

The Impact of the First World War on British Society

Arthur Marwick

A generation ago Professor Cyril Falls, in his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of the History of War in the University of Oxford, attributed the disrepute into which he felt war studies had fallen to the 'fallacious' theory 'that the major, if not the sole, object of history should be the study of the artisan, the labourer and the peasant'.¹

Today it has become a commonplace that this very preoccupation with the artisan, the labourer, and the peasant must, in the twentieth century at any rate, lead to a detailed study of war and war's 'impact' on society. Yet even now, despite the vast quantities of books and articles called forth in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the first World War, it cannot be said that the literature on the British social experience during and immediately after the war is extensive. This state of affairs is in accord with the simple doctrine that war can have only a destructive effect on civilisation elaborated by Professors Toynbee and Nef,² and reinforced by that form of sociological exposition which has treated war as analogous to natural catastrophe.³ In general those who have talked most about war's impact have presented the least strict analysis and the fewest hard facts, writing blithely of

¹ Cyril Falls, *The Place of War in History* (London, 1947), 6.

² Toynbee's view is most clearly expressed in those extracts from the first six volumes of *A Study of History* published as *War and Civilisation* (London, 1950). John U. Nef, *War and Human Progress* (London, 1950), was written in explicit refutation of Werner Sombart, *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (Munich, 1913).

³ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York, 1942); Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1942), especially I, 272: 'The preceding survey suggests that in the most recent stage of world-civilisation war has made for instability, for disintegration, for despotism, and for unadaptability, rendering the course of civilisation less predictable and continued progress toward achievement of its values less probable.'

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

social revolutions, short skirts, and the vulgar manners of the *nouveau riche*.⁴

The higher ground of solid scholarship has been dominated by those 'whig' historians who have followed Toynbee and Nef in stressing war's disruptive effects, and who have tended to concentrate on the association between modern war and the growth of totalitarianism. The counter-attack has been mounted, sporadically, by the 'tories', the precursors and followers of Professor Falls;⁵ in greater force, but on a more limited front, by the economists, who after 1918, and again in 1939-40, became fascinated by the economic reorganisation and growth of collectivism accompanying war; and, more in the spirit than in the published word, by Marxist upholders of Trotsky's dictum that 'war is the locomotive of history'.⁶

The classic whig account is that of F.W. Hirst, who set a fashion in naivety of analysis which many have imitated but few have equalled: the war, said Hirst, had weakened the Liberals, strengthened the Conservatives and the Labour party, though only to the extent of replacing the two-party system by a three-

⁴ E.g. Philip Gibbs, 'The Social Revolution in English Life', in *More that Must be Told* (London, 1921), 213-43; Frank Dillnott, *England Since the War* (London, 1920); C.F.G. Masterman, *England after the War* (London, 1922); Frank P. Chambers, *The War Behind the War 1914-1918* (New York, 1940), is a worthless narrative.

⁵ See N.H. Gibbs, 'War and History', *The Listener*, 6 October 1955; Correlli Barnett, *The Swordbearers* (London, 1963); John Terraine, *Douglas Haig; the educated soldier* (London, 1964); Cyril Falls, 'The Doctrine of Total War', *The Nature of Modern Warfare* (London, 1941), 1-20.

⁶ Allen Hutt, *The Post-War History of the British Working Class* (London, 1937), 10, in fact argued that the war temporarily 'overwhelmed' the revolutionary movement. Paul Louis, *Le Bouleversement Mondial* (Paris, 1920), has only brief references to Britain: esp. 5-6, 184-9. Karl Kautsky, *Krieg und Demokratie* (Berlin, 1932), does not mention Britain and the first World War. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (3rd ed., London, 1950), 354-5, of course, argued that a prolonged war hastened the advance of 'socialism and democracy', but did little to develop his point that 'Any major war that ends in defeat will shake the social fabric and threaten the position of the ruling group. . . . But the converse proposition is not so certain. Unless success be quick or, at all events, striking and clearly associated with the performance of the ruling stratum . . . exhaustion, economic, physical, and psychological, may well produce, even in the case of victory, effects on the relative position of classes, groups and parties that do not differ essentially from those of defeat. . . . In England the labour vote that had been at little over half a million in January 1910 and not quite two millions and a quarter in 1918, went to 4,236,733 in 1922 and to 5,487,620 in 1924 . . . MacDonald reconquered the leadership and in 1924 the party came into office if not really into power.'

