations of loyalty in the hope of later gains.

Despite these disputes, socially and culturally Great Britain was more homogeneous than any other major power, and better placed to withstand the strains of the war. English was almost universal as a sole or first language, as was literacy, although ports and industrial cities had pockets of diversity. Scotland and Wales were accepted as having their own culture, but the whole country was most commonly called England, rather than Britain; in 1915 the kilt-wearing Scotsman Sir [Ian Hamilton \(1853-1947\)](#) described [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#), whose family home was in Ireland, as "the idol of England" with no sense of incongruity. Christianity was almost universal, and most people professed some religious belief without necessarily being regular churchgoers. This included the [Church of England](#) and Church of Scotland as state churches, a much smaller but growing Roman Catholic population, and numerous forms of non-conformism. Discrimination against other religions was mild in comparison with mainland Europe, notably as regards Judaism. Religious convictions were seldom overtly political, although religious beliefs did influence politics, including strains of nonconformist [pacifism](#) in much of the British labour movement and British forms of socialism. This homogeneity was strengthened rather than weakened by a marked parochialism and regionalism, of which the Scots and Welsh identities were only the most prominent, with most people looking to their local rather than national leaders, including local business, religious, and trade union representatives. The most marked differentiations were of social class. Of a workforce of just over 18.3 million in 1911, just under 13.7 million were skilled or unskilled manual workers, just under 4.3 million white collar workers, and just under 1.2 million employers or proprietors.³ Variations within social classes and between different parts of the country, and the problems of interpreting statistical information, make generalisations about the wartime experience of any one class as a whole problematic, partly because the experience of the war itself changed relationships between the classes, as well as within them.

By virtue of being an island kingdom, no part of Great Britain's national home territory was invaded or contested during the war, although there was a persistent concern over a possible invasion, and attacks by German warships, [airships](#) and [aircraft](#) took place from 1914 onwards. Great Britain had no recent experience of peacetime military conscription, and had to create and equip a mass army of millions during the course of the war, with consequent significant social and economic dislocation, and cultural impact. But from the war's start, Great Britain was the world's strongest maritime power, with by far the most powerful war

fleet. In geo-strategic terms, the United Kingdom formed an 800-kilometre-long breakwater lying across the sea communications of northwestern Europe, giving the Allies another critical advantage, particularly in the distant naval blockade of Germany that was one of their main weapons. By 1914, the British had decisively won a peacetime [naval arms race](#) with Germany prompted by a battleship-building programme, with twenty-two battleships in service and thirteen under construction, plus a strength in depth of about 600 warships of various kinds, and an advantage over Germany of almost 2:1. Although British naval power was strained and challenged throughout the war, it never experienced a critical shortage.

In contrast, the British army before 1914 was tiny in comparison with other powers, with about 250,000 men serving. Since the later 19th century the army had been structured primarily to provide garrisons for the British Empire rather than to fight a European war. An all-volunteer force, the British army had little connection with British society, with officers being drawn mostly from a small section of the upper class, while the working-class regarded military service as a last resort or a disgrace. Attempts since 1908 to create a volunteer reserve for home defence known as the Territorial Force (an exact translation of the German *Landwehr*) achieved little success, and even including the Territorials at full mobilisation the British army was on paper barely 750,000 men. This reflected a general attitude among the population as supportive of the British Empire and defensively patriotic, but not militaristic. Much the same attitude prevailed in many parts of the Empire. In the First World War the British were able to draw substantially on soldiers (many of them British-born) from [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#) and [South Africa](#) in particular, and on their Indian army, an all-volunteer force with British officers recruited chiefly from the northern part of [India](#).

