

Social Costs of War

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Summary

This article explores how the anticipation, reality, and memory of sacrifice informed experiences and legacies of World War I. Drawing on representative examples from multiple nations, I suggest that Europeans' inability to imagine either the wide-reaching social costs of modern warfare or the cumulative power of propaganda grew pre-war socio-economic tensions into exclusionary subcultures rooted in images of sacrifice.

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Introduction

Popular accounts of World War I tend to focus on the war as having unexpectedly and irrevocably changed Western society. After a century or more of [technological](#) progress and bourgeois triumph, this story goes, the Great Powers lurched into an Armageddon that left no one unscathed. When considering the war's actual impact, [traditional scholarship](#) focused on narrow notions of innocence and culpability.¹ Since at least the 1970s, however, scholars

have, while not discounting the cataclysmic approach, increasingly suggested that the cultural break was not comprehensive. Political institutions and the traditional elites that dominated them remained—with a few notable exceptions—more or less intact. Colonial [empires](#) remained the norm for the Great Powers, and a foreign policy aim of newer powers such as [Germany](#), [Japan](#), and the [USA](#). A growing body of personal accounts suggest that while public attitudes changed, the war's impact on societal structures is more ambiguous, and until recently, English-language scholarship largely ignored the war's impact in Southeast Europe and the overseas colonies.

Reframing questions about the significance of World War I by considering the war's social costs bridges gaps between attitudes and impact, personal and societal sacrifice, and between the [Eastern](#) and [Western fronts](#). Seen this way, the war's high social costs created amorphous yet powerful communities of sacrifice rooted in anticipated, actual, and memorialized costs of war. Part 1 discusses the anticipated costs of a technological war. Given the turn of the century socio-political climate, what did people expect to sacrifice? What anticipated costs shaped elite and popular perceptions of war in 1914? Part 2 considers some of the wide-ranging actual costs, including both voluntary and mandatory contributions to the war effort, as well as broader structural costs—some of which were readily apparent, while others remained largely unseen. Part 3 focuses on demographic groups that paid particularly high costs for their participation in the war, then highlights the sacrifices and costs endured by particular national groups. Finally, Part 4 identifies a few longer-term implications, suggesting that even more than 100 years on, the [modern](#) world is still paying the social cost of World War I.

Anticipated Costs

One of the distinguishing features of turn-of-the-century attitudes toward war was the notion of [Burgfrieden or union sacrée](#). Driven by the twin forces of cultural and political [nationalism](#), both traditional elites and the middle classes anticipated that military conflict would inherently unify the nation; festering socio-economic discord between classes, regions, and confessions would fade. Germany and [France](#) are often cited as clear examples of this "[will to war](#)," but the conviction that war could ease domestic tensions also pervaded [Austria-Hungary](#), [Britain](#), [Russia](#), and even the floundering [Ottoman Empire](#). Ironically, [ethnic minorities](#) in all the empires also expected military conflict to link their own political causes with those of the imperial [governments](#). As American aid worker and recipient of the Serbian Red Cross Gold Medal, [Elbridge Colby \(1891-1982\)](#) observed in 1917:

The similarity of [contemporary Serb rhetoric] to ancient tradition and song is amazing... A nation which cradles its youth, like the heroes of Homer, to antique chants of high courage

ever preserves the ancient valour... They fight to the end, these Serbs, because they always fight for freedom... the songs tell the same story.²

