

Why Has The First World War Cast Such A Long Shadow Over The History Of The British Isles, Even Eclipsing The Legacy Of World War Two?

Introduction

Due to its significant and enduring effects on politics, society, and culture, the First World War has left a particularly long-lasting shadow over British Isles' history. A whole generation of young men lost their lives in the conflict, permanently staining the nation's collective memory. Significant societal changes were also brought about by the war, including the rise of women in the workforce and the dissolution of the old class structure. The redrawing of the state borders in Europe and the dissolution of empires were two other long-lasting political effects of the conflict.

The key to the 'long shadow' is that in the early 1900s, Britain dominated the global economy, drawing on the substantial resources and affluence of both the vast British Empire and an industrialized economy. But it was completely unprepared for what happened in the summer of 1914 (Ellison, 59). The loose network of borrowing amongst the Allies was formalized into a network of bilateral indebtedness between governments, with the US at its core, and Britain found itself subservient to the hard-nosed US. As the leading provider of international credit in 1917, the US overtook the British Empire's dominance and marked the beginning of the end for British hegemony (Ellison, 78). WWI effectively saw British world dominance end; the war was won eventually but the nation was crippled by the effort (Fussell, 343).

Thesis Statement: WWI had such a devastating impact on Britain's culture, economy and world status. However, looking at the national memory in 2024, the image of Britain alone in 1940 remains a far greater part of national identity than the dark shadow of WWI.

Collective Memory and Cultural Representations

Memorials like the Cenotaph in London or those found in the freezing villages on the outskirts of Great Britain symbolize the national and local acknowledgment of the loss and gratitude for the fallen. Walking into Westminster Abbey past the tomb of the unknown warrior is to acknowledge the fallen, but the war exists in collective memory beyond memorials and tombs. One may argue

that every aspect of British daily life continues to honor the battle. For example, one of the results of the Defense of the Realm Act is the hours at which bars close. It was often thought that the afternoon closing time was intended to deter munitions workers in 1915 from spending their days drinking beer (Fussell, 341). Many of the regulations excluding foreigners and suppressing espionage and sedition date back to the Great War. Another remnant is the "D" notices sent to publications alerting them to "national-security matters." (Fussell, 341). Then there are seemingly ubiquitous practices like wearing wristwatches (which were formerly a trench fad), smoking cigarettes, and tending to garden "allotments" ("Food Will Win the War"). Likewise, the complete substitution of gold coins with paper money was a part of WWI (Fussell, 341).

The power of literature, art, and poetry has been paramount in depicting WWI's legacy. Wilfred Owen's stirring poetry and memoirs like that of Siegfried Sassoon uncovering the horrors of the war on the Western front provide deep insights into the subject of war, especially when viewed from the eyes of the soldiers in the trenches (Mahmud 26). Most high schools study Wilfred Owen and his poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" has become a regular assignment for in British school. These literary representations not only offer a glimpse into the most terrible aspects of war but also fulfill the role of acts of commemoration, which is the space where those who shed their blood for their countries are not forgotten. On the same note, visual artists like Paul Nash and John Sargent Singer show the soldiers' condition with their paintings, ensuring that the horrifying pictures of trench warfare and the Western front landscapes will be remembered for every generation. The death toll was shocking, for example, more British soldiers were killed in the first day of the Battle of the Somme than Americans in the entire Vietnam War (Ferguson).

Fussell argues that the reality of trench warfare burst myths of chivalry and heroism, leaving a more thoughtful and jaded view of armed conflicts. However, Ferguson notes that the anti-war poems of Owen and the idea of the misery of the trenches masks the hatred of the enemy that developed as the war went on. The low levels of desertion point toward an anti-German sentiment in British thinking that continued into the following decades (Ferguson). This is supported by Todman who suggests that British hatred of Germany, created by a sensationalist press that mobilized initial support for the war, actually increased as the war went on. Furthermore, besides artistic representations, Remembrance Day, an example of a commemorative celebration, is significant in preserving the memory of the Great War. On the

11th of November, we mark the Armistice that ended WWI and pay respect to the millions of people who lost their lives during the war (Fussell 9). The grandness of this annual ceremony, where poppies are worn to pay tribute, the moment of silence, is nothing but a testament to the ongoing role of the war in British culture. The poppy itself reminds us of the Flanders fields where the dead lie, and the poppies grow.

Another important issue that is easily overlooked is how there was a legacy of skepticism in Britain over reports of atrocities against the Jews in the thirties directly drawn from the realization that stories of ravished Belgian nuns were deliberately manipulated propaganda in WWI (Fussell, 343).