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

party system (Hirst gave no hint that there might be deeper sociological reasons for the decline of the Liberals); state control had been greatly and lamentably strengthened; war had brought 'moral evils' and 'social degeneracy'.⁷ The emotional hysteria evoked by war formed the main topic of two important whiggish studies by Carolyn E. Playne and Irene Cooper Willis.⁸ The earliest tory accounts are really part of the patriotic polemic of the war itself. Writing in September 1918, W. Basil Worsfold, well-known for his pot-boiling studies of the British Empire, produced *The War and Social Reform: An Endeavour to Trace the Influence of the War as a Reforming Agency; with special reference to matters primarily affecting the wage-earning classes* (London, 1919). Though the book scarcely fulfils the promise of the title, the author did incidentally touch on two of the fundamental issues to which all serious commentators have been forced to return again and again: war as a supreme challenge to society and its institutions,⁹ forcing reorganization in the direction of efficiency; and war as a revelation 'of the value of the manual worker to the state'. The most imposing works in the economic canon are the Carnegie Foundation *Economic and Social History of the Great War* – of which, finally, twenty-four volumes were published in the British series (Oxford, 1919–34), with 'economic' firmly taking precedence over 'social' and, in lesser degree, the *Official History of the Ministry of Munitions* (8 volumes, 1918–22). Written, in the main, by administrative participants in the events described and composed partly from the documents, partly from memory (as is so often the case with contemporary history), the Carnegie series is by no means uniformly reliable, but the cumulative effect is a hymn of praise for the war-time experiments in state control. In general historians have agreed that once new techniques of economic management had been developed in war, there could be no complete return to the laissez-faire orthodoxy of 1914, though Professor Tawney wrote a polemical denunciation (riddled with minor errors) of what he

⁷ Francis W. Hirst, *The Consequences of the War to Great Britain* (Oxford, 1934), I–46, 63–85, 305.

⁸ Carolyn E. Playne, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain* (London, 1928), *Society at War 1914–1916* (1931), *Britain Holds on 1917–1918* (1933); Irene Cooper Willis, *England's Holy War* (New York, 1929).

⁹ Cf. Correlli Barnett, *The Swordbearers*, II: 'war is the great auditor of institutions'.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

called the 'Abandonment of Economic Controls 1918-1921',¹⁰ and the *Official Ministry of Munitions History* boldly stated the probability that 'experience of state control during the war has retarded rather than hastened the spread of state socialism' (VII, 1).

Best of all the economic studies is a slender volume by Professor A. L. Bowley, the statistician and author of a number of valuable social surveys. Bowley suggested that post-war changes could be divided into three categories: those mainly unconnected with the war; those accelerated (or retarded) by the war; and those directly attributable to the war – the destruction of life and of capital. He thought the main post-war technological changes, such as the transition to oil firing in ships, fell under the first heading, while certain other technological changes, such as the development of aviation, fell into the second category, as did the emancipation of women and the growth of political and social democracy. In *Has Poverty Diminished?* (1925) Bowley had referred to his verdict of 1913 that 'to raise the wages of the worst-paid workers is the most pressing social task with which the country is confronted today', and concluded, 'it has needed a war to do it, but that task has been accomplished'. To war's direct destruction of capital Bowley linked the imposition of high progressive taxation and the partial redistribution of income between social classes which resulted.¹¹ Historians remain divided on the question of how far this redistribution brought about significant changes in the class structure: Professor D. C. Marsh is sceptical, but other recent work has tended to suggest that at the upper levels of society taxation did have a significant effect.¹²

American commentators, almost all of them preoccupied with the problems of economic reorganisation, have been legion, French, German, or other non-British commentators practically non-existent.¹³ Of the two great French authorities on modern

¹⁰ *Economic History Review*, no. 1, 1943.