The more recent past also shaped the educated classes' ideas about the costs of such a war. According to 19th century statistics, the Crimean War (1854-56) had cost the lives of about 600,000 combatants, and the American Civil War about 370,000.³ Later scholarship would significantly raise those numbers, but at the turn of the century, many educated observers expected technology to make [warfare](#) more efficient. Most Western Europeans also believed colonial wars were—and would be—both more common and more deadly than a theoretical continental conflict. Furthermore, both cultural romanticism and 19th century science depicted war as a valuable, even necessary, part of historical development; religious metaphors and cultural myths further colored perceptions of sacrifice. Whether on an individual, cultural, or biological level, conflict and struggle seemed to be natural, unavoidable and, most importantly in an era of progress and efficiency, useful. Military strategists and industrial entrepreneurs encouraged the Great Powers to increase military spending so as not to fall behind rivals, while smaller nations such as Serbia hoped investing in technology would level the playing field. In short, arms development outpaced strategic innovation. Since technology had made the production of consumer goods faster and less expensive, it seemed rational that [industrialized warfare](#) would also be more efficient. “The market” would ensure a quick, low-cost war. Even in regions scarcely touched by industrialization, few Europeans imagined the sacrifices that a modern, industrialized war would demand of them.

Of course, history also taught that war would require recalibrating some aspects of public life; it was widely expected that personal freedoms would be sacrificed—temporarily—for the national cause. Thus, few were surprised when national governments expanded and centralized economic regulations and restricted freedom of the [press](#). By August 1914, European governments used the rhetoric of collective sacrifice to [censor](#) the use of “enemy tongues.” Such bans, of course, primarily impacted minority populations; the extent to which such rules were actually enforced varied widely. For example, the [Russian government](#) threatened German speakers with fines or deportation, but seldom intervened in the lives of wealthy Germans who lived in the empire. Similarly, public assertions of patriotic sacrifice did not stop upper class Britons from complaining about production delays, shipping costs, and a shortage of unskilled labor.⁴ Union organizers and other social activists also employed the language of sacrifice. While the [urban](#) working classes had little to give, the rhetoric of sacrifice could be used to legitimize complaints about exploitive employers; “[profiteers](#)” hurt not only wages but also the war effort and the myth that national solidarity trumped

traditional class conflict.⁵

Such arguments never really took hold, however. Citing patriotic duty, national governments across Europe asked citizens, minority parties, feminists, and trade unions to set aside their differences. This was no small sacrifice and was not an obvious choice, particularly in places like the German Empire and [Italy](#), relative newcomers to political nationalism. Across the continent, working class men were only slowly gaining a voice in national politics. In Italy, Great Britain, and Russia, for example, universal male suffrage remained an open question in 1914. Even in the dozen nations that had extended the vote to adult males ([Denmark](#), Austria, [Belgium](#), France, [Norway](#), [Portugal](#), [Spain](#), Germany, [Serbia](#), [Greece](#), and [Sweden](#)), the working classes had scarcely impacted government policy. Many radical feminists, particularly in Central Europe, similarly set aside political demands in the name of national unity.⁶ In 1914 at least, calls for national unity and the rhetoric of sacrifice and unity prevailed over individualism.

The Immediate or Visible Costs

The call to bear or sustain the costs of a major war quickly went beyond rhetoric to include both voluntary and mandatory sacrifice. Widespread volunteerism in the early months of the war demonstrated the effectiveness of the rhetoric of sacrifice. Millions of young men flooded recruitment offices in the summer and fall of 1914—particularly in Britain, where some 2.6 million [volunteers](#) filled the ranks of a relatively small professional army. Other nations saw fewer volunteers due to the general practice of universal conscription. However, over the course of the war, Austria-Hungary had more than 20,000 Polish recruits, partly by creating [Polish-only units](#); similarly, Britain recruited an additional 130,000 men—Protestant and Catholic alike—by creating Irish-only units. Volunteers tended to be wealthier and more educated than draftees and understood themselves as serving both national and personal interests. That said, while paid more than draftees, white-collar volunteers also recognized that military service would take some toll on their households.