Business as Usual and Mobilising for War

The [British government's](#) decision to enter the war has been endlessly debated, both at the time and since. Great Britain's participation was almost guaranteed not just by the German declaration of war against [Belgium](#), but by the size and immediacy of their invasion and violation of Belgian [neutrality](#). The shock of this attack swung doubters in the British Cabinet, in Parliament, and as far as can be judged in the wider country, in favour of war. There are significant problems of evidence and methodology in evaluating British working-class attitudes towards the war. It seems fair to say that for most British people the war was about the [German occupation of Belgium](#), and all that it represented. The British people saw this as a defensive war, despite the fact that Great Britain had not itself been attacked: a war against German [militarism](#) and in defence of wider British security and the principles of [international law](#).⁴ When the fighting stabilised into trench warfare by the end of 1914 it was the [Western Front](#) (France and Flanders, with a small area of Belgium including the town of

Ypres) that was the centre of Great Britain's view of the war. [Germany](#) was considered to be by far the principal enemy, and the British public saw the war as won when German forces were ejected from [France](#) and Belgium in August-November 1918.

As part of the British declaration of war, Prime Minister Asquith assembled a small inner War Council, which developed by the end of 1916 into a War Cabinet. This functioned as the chief directing body for British grand strategy, to which the Army and Royal Navy submitted their plans, joined in April 1918 by the Royal Air Force (RAF) as the world's first independent military air force. In August 1914, Great Britain immediately imposed trade sanctions and a [naval blockade](#) on the Central Powers, although the effectiveness of this blockade, and the extent to which it contributed to crippling their domestic economies, is a matter of considerable historical dispute. After some debate, the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (or BEF as it came to be known) was also sent to fight alongside the French army, rather than being used as the basis for training a larger army. By the end of 1914, the fighting on the Western Front had effectively destroyed the original BEF. The shock of the outbreak of war to the international financial system also led the Bank of England to close its doors for a week, and [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) as Chancellor of the Exchequer (chief finance minister) had to assure banks of "business as usual", which became a government watchword for the first few months of the war. The London Stock Exchange also stayed closed until January 1915. By then, British [sea power](#) had cleared the oceans of German warships, largely confining the conflict to Europe and its surrounding waters. The British government did not expect a short war, and felt that the country had survived the possibility of an early defeat.

The post of Secretary of State for War (political head of the army) was vacant at the start of the war, and Asquith appointed Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, a famous and respected military hero who was also a member of the House of Lords. Kitchener was notoriously taciturn and secretive, and he made little or no distinction between his political appointment and military rank. His domination of his cabinet colleagues for the first months of the war marked the start of important questions about political-military relationships in a democracy at war. The immediate creation of a mass British army by volunteering, despite the lack of any [pre-war planning](#), was almost entirely Kitchener's decision. It is speculated that he hoped that the French and Russians could hold out against the Germans until this army was properly trained and equipped so that he could use it as the instrument of a British-led victory, probably not before 1917. Instead, the circumstances of the war led to the new British army being used piecemeal from 1915 onwards, while still undertrained and underequipped.⁵ The popular response to Kitchener's call for volunteer soldiers was hesitant at first, but by the third week of August 1914, 101,939 men had volunteered, more than the War Office in London could handle. The number of volunteers peaked in the first week of September with 174,901 coming forward, probably in response to news of the first BEF

defeats at the Battles of [Mons](#) and Le Cateau. While each individual had his own reasons for volunteering, the great majority appear to have volunteered as a grimly reasoned response to their country being in danger of defeat, rather than any light-hearted war enthusiasm; economic as well as patriotic factors and a sense of duty also played a role.

Overt [propaganda](#) had little part at first in British military volunteerism. One of the British government's first responses to the war was to implement pre-existing plans for [censorship](#) and added security measures, including agreements with a largely sympathetic [national press](#), and a very powerful [Defence of the Realm Act](#) (DORA); these powers existed mainly as a deterrent and warning. A small but vocal opposition to the war was largely tolerated, including the influential [Union of Democratic Control](#) (UDC) founded at the war's start, and the No Conscription Fellowship, founded in November 1914 when military conscription seemed very unlikely.⁶ The policy of censorship and secrecy at the start of the war was also progressively modified by demands for information as soon as volunteer soldiers arrived on the fighting fronts in larger numbers. Soldier's communications with the home front (as it increasingly came to be called) through [letters](#) and other means were frequent and officially supported. The first official newspaper reporters were allowed on the Western Front in March 1915, and even newsreel cameramen, by the year's end.