¹¹ A. L. Bowley, *Some Economic Consequences of the Great War* (London, 1930), 20-3.

¹² David C. Marsh, *Changing Social Structure of England and Wales* (London, 1955), esp. 216-7. F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1963), 330 ff. W. L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite* (London, 1963), 100-196.

¹³ The most recent, and best, American study is Samuel J. Hurwitz, *State Intervention in Great Britain* (New York, 1949). First into what became a very crowded field was H. L. Gray, *War Time Control of Industry* (New York, 1918). The advent of a second World War brought forth such books as Horst Mender-

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

Britain, André Siegfried gave no special weight to the war as an agent in what he called *England's Crisis* (1930). Elie Halévy made some pertinent comments on the 'social peace' in Britain during the war, showing how misplaced were contemporary hopes (he was writing in 1919) that the Whitley Councils would usher in a new era of co-operation between employers and employed; his major (though undeveloped) theme, the idea that war had ushered in *The Era of Tyrannies*, is very similar to that of the British whig historians.¹⁴ While sociologists have opened up important lines of enquiry, the notorious colourlessness of contemporary British history (no soviets, no concentration camps, no resistance movements) has apparently dissuaded them from drawing their data from the British experience. Clearly, the general concept of war as 'disaster', or at least as 'discontinuity',¹⁵ is a valuable one. It is almost half a century since Samuel H. Prince completed his investigation into the disastrous explosion which took place at Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1917. His assessment of the role of catastrophe was that

Functioning directly, it prepares the groundwork for social change by (1) weakening social immobility; (2) precipitating fluidity of custom; (3) forcing environmental favourability for change. Indirectly it sets in motion factors determining the nature of the social change, such as (1) the release of spirit and morale; (2) the play of imitation; (3) the stimulus of leaders and lookers-on; (4) the socialization of institutions.¹⁶

hausen, *The Economics of War* (New York, 1941), A. W. Spiegel, *The Economics of Total War* (New York, 1942), and Albert T. Lauterbach, *Economics in Uniform* (Princeton, 1943), all drawing some of their material from the earlier British experience. First-war German studies, such as Otto Jöhlinger, *Der britische Wirtschaftskrieg und seine Methoden* (Berlin, 1918), were generally admiring of British methods of economic reorganisation; second-war studies were purely propagandist. The 1940 annual meeting of the American Historical Association resulted in the publication of *War as a Social Institution: the historian's perspective* (ed. Jesse D. Clarkson and Thomas C. Cochrane, New York 1941), but Britain's 1914-18 experience was not thought worthy of inclusion. The Institute of World Affairs, *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Session: War and Society* (Los Angeles, 1941), is little more than propaganda on behalf of American participation in the second World War.

¹⁴ Elie Halévy, *L'Ère des Tyrannies* (Paris, 1938). American paperback edition, *The Era of Tyrannies* (New York 1965), 105-57, 183-207, 234-47, 249-66.

¹⁵ See William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, 1959), 159-72. He writes (168): 'In general, war crises of great severity clearly are mass-producing in their devastation of the very physical basis of both elite and non-elite.'

¹⁶ Samuel H. Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change: Based on a Sociological*

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

However, the point about war is that it is not wholly an extra-social stimulus (as is natural catastrophe), but that it also involves intra-social stimuli. Failure to appreciate this, I believe, invalidates much of Sorokin's *Man and Society in Calamity*. From the twin periods of scholarly activity centred on the two wars the most directly relevant contributions are William B. Trotter's *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace* (rev. ed. 1919), and Willard Waller's essay 'War and Social Institutions',¹⁷ though Trotter came perilously close to patriotic rhetoric in his eulogy of the social cohesion of the British people in time of stress. Waller referred to group instincts in explaining the growth of social reform during wars: 'For the most part this phenomenon is a phase of the reversion to the tribal morality of the in-group and the out-group. The direction of hostility toward the enemy leaves the in-group at peace' (488).