Middle-class women also volunteered for government service, most visibly as military [nurses](#) and aides. While these positions were not new (Britain, for example, had enlisted female military nurses since 1902), their numbers rose dramatically. These paid volunteers staffed first-aid stations, canteens, recreation centers, and motor pools. Women also volunteered for a plethora of positions via campaigns aimed to free men for frontline service. These included munitions work, which primarily attracted working-class women, as well as more prestigious jobs. Most factories hired female welfare supervisors to oversee women workers, while more than 55,000 educated British women provided administrative support through the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. In some cases, female volunteers even served as mechanics and

ground crew in the air corps. Here too, rhetoric was important; volunteering demonstrated a level of patriotism and personal agency, and whether or not they drew paychecks, middle-class volunteers saw themselves as making a sacrifice. They likewise understood investing in [war bonds](#) as a sacrifice, often redirecting considerable assets toward funding the war effort, particularly in the United States and [Canada](#).⁷ War bonds were less popular in Britain, perhaps due to the relatively long maturation period. By the third bond drive (in 1917), some officials recommended making subscription compulsory; instead, interest rates were raised to over 5 percent.

Perhaps surprisingly, middle-class families did not necessarily connect contributing to the war effort with suspending luxury purchases. For example, while international reservations in resort towns such as Blackpool and San Sebastian initially fell off, business soared throughout the war years. In addition to drawing more middle-class families from their respective regions, these cities effectively extended the season by housing thousands of [refugees](#) and soldiers, whose costs were paid by the state. Even in cities relatively close to the frontlines, middle-class landlords benefitted from this stabilizing effect.⁸ On the other hand, the difficulties of doing business during wartime hurt smaller, family-owned businesses. Unable to compete for lucrative government contracts, many sold out to large corporations.⁹

Among elite families, the costs of the war were more ambiguous. While some scholars point to the demographic collapse of Europe's upper classes, civilian death rates were considerably lower among elites; wealthy families were obviously better able to both escape warzones and ameliorate the impact of rationing. Both traditional and nouveau elite, however, often sacrificed the transnational networks in which pre-war Europe was rooted. Many industrialists prospered, of course, and a surprising number of inter-regional business contacts survived the breakup of Central European empires. Still, the war, and the nationalist sentiments it fueled, significantly weakened elite networks' stabilizing influence on international socio-economic relations. Long-standing scientific collaborations—and rivalries—crumbled under exclusionary nationalism.¹⁰

Evaluating working-class families' voluntary contributions to the war effort is more difficult. In some cases, working-class families found themselves better off. Military pay often matched—or even exceeded—the wages of a semi-skilled worker, and many menial laborers found better-paid semi-skilled positions in the war industry. That said, working-class families also came under considerable pressure to show support for the war; lacking the time to join charitable/service organizations, even small financial contributions thus took on symbolic meaning. In the U.S., for example, War Savings Certificates, which could be purchased in 25-cent installment plans, were marketed primarily to the working class, young people, and even

draftees.

The belligerent states' understandable focus on voluntary contributions and eager sacrifice often overshadows what they required of their citizens during World War I; in practice, the line between voluntary and mandatory contributions was hazy at best. For example, all the major powers except Britain and the United States maintained conscription-based militaries; on paper, this required basic military training of all eligible men, and gave the professional officers corps a cost-efficient supply of battle-ready troops. However, in 1914, men who had been exempted from mandatory service often volunteered. Furthermore, popular pressure often encouraged draftees to assert their eagerness to serve. More than 75 percent of military-aged men in Austria-Hungary, France, and Germany saw military service, but it's less clear how they understood the call to serve.¹¹

Mandatory contributions to the war went beyond military service. All belligerent nations raised taxes to offset largely unanticipated budget increases. The United States' 1917 War Revenue Act, for example, taxed incomes over \$50,000 at over 18 percent, and levied new taxes on alcohol, tobacco, gum, and other items. Britain also exploited its control of imperial trade, buying virtually all the wool produced in [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) to meet wartime demand.¹²