Over the next two years, the British army expanded more than tenfold from the original six [infantry](#) divisions (and one [cavalry](#) division) of the BEF to over sixty fully equipped infantry divisions and their supporting troops. This British army was composed of replacements for the pre-war Regular Army, the expansion of the Territorial Force with its troops' agreement to serve overseas, and the creation of the "new" or "Kitchener" formations, which involved not just the War Office but many local organisations, including the ["Pals" battalions](#) recruited locally and sometimes from small communities. The Regular, Territorial and Kitchener formations retained a distinctiveness reflecting their origins at least up to the end of 1916. Just over 1 million men volunteered by the end of 1914, part of a total of just under 2.5 million up to December 1915. In round figures, 5.2 million men served in the British army during the war, just under half of the available pool of adult males aged eighteen to fifty-one, and about half of these were originally volunteers.⁷ On the Western Front, the British army grew by early 1916 to a strength of between 1 and 2 million men at any time. Almost from the start, this army also had a British Empire component, including Indian army troops from 1914 onwards, Canadian troops from early 1915, and Australians, South Africans, New Zealanders and Newfoundlanders by 1916. But despite the centrality of the Western Front to the British experience and memory of the war, many British army and British Empire soldiers served in other theatres of war, including about 3 million who served in the war against the [Ottoman Empire](#), over 1 million of them British rather than from the Empire. At any time after

1914 there were also about 1 million British troops in Great Britain itself, including those in training, as well as numerous garrisons for India and the Empire around the world.

While this mass army, which was unprecedented in British experience, was being recruited, trained and equipped, the British relied on sea power and blockade (although in strict legal terms a formal blockade was not declared). Great Britain financed its war effort at first chiefly by borrowing on the international markets, particularly from the [United States](#), using the funds as loans to its Empire and Allies, or to purchase military equipment, also chiefly from the United States. This included large subsidies to [Russia](#), and to Italy which entered the war on the Allied side in May 1915. The extent of this borrowing tied the United States into financial support of an Allied victory long before its entry into the war in April 1917, augmenting British diplomacy and a well-organised British propaganda campaign aimed mostly at American elite public opinion. The British also relied on diplomacy to isolate their enemies, to win sympathy in other [neutral](#) countries, and to encourage others to enter the war on their side. The big difference from all previous wars that the British had fought using the same strategy was the immense financial cost and dislocation the longer the war lasted, coupled with its exceptionally heavy casualties as the product of mass industrialised [warfare](#) and trench deadlock. While their own soldiers were being trained and rushed into battle, the British relied for land power chiefly on the forces of France and Russia. But the German successes of 1914, including the capture and occupation of most of Belgium and key industrial regions of northern France, placed them in a victorious position from which the French were unable to drive them, while Russia's poor military performance was a continuing source of anxiety for the British.

The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers in late October 1914 severed British strategic communications with Russia through the Black Sea, and potentially threatened both the Suez Canal and India. The British (along with all other great powers on both sides) wrongly assumed that the Ottoman army would collapse with the first attacks, and that the chief problems would be the political ones of how to partition the Ottoman Empire between the victorious Allies. As well as defending the Suez Canal and mounting an offensive into [Mesopotamia](#), chiefly with Indian army troops, the British made an innovative use of sea power, the brainchild of [Winston Spencer Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#), First Lord of the Admiralty (political head of the Royal Navy), to force the Dardanelles with warships in February 1915 and reach Constantinople. When this failed, a British-led force of British Empire and French troops landed on the [Gallipoli peninsula](#) in April in the hope of clearing the Dardanelles. This landing was expected to prompt naval and military support from Russia, and bring the Balkan countries into the war on the Allied side, but in this, British diplomacy failed. After an additional landing in August 1915 had also failed to achieve victory, the British evacuated Gallipoli in January 1916. The British attempt to win a cheap

success in Mesopotamia also ended in failure in April 1916, with the surrender of British Empire forces at [Kut-el-Amara](#).