Taking up the concept of war as 'discontinuity', Waller explained how the new situations of war created a need for new *mores* and new *folkways*, certainly very relevant to what took place in Britain during and after the war in the world of sexual standards, fashion, etc. (487-92). This is certainly an area in which the tools of the social psychologist could usefully work on the materials gathered by the historian. The one concrete example which Waller drew from Britain was that of the gaining of political rights by women in 1918, cited in support of the somewhat question-begging thesis that 'minorities and under-privileged groups tend to make gains, at least temporarily, under war conditions' (511).

Here we return to one of the central historical issues, subsequently brilliantly illumined in Stanislaw Andrzejewski's *Military Organization and Society* with its theory of the Military Participation Ratio (MPR) and the co-variation of the pyramid of social stratification with this MPR.¹⁸ (In other words, the greater the participation of low-status groups and classes in the war effort, the stronger the levelling tendency.) Necessarily, in a book covering

Study of the Halifax Disaster (New York, 1920), 145. An invaluable recent contribution is G. Sjöberg, 'Disasters and Social Change', in G.W. Baker and D.D. Chapman, eds., *Man and Society in Disaster* (New York, 1962).

¹⁷ In Willard Waller, ed. *War in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1940), 478-532.

¹⁸ Stanislaw Andrzejewski, *Military Organization and Society* (London, 1954), 33-8.

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

the whole range of human history, actual reference to Britain and the first World War is brief: noting that the levelling tendency in Britain was apparent long before 1914, Andrzejewski continued: 'It is nevertheless significant that the two world wars, fought with conscript armies, strengthened immensely these levelling tendencies. The end of the first saw the introduction of universal adult suffrage; the second brought to power the Labour Party, with its programme of soaking the rich.'

The last phrase, sufficient to send shudders down the historian's spine, perhaps suggests that, vitally important as Andrzejewski's contribution undoubtedly is, the parade of sociological precision conceals a goodly amount of historical imprecision. Fortunately, however, Andrzejewski's basic idea was snatched up by two distinguished scholars, Professor Richard Titmuss and Dr Philip Abrams, and applied to the specifically British evidence.

In his lecture on 'War and Social Policy',¹⁹ Professor Titmuss noted that in recent times wars have followed an 'ascending order of intensity', hence the 'increasing concern of the State in time of war with the biological characteristics of its people'. At the first stage of intensity the concern is with the quantity of recruits to the armed forces; at the second it is with the quality of recruits; and at the third it is with the whole population, from whom future recruits will be drawn. Titmuss stressed the importance of the Boer War (1898-1902) in the development of this concern on the part of the State. Strangely, he played down the importance of the first World War, the throwaway remark that 'the story repeats itself in the First World War' suggesting a somewhat imperfect sense of historical proportion. Explicitly picking up Max Weber's dictum that 'the discipline of the army gives birth to all discipline', Titmuss enunciated his first general conclusion:

The waging of modern war presupposes and imposes a great increase in social discipline; moreover, this discipline is only tolerable if – and only if – social inequalities are not intolerable. The need for less inequality is expressed, for example, in the changes that take place in what is socially approved behaviour – marked differences in standards of

¹⁹ First published in *The Listener*, 3 November 1955, and reprinted in R. M. Titmuss, *Essays on 'The Welfare State'* (London, 1958). Altogether seven talks on 'War and Society' were published in *The Listener*, 6 October – 17 November 1955.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

living, in dress, in luxury entertainment and in indulgences of many kinds are disapproved.²⁰

Historically, of course, the question remains: is this levelling permanent, or may there not be, in reaction against the austerity of war, a subsequent outbreak of conspicuous consumption on the part of the wealthier classes? Some of the evidence from Britain 1918–21 would support this view, though on balance it does distinctly appear that a permanent levelling of standards was effected.²¹ Here again the assistance of the social psychologists would be welcome.²² Drawing upon Andrzejewski's theory, Titmuss concluded that 'The aims and content of social policy both in peace and war are . . . determined, at least to a substantial extent, by how far the cooperation of the masses is essential to the successful prosecution of the war . . . If this cooperation is thought to be essential then inequalities must be reduced and the pyramid of stratification must be flattened'.