Societal Sacrifices and Costs

Food rationing, like most collective sacrifices, blurred the line between voluntary and mandatory sacrifice. Initially embraced as a tangible sign of patriotism, rationing lost popularity in the final years of the war, and public officials simply couldn't enforce uniform adherence. Consequently, the wealthier classes could—and did—thwart formal guidelines with considerable impunity, as did many [rural](#) families. Urban workers, on the other hand, had a harder time organizing foodstuffs; rationing hit them sooner and harder. By the end of 1918, all of the Central Powers, as well as France, Belgium, Serbia, [Romania](#), and much of the Russian Empire, documented severe [food](#) shortages. The entire agricultural sector lacked manpower, horsepower, and fertilizer. Mechanized warfare laid waste to acres of land, particularly in Silesia, Belgium, and eastern France, and the [US government](#) estimated that European Allied Powers depended on extra-European sources for more than 50 percent of their foodstuffs. This led to both physical and cultural sacrifices, such as giving up traditional diets. In parts of Italy, for example, rationing limited the wheat content of pasta. Wheat was so strictly rationed in France that bread disappeared from even upscale restaurants and dining rooms.¹³ Meats and fats were also strictly rationed, and substitutes such as margarine required more processing/energy—which was also in short supply.

Beyond food, all the belligerent nations suffered severe shortages of coal, wood, leather, and other items requisitioned for the war effort. Deficits were typically worse in urban areas, contributing to a rapid breakdown in distinctions between the working poor and the middle and even upper classes. In Warsaw, for example, the leather shortage meant that even white-collar workers and university students were reduced to wearing the wooden clogs associated with the impoverished classes.¹⁴ Over time, shortages contributed to the breakdown of wartime social norms. Even middle-class housewives regularly patronized the black market, while shopkeepers hoarded goods until they could be traded for food.¹⁵ Pawnbrokers found a high demand for their services, and rents soared, particularly in England, where sympathy for “poor Belgium” didn’t stop landlords from evicting impoverished refugees. In France, meanwhile, one report suggested that more than 50 percent of milk on the market had been diluted with water. In the United States, advocates of Prohibition successfully argued that drinking reduced wartime productivity and enriched German-American brewers. The December 1917 passage of the 18th Amendment, however, led to a lucrative black market. This relatively small-scale exploitation of local conditions echoed wartime profiteering at the national and international level; American, Norwegian, and Dutch shipping companies enjoyed record-breaking profits, as did firms that produced weapons, corn products, or sugar.¹⁶

Broadly speaking, the peoples of all belligerent nations ceded considerable local agency to their respective national governments. In democratic states, voters and parliaments yielded power to the executive branch, and accepted both price controls and production quotas. New regulations meant, of course, new or expanded regulatory agencies that specialized in particular sectors of production. Restrictions also led civilians and soldiers alike to increasingly blame bureaucrats for material shortages, while the competition for resources often pitted army, navy, and war-essential industries against one another. Finally, the liberal “champions of individual autonomy... became devotees of group security.” Having used the war to “[justify] massive transfers of wealth from individuals, families and other private sources to the state [and] the overwhelming of private lives and even privacy,” many European states retained their dramatically expanded bureaucracies in the post-war period, which arguably eased the spread of totalitarian movements.¹⁷

Communities of Sacrifice

A defining feature of World War I is the high price paid by noncombatants. In cities such as Ypres, Verdun, Warsaw, and Belgrade, the high number of civilian deaths made it virtually impossible to sustain mourning rituals, and most national governments anonymized these

deaths, often quickly exploiting them for [propaganda](#) purposes. The “Rape of Belgium,” and the sinking of the [Lusitania](#) are but two examples and do little to elucidate the nature and extent of civilian suffering, particularly in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where the frontlines moved back and forth across wide swaths of land, and through major cities such as Warsaw and Kiev. Across Europe, the cost of living doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled, despite price controls and other government measures; this too is a common feature of communities of sacrifice. Among the millions of “ordinary people” who bore the social costs of war, however, several groups stand out.