The year 1915 had been disastrous for the British; they did not win a single decisive battle on land or sea, and mostly suffered heavy defeats. This was a reflection of British political and military ambitions and weaknesses at the start of the war. They had tried to mount two substantial land campaigns, one on the Western Front in support of much larger French attacks, and one against the Ottoman Empire, without the trained troops or resources to do either properly. At the same time the Royal Navy was under pressure from the first of two German unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) campaigns, in February to September 1915, and British industry was not yet geared up for the war. After a series of unsuccessful British attacks on the Western Front on essentially the same battlefield at Neuve Chapelle/Aubers Ridge/Festubert in March-May 1915, the British army commander on the Western Front, Sir [John French \(1852-1925\)](#), made public his view that the chief cause of the failure was a shortage of [artillery](#) shells, provoking the “[shell scandal](#)” at home. Together with the continuing failure at Gallipoli, increasing dissatisfaction with Kitchener among his colleagues, and a sense that the war effort lacked political direction, this provoked a change of government. On 25 May, Asquith formed a coalition government with the Unionists, including senior Unionists in his Cabinet. Churchill was removed from the Admiralty, and Kitchener’s authority was curtailed by the creation in May of a Ministry of Munitions under Lloyd George.

The Asquith Coalition and the Strain of War

The complaints of the generals that they were not receiving adequate supplies of shells, and that Great Britain could not yet run two separate major land campaigns, were well founded. After the failure at Gallipoli the British largely went onto the defensive against the Ottoman Empire until 1917. They also progressively “Indianised” their war against the Ottoman Empire, making the Indian army chiefly responsible for that theatre of the war, with fewer British troops. On the Western Front the key to overcoming the defensive deadlock was artillery firepower and shells on a previously unimagined scale, augmented by technological innovations, such as the development of [air warfare](#) almost from nothing in the course of the war; the invention and first use of [tanks](#) in September 1916; increases in infantry firepower; and the training to employ all these innovations in a unified manner. By 1918 the British army on the Western Front had nearly 6,500 artillery pieces of all calibres: in practice, the only restrictions on the number of artillery shells fired in an attack were of transport, and over 900,000 rounds fired in twenty-four hours was not impossible.⁸ These levels of firepower and the [technology](#) and training to use them became available to the British and French (and to a more limited extent and briefly to the Germans), only on the Western Front and from the very last months of 1917 onwards. They represented the mobilisation of the British home

front for war on a massive scale. The creation of the Ministry of Munitions under Lloyd George greatly increased government involvement in British industry, including securing the co-operation of the trades unions and imposing controls on businesses, but in practice the bulk of the orders for arms and equipment had already been placed before the end of 1915. This government intrusion into business also meant virtually full employment, but was contrary to pre-war Liberal political ideology. To pay for the war, the Asquith Coalition also supplemented its overseas borrowing with increased domestic taxation and war loans, which would increase in importance during the rest of the war.

By the middle of 1915, the balance of manpower between the army and production on the home front became a serious problem, as volunteering began to decline. Meanwhile, the failure of a further British attack on the Western Front, at Loos in September/October 1915 led to the withdrawal of the main Indian army component (two infantry divisions) from the Western Front to Mesopotamia, and the dismissal of Sir John French at the end of the year, replaced as British commander by Sir [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#). After an unsuccessful attempt to encourage further volunteering known as the Derby Scheme, the government introduced compulsory conscription, known as “national service”, for unmarried men aged eighteen to forty-five in January 1916; married men continued to volunteer until conscription was extended to include them in May 1916. The introduction of conscription came from a complex mixture of political rivalries and arguments, the need to balance military needs with those of industry and the national economy, and a belief that greater government intervention and control was needed to win the war. The government had believed that there was a pool of about 1 million suitable men who had failed to volunteer, but this turned out to be untrue. Discounting those men needed on the home front to maintain the war economy, conscription provided the army only with just enough men to keep it up to strength. Given that the proportions of men taken from different regions and social groups were broadly similar, the army was predominantly English and working class, but there were many variations; up to the start of conscription at least, the officer corps was drawn overwhelmingly from the upper-middle class, who suffered disproportionate losses, especially of young men.