In a superb article, whose only disappointments are its title and its conclusions, Dr Abrams, following in social history a parallel course to that charted by Tawney in economic history, sought to explain what he called 'The Failure of Social Reform 1918–1920'.²³ Despite all the high hopes and rhetoric of the war period, Abrams argued, there remained two major obstacles to the realisation of concrete social reform: administrative and ideological. For all that there had been a great expansion in government, 'still it was not nearly big enough to handle the business it had undertaken'. Ideologically the obstacle was the failure of the politicians responsible for social planning 'to understand certain critical relationships' within the society they wished to reform:

It was not just that their greatest desire was 'social harmony' or that they thought of harmony as the natural condition of society. The peculiar ideology of the war effort, of 'all pulling together', the tacit MPR assumptions that the war generated, led them to believe in the *immediate reality of harmony* between interests and classes in society which it was

²⁰ The quotation from Weber, as cited by Titmuss, is in J.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1947), 261.

²¹ The evidence is to be found in *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, ed. Hubert Llewellyn Smith, VIII (London, 1934), and D. Caradog Jones, *Social Survey of Merseyside*, 3 vols. (Liverpool, 1934).

²² There was certainly a very pronounced reaction against austerity in Britain some years after the second World War.

²³ In *Past and Present*, April 1963.

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

their job to 'ameliorate'. To this extent they were effectively disqualified from seeing the need to constrain groups to work together.

Dr Abrams is therefore led to the conclusion that 'the one group in English society to which the war brought a significant extension of social and political privilege was middle-aged propertied women'.

Abram's article provides a kind of *post facto* justification for the various narrative historians who have felt the war unworthy of any special treatment as an agent of social change,²⁴ and it serves as a remarkable complement to Halévy's earlier reflections on the abortive nature of the wartime 'social harmony'. Yet, though his argument must command our respect, I do not believe that it should command our acceptance. With the Titmuss lecture it shares one great self-imposed defect: a total concentration on the issue of guided social reform to the exclusion of any consideration of the unguided forces of social change unleashed by the war. Only two major narrative histories have appreciated this point, and then implicitly rather than explicitly. In reading the early chapters of Professor Mowat's *Britain between the Wars 1918-1940* (London, 1955), one constantly suspects that the author wishes he had chosen 1914 or 1916 as his starting date: he does bring out clearly how the war experience had made acceptable such major innovations as the recasting of Unemployment Insurance in 1920 and 1921 (not mentioned by Dr Abrams).²⁵ Briefly and pungently, Mr A.J.P. Taylor, in his volume of the *Oxford History*, has asserted that it was the war that brought democracy and socialism to fruition in Britain, that 'the history of the English state and of the English people merged for the first time'.²⁶

How then do we assess the impact of the war? Although, as the researches of W. L. Guttsman, F. M. L. Thompson, J. M. McEwen, and J. M. Lee have shown, the war did alter the balance of power within the British political elite away from the landed aristocrats

²⁴ E.g. Alfred Havighurst, *Twentieth Century Britain* (New York, 1962), Maurice Bruce, *The Coming of the Welfare State* (London, 1961), Hardy and M. Wickwar, *The Social Services* (London, 1949).

²⁵ C. L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars 1918-1940*, 45-6, 127-8.

²⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), I-2, 34-41, 73-114, 120-6.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

towards the lesser businessmen,²⁷ it is evident that the nature of British political leadership in the post-war years was not greatly different from that of the Edwardian era. A study of the relevant Cabinet papers suggests that instead of well-meaning reformers being frustrated by their ideological limitations, a clear-headed group of Conservative politicians found that, however hell-bent they were on a return to 1914, they could not will away all the changes brought about by the war.²⁸ Believing that so far no one has given a completely satisfactory explanation of the relationship between war and social change, I concluded my own study of 'British Society and the First World War' with the suggestion that the relationship could best be examined through identifying seven *methods* by which war affects society.²⁹ I now believe that this list can be reduced to four (a sign, I hope, of progress), and I have substituted *mode* for the unsatisfactory word *method*.³⁰