The toll exacted from [children](#) is often associated with the loss of one or both parents, siblings, extended family members, teachers, or other community figures. In most countries, however, public support focused on “war orphans,” a label that encompassed only the children of dead soldiers; “as workers, peasants, and symbols of the nation and its future,” children were explicitly and intentionally targeted by militaristic policies. Their sacrifices helped justify attacks on enemy civilians, while their clothes, toys and games became tools through which to normalize violence in the private sphere. In public, children were a key target of demographic reclamation. Textbooks increasingly anonymized and demonized enemies and ethnic minorities, particularly—but not exclusively—in Hungary and the German-Polish-Czech borderlands. In Southeastern Europe, “nationalist population politics turned children into a commodity to be possessed, kidnapped or reshaped.”¹⁸ For example, Armenian and Greek children were forcibly removed from Christian homes and raised as Muslim Turks.¹⁹ In short, wartime societies endorsed and normalized ethnic discrimination for a generation of children.

Veterans

Some 65,000,000 men were mobilized between 1914 and 1918. While not all saw frontline service, the [casualty rate](#) (killed, wounded, and missing in action as a percentage of those mobilized) was over 50 percent among Austro-Hungarian, Australian, Bulgarian, French, German, Russian, and [ANZAC](#) forces.²⁰ 8.5 million soldiers died and at least twice that number were wounded. Of these, at least 9.5 million were considered permanently disabled, with injuries that permanently limited their economic and social prospects. The social and [psychological](#) costs are incalculable and often reduced to studies linking the war’s futile brutality with the [paramilitary](#) organizations and authoritarian politics of the 1930s. While true, wartime service also groomed a generation of veterans to lead mainstream politics and even—notably in Germany, France, and Italy—filled the ranks of [pacifist](#) groups.²¹

Of all veterans, Russians veterans suffered the most, as the nascent Soviet Union only

provided pensions to veterans of the Bolshevik [Red Army](#). Of the major European powers, Germany offered the most comprehensive benefits for disabled veterans, including marital and per-child supplements as well as occupational rehabilitation. Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States also offered significant support for the incapacitated. In Britain, only 1.6 of more than 2 million disabled veterans had qualified for pensions by 1929. Others relied largely on charity and the hope that government incentives would encourage employers to hire incapacitated veterans.²² Germany's "Law of the Severely Disabled," for example, required firms with more than twenty-five employees to reserve 2 percent of positions for disabled workers. Still, war pensions to veterans, [widows](#), and orphans comprised over 20 percent of Germany's federal budget in the early 1930s.

Urban Workers

Wartime hardships wreaked particular havoc on the urban working classes, even if the immediate impact of declaring war seemed largely positive. As noted above, unskilled laborers often saw incomes rise during war; in Britain, according to Arthur Marwick, real wages rose somewhat more than the cost of living during World War I, so that many working-class families were indeed economically better off after the war. That said, workers were more susceptible to shortages and disease and the death of a primary wage earner could push families into irreversible poverty. The costs were similar in kind but much higher in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and were reflected in the shrinking size of working-class families. In Russia, for example, the average size of urban households dropped steadily between 1914 and 1920; in many cities, this trend would not be reversed until after 1945.²³ Corruption also played a role, particularly when officials anticipated governmental collapse. In the words of poet Shaykh Naji Mutlib, local, regional and national bureaucrats all strove to "fan their own kabobs," and the armistice seldom ended such practices. Meanwhile, in many regions, wartime support for industrial safety regulations largely disappeared in the early 1920s.²⁴

Across Europe, the social policies promised by wartime governments seldom materialized, fueling resentment of employers and politicians alike, the very people who had urged trade unions to put political demands aside in the name of patriotism. The working-classes also had fewer resources to rebuild lives and care for disabled veterans after the war. Even in Weimar Germany, where public spending for disabled veterans was highest, budgets increasingly supported policies that valued the health of the nation over the individual patient.²⁵ Consequently, many in the working classes came to believe that "elites" had not sacrificed anything for the war effort, and latent class conflict worsened as material hardship increased. Particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, wartime sacrifice was followed by crippling

inflation and a housing shortage. In France, the labels “veteran” and “socialist” had become antithetical by war’s end. Even the [neutral Netherlands](#) feared [revolution](#); when socialists demanded the dismissal of the Upper House of Parliament, universal suffrage and public regulation of housing and wages, Rotterdam’s mayor tried to placate them with keys to the city. Across the continent, crackdowns on alleged Bolshevism and urban crime disproportionately targeted working-class communities. Thus, while the war may have temporarily relaxed class hierarchies in some areas, wartime suffering took a longer-lasting toll on the lower classes.²⁶