The British-led Allied domination of the seas continued, but showed no prospect of winning the war quickly. A Controller of Shipping was appointed in January 1916, followed by a Ministry of Shipping at the end of the year and a Ministry of Blockade created in February 1916, intensifying the blockade and helping keep the country supplied from overseas. The German main battle fleet ventured out into the North Sea on several occasions during the war in the hope of catching the British by surprise, and on 31 May/1 June it clashed with the British [grand fleet](#) at the inconclusive [Battle of Jutland](#). Although British public opinion was disappointed by the lack of an overwhelming victory, the German failure to defeat the British

meant that the blockade and British domination of global trade both continued. On 5 June, Kitchener was drowned when the British warship on which he was travelling sank in the North Sea. Otherwise, the war at sea continued to run increasingly and almost entirely in the British and Allied favour.

The expansion of war industry together with mass recruiting for the army resulted in labour shortages by early 1915, and female labour took on a new significance. From the start, British official propaganda emphasised the importance of [women to the war effort](#), not just in a domestic role as supporters of their menfolk at war, but as positive contributors. The Imperial War Museum, founded in London in 1917 to commemorate and document the British Empire's war effort, laid particular stress on the role of women. Upper- and upper-middle class women took up many roles on the home front. The Women Police Volunteer Service appeared in 1914. In addition to the women's suffrage movement, many existing and improvised women's organisations placed themselves at the disposal of the war effort, notably the Women's Institute, founded in 1915. These women worked as organisers and committee members at a local level, stretching to a national level in some cases. The wartime role of women [nurses](#) and clerical workers helped confirm their positions in distinctly female professions. Young working-class women were already expected to work until they married, and about 1 million moved during the war from domestic service or other traditional women's employment to take a wide variety of jobs, sometimes with high public visibility, and much better pay. The most recognisable and controversial were the young "munitionettes" employed in the expanding munitions factories. Women military nurses, drivers and clerical workers, including some wartime volunteers, saw active service on the fighting fronts (although never in combat roles), in which a number were killed in action or decorated for bravery. In 1916, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was formed as part of the British army, followed by its naval and air force equivalents.⁹

At the Chantilly Conference of 6-8 December 1915 the French, British and Italians each agreed to launch a substantial attack against the Germans and Austro-Hungarians in early summer 1916; later also agreed by the Russians, this plan was the only occasion in the war that the Allies co-ordinated their major attacks in this way. This committed the British to using their under-trained and under-equipped army on the Western Front in what would become the [Battle of the Somme](#). This was the first full-scale British experience of First World War battles, an Anglo-French offensive campaign lasting from July to November with several hundred thousand casualties on all sides, for the gain of a few kilometres of ground. The first day of the battle, 1 July 1916, entered British folklore as the worst day in the British army's history, leaving over 19,000 dead and 38,000 wounded for only small gains over one third of the front. Because of the British voluntary recruiting system, the effect on small communities could be devastating. Representative of the extreme cases was the "Accrington Pals"

battalion from a small northern industrial town, that was effectively wiped out with 585 casualties out of 720 men. But the British fought on, and by the mid-point of the battle they had already shocked their German enemies with their firepower and their improving military skills. Facing two effective major enemies on the Western Front rather than the French army alone had a profound effect on German strategic planning.

By mid-1916 the British army on the Western Front resembled a giant linear city, the second largest British city after London, and an entire “trench culture” had built up in consequence. The army took a large part of its existing civilian culture with it to war, and the impact of encountering other countries and cultures on most soldiers was surprisingly small. The daily experience of individual soldiers could also be vastly different. Even soldiers in the fighting formations such as the infantry would be involved in a major battle at most two or three times in the course of their war service. The frontline trenches were places of death and horror, and the British army sought to ameliorate their soldiers’ experience of these through regular rotation and leave, so that most soldiers spent much of their time behind the front lines. Even so, statistically any British soldier who served in France and Flanders had about one chance in two of being injured or killed in the course of the war. The closeness of the Western Front to Great Britain and the interaction between these soldiers and British civilians all had a brief but profound impact on domestic life and society.¹⁰

In political and social, as well as economic and military terms, the problem for the British was whether even their immense resources could cope with supporting their Allies and Empire with money and equipment, while at the same time creating and using a mass army of their own, with its own demands for equipment and for men in the face of the inevitable accompanying heavy losses. Lloyd George’s replacement as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Asquith Coalition government, Reginald McKenna (1863-1943), argued from mid-1915 through to late 1916 that the financial strain was too great. Although Great Britain had officially abandoned the gold standard at the start of the war, economic orthodoxy was that its international standing was linked to its gold reserves, which were set to run out in early 1917; technically, Great Britain was facing bankruptcy. The problems were immensely complex, balancing the demands of the finance markets, of industries and manpower, and of the size and deployment of the armed forces, to win the war without crippling Great Britain’s post-war prosperity and position in the world.¹¹ It was a problem that successive British governments handled rather better than their French allies, and very much better than their enemies, but the strains involved inevitably weakened Great Britain’s position in the world in respect of the United States.