First, war *is* destructive; it shares in the characteristics of disaster:³¹ it is certainly discontinuity. Undoubtedly, in basing their every action on the economic standards of 1914, British politicians rendered more serious the effects of the economic dislocation brought about by the war: but the economic dislocation was nonetheless a reality. War-time borrowing, loss of reserves, and sales of overseas assets had severely reduced London's international creditor status. In the expansionist phase which lasted till 1914

²⁷ W.L. Guttsman, *Political Elite*, 100-196; F.M.L. Thompson, *Landed Aristocracy*, 330 ff.; J.M. McEwen, 'The Coupon Election of 1918 and the Unionist Members of Parliament', in *Journal of Modern History*, 1962, 294 ff.; J.M. Lee, *Social Leaders and Public Persons* (London, 1964), 80.

²⁸ See especially the Cabinet discussions of 5 August 1919, P.R.O., CAB 23/15, 606. At the height of the 1921 coal crisis the Cabinet (in the absence of Lloyd George) noted that: 'During the war the miners had shown that they were immensely patriotic, and it would be a calamity if Labour generally obtained the impression that the Government was siding in this matter with the employers'. P.R.O., CAB 23/25, 18(21).

²⁹ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London, 1965), 289.

³⁰ Arthur Marwick, *Britain in the Century of Total War: War, Peace and Social Change* (London, 1968).

³¹ In fact two world wars have brought to the United States material gain rather than the losses associated with disaster, and it may still be possible to profit from a limited war - as, for instance, did Israel in the Middle East. As I phrase it in my forthcoming book, the first mode results from the fact that war, at its simplest, is a matter of profit and loss (catastrophe, destruction, etc.). For a sociologist's appraisal of this point see Sjöberg, *loc. cit.*, 358: 'one man's misfortune is often another's gain'.

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

London had functioned triumphantly as the world's greatest financial centre on ridiculously small reserves; in the post-war atmosphere of suspicion and economic nationalism, this was no longer easy. Thus, after the first burst of inflation at the end of the war, the government sought to protect London's international financial position through deflation and retrenchment, giving the appearance of a total 'failure of social reform'. The economic dislocations of war, too, created the conditions of mass unemployment, which soon flooded past the paper barriers of inflated post-war demand. Again, though in the broad view the worker had made great gains during the war, in certain areas these were wiped out by the incidence of unemployment. Yet by a paradox which also attends upon natural disaster,³² the disruptions brought by the war to normal educational and health provision and to house-building gave an impetus to social construction on an entirely new scale. H. A. L. Fisher explained his Education Act of 1918 as being 'framed to repair the intellectual wastage which has been caused by the war'³³; so, too, the massive state initiative implied in the Housing Act of 1919³⁴ which, far from being a total failure, made possible the building between 1919 and 1921 of 70,000 houses a year, let at rents ranging from 5s. to 12s. a week, and which provided the basic principles for all future housing legislation.³⁵

War, to come to the second mode, acts as a supreme challenge to, and test of, a country's social and political institutions. War results not only in the destruction of inefficient institutions (such as the Tsarist regime in Russia), but also in the transformation of less efficient mechanisms into more efficient ones.³⁶ Leaving aside the challenge to and exposure of economic liberalism, the challenge to and exposure of the Liberal party, and the challenge to and rapid development of the country's exploitation of science and technology, this challenge-transformation mode also subsumes the public health improvements touched on by Professor Titmuss.

³² One thinks, in particular, of the way in which the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 resulted in San Francisco being rebuilt as one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

³³ *House of Commons Debates*, 10 August 1917.

³⁴ The case is argued in these terms in two government papers of 1917, *Housing in England and Wales* (Cmd. 9087), and the *Report of the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland* (Cmd. 8731).

³⁵ Marion Bowley, *Housing and the State* (London, 1945), 15-25.