Displaced Persons

Displaced persons also paid a high price for the war. Initial waves of “voluntary” refugees were followed by both government-mandated evacuations and spontaneous flight throughout the war years. While [Belgian refugees](#) found comparatively warm welcome as the embodiment of German brutality, even this had its limits. In the Netherlands, local communities’ sympathy for refugees had evaporated by the winter of 1914-15. If refugees found work, they were criticized for taking local jobs, undercutting union contracts, or combining wages and charitable aid to better their own lot. If they didn’t work, of course, local host communities were quick to describe them as lazy, dangerous, or even “germs of espionage.” In short, these foreigners disrupted labor markets, threatened local identity, and blurred distinctions between friend and foe.²⁷ In southern France, refugees became known as “Germans of the north,” and once the Western Front had basically stabilized, more than 3 million French and Belgian refugees were forced back into *départements* under German [occupation](#).²⁸

In Southeastern Europe, refugees threatened to upset fragile demographic stability, which led to seemingly contradictory policies. Austro-Hungarian public authorities, for example, celebrated the patriotism of Galician Jews who had fled their homes rather than succumb to Russian dominance. Simultaneously, though, [anti-Semitic](#) incidents rose in Vienna, and residents described the newcomers as rude and dishonest. Italian, Polish, and Ukrainian refugees, meanwhile, were more frequently concentrated in hastily built [internment](#) camps.²⁹ Refugees and resident civilians alike were drafted by enemy forces for various kinds of [labor](#). [International law](#) allowed occupying militaries to conscript civilian laborers. This was a frequent practice, as most civilians saw voluntary work for the occupation forces in any capacity as collaboration, and hiring locals saved occupiers housing, transportation, and food costs. After the war, refugees were particularly prone to accusations of having shirked their patriotic duty or fraternized with the enemy.³⁰

Minorities and Colonial Populations

Minority communities in all belligerent nations paid dearly for the war effort. Most infamously, the war enabled Ottoman Turks to bring decades of persecution to a head. Citing the presence of ethnic Armenians in the Russian military, the Ottomans forced more than 1.5 million Anatolian [Armenians](#) into desert internment camps, all but eliminating the Armenian community. Most Allied nations restricted the movement and civil rights of even naturalized ethnic Germans. Britain's [Alien Restriction Act of 1914](#), for example, shut down German-language newspapers and social organizations and cancelled naturalization hearings for the duration of the conflict. Britain also interned more than 32,000 natives of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires by 1915, and deported many of them at war's end.³¹ In Russia, a series of anti-German pogroms in 1915 decimated longstanding Russian-German communities. By 1917, the war had cost ethnic minorities legal rights, not only in all belligerent countries, but also in theoretically neutral nations such as [Brazil](#) and the United States. Even the most integrated minorities sacrificed diasporic identity, as frontlines dissected Europe's multi-ethnic regions. Polish-Russians faced ethnic Poles—frequently former neighbors or extended family members—in the German and Austro-Hungarian armies. In the West, Alsatians and Lorrainians served in both French and German armies.

Far from the frontlines, colonial populations bore similar costs, while also sacrificing dreams of independence. In [India](#), for example, middle- and working-class hopes for reform crumbled as the colonial government negotiated with regional princes and political activists, men who, according to the Lahore *Prabhat*, “have a conception of the meaning of patriotism,” while the illiterate masses perpetuated ridiculous rumors that suggested a certain sympathy to the Central Powers—and fueled the decision to impose martial law in the Punjab, home to the vast majority of South Asian troops.³²