The Lloyd George Coalition and the Paths to Victory

Although the Allied offensives of 1916 had rocked the Central Powers, they were still undefeated. In December 1916, Asquith was forced to resign and was replaced as prime minister by Lloyd George at the head of a Unionist-led coalition, with most of the Liberals following Asquith into opposition. This greatly intensified the problem of British political-military relations: although Lloyd George was a dominating figure as a prime minister, he depended chiefly for his political support on London newspapers and on Unionists who also supported Haig and other generals who believed that the war could and should be won on the Western Front. The result was a year of major British offensives on the Western Front (accompanied by acrimonious disputes between Lloyd George and the War Office), none of which brought victory: the Battle of Arras in April 1917, the Battle of Messines in June, the Third [Battle of Ypres](#) (or Passchendaele) in July-November, and the Battle of Cambrai in November-December. The accompanying arguments over British strategy, whether the country could endure the casualties, and even whether the war could be won, were interpreted by Lloyd George by early 1918 as a military threat to Great Britain's democracy.

Meanwhile the Germans, in reaction to their own failure to win decisively at Jutland, to the continuing blockade, and to the growing Allied strength on the Western Front, opted for the extreme measure of unrestricted submarine warfare once more, introduced on 1 February 1917 in an attempt to defeat Great Britain by cutting off its food supply. The immediate consequence was that the United States entered the war as an Associated Power on the Allied side on 6 April 1917. The German submarine campaign failed against the strength of the Royal Navy and Allied sea power as well as the British ability to organise their economy and food supplies.

With the impact of the German unrestricted submarine campaign, and heavy losses on the Western Front for no obvious gain, 1917 was the year of greatest strain and division for the British Home Front. Historians describe the British government "remobilising" its people for the war effort. This included punitive measures, increasingly used against dissenters, including the well-publicised imprisonment of a small number of conscientious objectors to conscription. A wave of British industrial unrest and strikes began that continued through into 1918. But a government commission of enquiry reported in July 1917 that although there was evidence of war weariness, the root causes of the strikes were costs, shortages and inequalities rather than ideological or revolutionary opposition.¹² Political and economic reforms during 1917 and 1918, ranging from food rationing to an increased political franchise, sought to address public discontent by easing the disproportionate burden of the war on the lower classes. British domestic propaganda was consolidated into a Ministry of Information in February 1918.

One of Lloyd George's first actions as prime minister was to create a Department of National Service in January 1917 to further regulate the supply of manpower, enlarged to become the Ministry of National Service in March. In April 1918, all men aged eighteen to fifty-one became liable for conscription, including in theory in Ireland, which resulted in major political disruption there; Canada had also introduced conscription. By the last few months of the war the British army was increasingly short of trained soldiers, and more reliant for its best fighting troops on the Western Front on the Canadians and Australians. This had political implications both during the war and for the relationship between Great Britain and its Empire.

After the 1917 "[October Revolution](#)" in Russia and an unexpected British victory against the Ottoman Empire in September/December 1917 leading to the capture of Jerusalem, the British government planned a change in strategy for 1918. The plan was to go onto the defensive on the Western Front in the face of an expected German attack following the collapse of Russia, wait for the arrival and build-up of a large United States army, and meanwhile make greater efforts against the Ottoman Empire. This strategy was partially abandoned following the successful defence against the [German Spring Offensives](#) on the Western Front, March/July 1918, followed by an Allied counter-offensive. The result was that the final [Battle of Amiens](#) and [Hundred Days advance](#) of August/November 1918, that won the war on the Western Front, came simultaneously with the final Armageddon campaign September-October that defeated the Ottoman Empire.¹³