³⁶ Ironically there is an echo here of Professor Toynbee's famous 'Challenge and Response' theory.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Usually, however, it must be seen as operating in conjunction with the third mode (Military Participation) identified by Andrzejewski and developed by Abrams. The war-time 'emancipation of women' is a commonplace (though in fact there is no good modern scholarly account); more controversial is the question of the effects of the war on the working classes. Their gains, in fact, were three-fold: because of their strengthened role in the market, their wages and living standards rose; because of their increased participation in activities and decisions that were, and were seen to be, important, their political and industrial organization was toughened; because the government needed them, it gave them, mainly through the processes of legislation, enhanced recognition and status. The average income of all working-class families between 1914 and 1920 rose by 100 per cent, which slightly more than cancelled out the rise in the cost of living. After 1920 price levels fell while, with some exceptions, the new wage levels were successfully defended, so that by the early twenties the working classes, provided they were not unemployed, were in real terms ten or twenty per cent better off than before the war.³⁷ Whether we talk of 'rising expectations' or changing 'reference groups', it is apparent that the taste of affluence, afforded to some workers during the war, greatly accelerated that quest for a higher standard of living which in itself has proved so potent an agent of continuing social change.³⁸ While it would be absurd to deny that the actual tally of social legislation fell dismally below that promised by the politicians, it is also instructive to make two other comparisons: the post-1918 Labour Party with the pre-1914 Labour Party,³⁹ and the post-1918 franchise with the pre-1914 one – only in 1918, as Mr Noel Blewett has clearly demonstrated, did Britain become a political democracy.⁴⁰

The fourth mode I present with diffidence. To say that war, in common with the great revolutions in history, is a colossal emo-

³⁷ *Labour Gazette*, 1925; A. L. Bowley, *Has Poverty Diminished?*; Sidney Pollard, *Development of the British Economy* (1962), 289 ff.

³⁸ We need more studies in the style set by W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth century England* (London, 1966).

³⁹ Of the many histories of the Labour Party, the one which brings this point out most forcefully is Carl F. Brand, *The British Labour Party: A Short History* (Stanford, 1964).

⁴⁰ Noel Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom 1885–1918', *Past and Present*, December 1965.

IMPACT OF FIRST WORLD WAR ON BRITISH SOCIETY

tional and psychological experience may seem either vague and question-begging, or mere repetition of the point that, in one sense, war is catastrophe. Yet, when we all talk so lightly of the 'traumatic' effects of the first World War, when there is such copious evidence of the stimulus given by the war to the arts in Britain,⁴¹ when there are so many individual examples of conversions to socialism or away from religious and other orthodoxies,⁴² it does seem that we have here a vast and important topic for study: the historian can collect the evidence, but again the help of the social psychologist is urgently needed.⁴³

One related point remains: did the war foster a growth of violence in post-war British society? The answer, I believe, is 'no', though certainly Britain did channel her form of fascism into the Black-and-Tan war in Ireland. But it would help to settle the matter definitively if a comparative statistical study were made of acts of violence committed in the three years before the war and in the three years after the war.

My purpose has been to explain a paradox. Of all human activities, war is most inextricably linked to the extremes of misery, suffering, and human degradation. To demonstrate how, at the same time, the war of 1914-18 was accompanied by important social change, is in no sense an attempt to glorify or condone war.

(This essay was written as a paper for the International Conference held by the Institute of Contemporary History in London, 25-27 October 1967.)

⁴¹ See A. Marwick, *The Deluge*, 140-8, 217-23. For an examination of the changes in war fiction wrought by the war see I.D. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (London, 1966), 166-208.

⁴² Many of the older converts are listed in G. T. Garratt, *The Mugwumps and the Labour Party* (London, 1932). Others were Lord Haldane, Sir Patrick Hastings, Godfrey (later Lord) Elton, Hugh (later Lord) Dalton, and Reverend Campbell Stephen. See also J. A. Lovat-Fraser, *Why a Tory joined the Labour Party* (London, 1921), and (for an example of the reaction against revealed religion) Lucy Masterman, *C. F. G. Masterman* (London, 1939).

⁴³ 'Shell-shock' was a phenomenon much studied at the end of the war. The evidence seems to suggest that there was not a great increase in psychoneurotic conditions among civilians. See e. g. J. T. McCurdy, *War Neuroses* (Cambridge, 1918), Millais Culpin, *Psychoneuroses of War and Peace* (Cambridge 1920), and L. S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology 1840-1940* (London, 1964), 245.