National Sacrifice

It goes without saying that international military conflicts bolster national narratives of sacrifice—and that post-war governments strove to craft politically-expedient narratives through public [commemorations](#) and official chronologies that document military and territorial losses. Given the plethora of work on this topic—including numerous articles in this encyclopedia—three examples illustrate how the social costs of war colored political change. In 1916 Russia, pre-war prices had already doubled and war-related deaths meant that women outnumbered men by two to one. By the end of the [civil war](#), one in four urban women were widows; nationwide, widows outnumbered widowers more than 7:1 in the mid-1920s. During the same period, repeated national efforts to regulate food distribution encountered resistance from local and regional authorities, who increasingly hoarded

supplies and blamed the state for shortages. This tension between Soviets, regional authorities, and the provisional government persisted for decades.³³

The (second) Polish Republic also faced enormous social challenges. More than 3 million Poles had been called to serve in German, Austrian, or Russian armies, none of which were eager—or financially able—to support Polish veterans or their families. In the south, the defeated Austrian authorities left economic and political anarchy, while throughout the region, political opportunism and mutual suspicion among veterans of the various armies hindered the Republic's effort to restore order. Border disputes with Germany and [Ukraine](#) and war with the Soviet Union fueled anti-Semitism and ethnic resentment against the third of the population considered "alien." Parliamentary deputy [Stanisław Grabski \(1871-1949\)](#) summed up Polish opinion: "The foreign element will have to see if it will not be better off elsewhere." Interior Minister Cyryl Ratajski (1875-1942) argued that, "Every German that we can somehow get rid of must leave." All told, the mostly upper-class Polish nationals, having gained political independence, faced hostile European neighbors, little support from peasants and workers, a vulnerable economy, and a very real threat of revolution.³⁴ The other newly independent states of Central Europe also struggled; having lost German capital and markets, most further isolated themselves through protectionist trade laws.

Prior to 1914, the Ottoman Empire was arguably better situated than its reputation as the "sick man of Europe" suggested. The 1908 revolution had established a multi-party secular parliamentary system. Furthermore, few ethnic nationalists were confident the demise of the Ottoman Empire would further their goals, given Western interests in the region. To many Iraqis, for example, the [1917 fall of Baghdad](#) marked not only the end of Ottoman rule, but also the more problematic demise of a centuries-old social order at the hands of Western modernity.³⁵ This fueled post-war resentment among elites, a rapidly increasing cultural divide between cosmopolitan merchants and the working classes, and widespread cynicism towards colonial notions of progress and civilization. Iraqi poet Shaykh Naji Mutlib was only one of many public figures who lamented this reality.

Oh Sorrow! Our kind is being degraded

From the West we take our clothes—

We have followed the light of the West

And we remain in its shadow

No one takes care of our barley

Beer has become its rabab (fiddle).³⁶

Social Norms as Sacrifice

Brutalized societies

Examining the long-term social costs of the First World War has garnered considerably more interest in recent years, going far beyond—and even challenging—the observation that the war primed one or more generations for authoritarianism in the 1930s.³⁷ Ángel Alcade and Benjamin Ziemann point out that veterans in Germany, France, and Italy also filled the ranks of post-war [pacifist](#) groups and charitable organizations. Many veterans, furthermore, eschewed politics all together.³⁸

The fear that veterans, noncombatants, and [social norms](#) had been [brutalized](#), however, dominated public discourse.³⁹ It established a new coming-of-age story, rooted not in exploration, conquest, or professional accomplishment, but rather in trauma that defied understanding and reduced individuals to anonymous recruits, sent *en masse* into [no-man's-land](#). In many communities, fears of wartime trauma's long-term consequences were well-founded— although not particularly focused on shell-shocked veterans. Rather, voters demanded that police crack down on juvenile delinquency—which often included not only organized violence, but also insignificant crimes such as speaking a foreign language or cursing in public.⁴⁰