For most of the war, military victory on the Western Front was measured more in casualties inflicted on the enemy than in terms of ground gained. Total casualty figures were not made public by either side during the war, and afterwards claims as to which side had won a particular battle were based on casualty figures that were highly politicised; this has presented major historical problems in answering even basic questions as to how many soldiers from each country were killed during the war, and in each specific battle. The official figure for [Great Britain's war dead](#) of 702,410 (plus 205,961 from the British Empire) is a reasonable estimate, if almost certainly low. British losses were lower in absolute terms; as a percentage of those who served; and as a percentage of the population, than those of any other major belligerent except the United States. Nevertheless, the effect of these losses on a Great Britain unused to mass land warfare was politically and psychologically devastating. Among soldiers younger than twenty-five the death rate was about 15 percent, and over 20 percent for young upper-middle class officers.¹⁴

This has raised three large and closely related historical questions: how much British civilians on the home front knew about the fighting on the Western Front; what they thought about it;

and how the troops themselves both endured the experience and eventually achieved victory. Every soldier's experience in the First World War was unique, and the trauma of battle often made it indescribable; civilians could never fully share this experience. But in broad terms the British public was kept well informed by successive governments of the nature of fighting on the Western Front, and had a realistic understanding of what it involved.¹⁵ Within the context of wartime censorship, British propaganda directed at their own people evolved piecemeal and was mostly based on providing facts, augmented and modified by arguments supporting the British case. Overall, British propaganda reflected a country in conversation with itself, including many local events, speeches and initiatives, rather than a firm policy imposed from the top. Germany, with its proclivity for committing repeated [war crimes](#) and violations of expected [norms](#), was also an almost perfect enemy for rousing British popular sentiment. The threat of a German victory in early 1918 played an important part in a renewed wave of British popular support for the war, which by its end may have been even greater than in 1914.

The announcement of the Armistice with Germany on 11 November 1918, which was taken to mean the victorious end of the war, came unexpectedly to most Britons, whether on the home front or the Western Front. The reaction of soldiers on the Western Front was at first largely one of relief rather than celebration; much greater jubilation was recorded on the home front, but many people were simply onlookers. The [influenza epidemic](#) of 1918/19 may have contributed to a generally depressed reaction from some. The most common response was that loved ones had survived and would now be coming home, or that their deaths and the wider public patriotic commitment had been validated by the victory.¹⁶

Conclusion

Politically, Great Britain emerged from the war victorious, and stronger than before. Great Britain was one of the "big four" victors of the war, alongside France, Italy and the United States, that shaped the [Peace of Paris of 1919](#). Geographically, the British Empire was, after the war, at its largest extent ever, if the [League of Nations](#) "trusteeships" are included. The biggest constitutional change and geographical loss for the British was the establishment in 1921 of the Irish Free State, meaning that from then on the country became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Financially, at the end of the war Great Britain was a net overseas creditor, although this included large debts owed by the Russian Empire on which the new Soviet Union later defaulted.

The war was a major contributing factor to the dramatic decline of the Liberal Party, which never again formed the main party in a government. It was progressively replaced by the Labour Party as the representative of organised labour and trades unionism. The extension of

the franchise for the December 1918 general election included (with some anomalies) all men aged twenty-one or over, and women aged thirty and over who were householders or married to householders. By comparison with pre-war Great Britain, this marked the start of a new mass politics. But neither the younger working class “munitionettes”, nor soldiers of the age group eighteen to twenty who had taken some of the heaviest casualties, were rewarded with the vote. The [war did not itself change gender relations](#) on any large scale, with women’s domestic role being mostly restored after 1918; but in the long term the wartime experience pointed the way towards a more modernised society. Overall, in comparison to other democracies Great Britain remained socially and culturally a conservative but not backward-looking country.

In terms of military achievement and power, the Royal Navy played a critical role as an instrument of the Allied victory. The surrender at the end of the war (and later scuttling) of most of the German war fleet removed the largest single threat to British security. British military technological achievements were substantial, including the creation of a powerful air force virtually from nothing in four years, and in inventing and introducing the tank as a new [weapon](#) of war. The greatest British achievement was in creating, again from almost nothing, an army that within two years was able to fight on almost equal terms with the German army, seen for decades as the most powerful in the world, and within four years was able to win two decisive campaigns in widely separated and different theatres of war.

Just as pre-war British society was simultaneously both homogenous and highly differentiated, so [post-war generalisations about any one region or class](#) can obscure a variety of particular cases. The traditional landholding aristocracy was severely weakened by the war and its effects, including through death duties (a form of taxation on their estates). The upper-middle class suffered proportionately the heaviest losses among their young men, giving rise to a British myth of a “lost generation” of talent. Many middle-class businessmen did well out of the war financially, but more generally the middle class felt their wartime loss of status and authority and feared for their future. The immediate impact of the war on the working class was that many civilians at home enjoyed temporary wartime improvements in their health and standards of living. Remarkably, the same was true of some soldiers even on the fighting fronts, a reflection of how very poor their pre-war quality of life had been. The overall experience and effect of the war was to diminish the upper classes slightly, and to raise the working classes slightly, showing what might be possible in the future. The war also left a legacy of disability and distress for many working-class veterans, leaving in many cases a sense of bitterness, as well as pressure for reforms.

The longer-term British reaction to the war, which was to dwell on their dead and the weakening of existing social certainties, was not based on the size of their loss but on its

nature. The war was one of the greatest British victories, and one of the most popular, but within a very few years of its end no British politician could describe a future war as anything other than a deeply regrettable evil, to be avoided if at all possible.

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Notes

1. See Cook, Chris/Stevenson, John: The Longman Handbook of Modern British History 1714-1980, London 1983, pp. 96-7. [↑](#)
2. For a controversial but very detailed and valuable account see Lambert, Nicholas A.: Planning Armageddon, British Economic Warfare and the First World War, Cambridge, MA 2012, p. 238. [↑](#)
3. Cook/Stevenson, Handbook of Modern British History 1983, p. 137. [↑](#)
4. See Silbey, David: The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916, London 2005, pp. 125-31. [↑](#)
5. See French, David: British Strategy and War Aims 1914-1916, London 1986. [↑](#)
6. See in particular Millman, Brock: Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain, London 2000, pp. 97-137. [↑](#)
7. See Winter, J.M.: The Great War and the British People, London 1985; and for detailed if complex data see [Anon:] Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920, London 1921. [↑](#)
8. See in particular Terraine, John: The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War 1861-1945, London 1980, p. 127. [↑](#)
9. See Marwick, Arthur: Women at War 1914-1918, London 1977; and for a more recent and culturally wider perspective see chapters in Andrews, Maggie/Janis Lomas (eds.): The Home Front in Britain, Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914, London 2014. [↑](#)
10. For recent perspectives see Todman, Dan: The Great War, Myth and Memory, London 2005; and Reynolds, David: The Long Shadow, The Great War and the Twentieth Century, London 2013. [↑](#)
11. For a good insight into this complex areas see Strachan, Hew: Financing the First World War, Oxford 2004, pp. 59-60. [↑](#)
12. See Gregory, Adrian: The Last Great War, British Society and the First World War, Cambridge 2008. [↑](#)
13. See French, David: The Strategy of The Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918, Oxford 1995, pp. 171-259. [↑](#)
14. See Winter, J.M.: The Great War and the British People, London 2003, pp. 65-99. [↑](#)

15. See Badsey, Stephen: *The British Army in Battle and Its Image 1914-1918*, London 2009, notably pp. 163-205. [↑](#)
16. See Ugolini, Laura: *Civvies – Middle-Class Men on the English Home Front, 1914-18*, Manchester 2013, pp. 302-6. [↑](#)

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[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

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[Home Front](#)

[Media](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Power](#)

[Violence](#)

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[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Governments](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Parliaments](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Colonialism, imperialism](#)

[The media](#) > [Censorship](#)

[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, domestic](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Battles, battlefields and campaigns](#) > [Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Western Front](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Combatants](#) > [Artillery](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Combatants](#) > [Infantry](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Combatants](#) > [Volunteers](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Military planning and recruitment](#) > [Mobilisation, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Trauma and medical care](#) > [Nurses](#)

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