War had simultaneously sensitized societies to the danger of urban unrest and established the state as regulator of not only public, but also private behavior, a role traditionally enforced by elders or informal hierarchies. In other words, [total war](#) professionalized both the naming and enforcing of behavioral norms. Having ceded so much self-disciplining authority to the national war effort, however, local communities were arguably more prone to political unrest as socio-economic conditions worsened. This undermined governments' assurances that peace presaged a return to normalcy, and arguably threatened those very officials' legitimacy in the eyes of a public that longed for safety and security. One post-war sign of public cynicism was the strong support for local civilian militias in countries across Europe.⁴¹

Religious Traditions

Many religious institutions also paid a high price during and especially after the war. Young clergy often volunteered as military chaplains, while older clergy clung to outmoded practices and dominated both local and national hierarchies. Contributions fell or were redirected

toward the war effort, impeding the church's ability to fulfill its diaconal role at a time when need increased exponentially. Simultaneously, wartime and post-war labor and material shortages drove up the price of upkeep on medieval-era buildings which cost more, given the shortage of skilled labor and building materials. Finally, as the death toll grew, Irish Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and German Lutheran clergy institutions found themselves forced to break from the long tradition of sacred-secular cooperation.⁴² The war's aftermath, of course, subjected the Russian Orthodox Church to Bolshevik persecution. Similarly, the demise of the Ottoman caliphate set the stage for religious-political turmoil in the region. Even in Western Europe, religious institutions rarely recovered from their wartime losses.⁴³

Disoriented Feminism

The cost of war to feminist movements is more ambiguous, in part because scholars have traditionally translated women's war work, at least for some categories of women, into greater personal autonomy and [political participation](#).⁴⁴ There is some truth to this, of course, supported by the widespread extension of the vote to women in many belligerent nations in the 1920s. Likewise, the impact of wartime employment and financial independence informed feminists' expectations and lifestyles long after the war ended. More recent work, however, suggests it would be more accurate to consider the war's "disorienting" impact on feminist movements. Victoria de Grazia's work on Italy, for example, emphasizes the class-specific ways wartime [mobilization](#) shaped post-war activism. Upper- and middle-class women's war work did provide access to government bureaucracies, arguably paving the way for greater civic participation after the war. Patricia Fara's work on female scientists in wartime Britain points to similar ties between professional and political emancipation. Working-class women, however, took paid factory work, and if anything, were drawn to socialist organizations, while unions strove for socio-economic leveling. Consequently, the Italian women's movement was less unified—and less effective—by war's end. Malgorzata Dajnowicz's study of rural Polish women draws similar conclusions; day-to-day struggles impeded women's political activism not only during the war, but also during the tenuous independence that followed.⁴⁵

Conclusion

World War I cost Western civilization its self-congratulatory optimism. A "long" 19th century had led political elites and revolutionaries alike to believe European culture would advance into perpetuity. By 1916, that shared sense of confidence had been deeply shaken, and growing cynicism about the nature of Western civilization intensified the toll of total war. Even where pre-war institutions survived beyond 1919, they had lost legitimacy. At the same

time, the state's intrusion into the private sphere became a permanent feature of modern life. Wherever the state provided benefits, it also demanded regulatory oversight, undermining the societal value of informal norms and unpaid work.

Through both propaganda and practice, World War I often reduced complex social identities to exclusionary communities of sacrifice that competed for recognition and resources. For example, while Central-eastern Europe remained a demographic mosaic, nationalist parties used the war to strengthen antagonistic narratives and exclusionary political agendas. This was most obvious in Ukraine, [Belarus](#), Germany, and [Poland](#), but also reshaped historical narratives in Hungary, Turkey and parts of Western Europe, where long-existent minority populations were reframed as cultural "intruders."⁴⁶ Out of wartime patriotism and sacrifice came both the demand for national states and—more importantly, perhaps—a widespread ambivalence about the same ethno-national projects.

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Citation

Kimberly A. Redding: Social Costs of War, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2018-08-28. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11299](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11299)

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Author Keywords

home front; sacrifice; community

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Soziale Situation](#)

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Key Person(s)

[Colby, Elbridge](#); [Grabski, Stanisław](#); [Ratajski, Cyryl](#); [Nurses](#)

Key Location(s)

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Social Costs of War

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Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

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