Societal Impact and Transformations

WWI caused fundamental transformations on the cultural and social front in Britain. In 1914, Britain was a society largely defined by class division and traditional gender roles (Eksteins 272). These conditions contrasted with the realities of the world war, which forced the British to deploy massive resources and demanded moral sacrifice.

One result of that all-out mobilization was the switch of roles between genders. Since a considerable number of men disappeared to fight in wars, women had to carry out the male-dominating roles at the workplace, so they took over the jobs that were done by men before 1914. Women began to wear trousers, cycle to work and smoke cigarettes, changes that became permanent in the post-war decades. Todman (136) presents a photograph of women and girls at a Birmingham aircraft factory in 1918, the girls are pictured happy and smiling for the camera, but it is a staged piece of propaganda and Todman notes that these photos were covering up the discontent many felt. The line drawings of *munitonettes* at work and the pictures of famous land girls in uniform conveying the contribution of women in fighting the war became the symbols of women's role. Emancipation helped both women and men to have the opportunity to earn a living for themselves, which, in turn, challenged stereotypical traditions and set the course for the women's suffrage movement, which eventually resulted in the 1918's wholesale extension of voting rights to women. Certainly, the earlier role of women as domestic servants changed by the war as opportunities remained for women in the workplace after the war ended.

The war should have, in theory, caused people to re-evaluate their long-held class beliefs of supremacy and paved the way for social equality. Soldiers and higher-ranking members were on the same battlefields together. Each fought and died without regard what their rank was (Mahmud 30). Besides the nightmares of trench warfare, a sense of significant injustice in society was brought out, giving rise to demands for better conditions on the home front. The fact that many ordinary workmen-soldiers fought and died in the battle for national independence made them national heroes. This, in return, led the people to voice their concerns for the betterment of the working poor and to improve their working conditions. However, the depression of the thirties and the increasing wealth disparity in society can show the war was not the great equalizer some present it to be. Perhaps it continued the picture of the north of England dominated by heavy industry and the working class, while the South had bigger middle class (Waites, 27).

The unspeakable scale of death and destruction experienced during the Great War led to a widespread disillusionment and pessimistic sentiment among large swaths of the population, and one can't help but compare it with the sense of optimism and confidence dominating the pre-war British society. Many soldiers upon returning home had to deal with both physical and mental trauma, torn by their experiences, and had a hard time getting used to life in the civilian world with the ghosts of the war following them around. One other dimension was that the war has had a devastating effect on families and communities, with millions now grieving the death of family and friends in addition to employment, educational, and health struggles. This sentiment led to the support for the appeasement movement in the 1930's where the rise of Hitler was not initially checked due to the trauma of WWI. Socialists in Britain were soon commenting that WWI "was a wicked waste of money and a wicked waste of life, and if people only had the common sense they ought to have, the millions spent on building armaments would be devoted to social purposes and bettering the conditions of the workers" (Todman, 157).

Todman revealed how the First World War has been rooted in British society and reiterated through retelling stories in memoirs, the fine arts, and films. Todman believed that the memory of the war had been formed through the interaction of a few factors, among them national belongingness, and nostalgia (Todman 59). A typical instance of such is the portrayal of the Lost Generation in literature. In British schools the final season of the comedy *Blackadder* is

frequently shown in schools. The series touches on the poignancy of the battles, and the desire to survive through the conflict, presented through comedy. A recent film inspired by the book *All Quiet on the Western Front* has also shown the trenches from a German perspective bringing the war back to debate and *War Horse*, book and film were also success.

The war also brought-in political ideologies and philosophies that refashioned the political setting of the U.K. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, directly challenged the established order, creating fears of other revolutions and social unrest. The post war era witnessed unemployment, inflation, and social disintegration; all this while most of the former soldiers wanted to find jobs and rebuild their lives. Lavish festivities in London were considered disrespectful because of the economic downturn that had reduced so many ex-soldiers to poverty and despair, especially when it was implied that many of those celebrating on November 11th had not actually done their share (Todman, 68). While many patriotic young men who had given their best for the cause were hungry in the streets, those who had stayed behind and profited from the war most assuredly shouldn't have been the one celebrating, although from their vantage point there were certainly plenty of reasons to be joyous. These feelings captured the legitimate ire of certain impoverished former soldiers as well as the rise of militancy and class conflict in the years following the Russian Revolution (Todman, 68).

Political and Economic Consequences

The introduction noted that WWI crippled Britain financially, and its empire was in very precarious situation. War debts, inflation, and economic devastation were some of the negative consequences of war, which, in turn, caused a drastic and highly complex social and economic situation post-1918. Between 1914 and 1918, the government's gold reserves dropped significantly. The prime beneficiary was the United States, who slowly started eclipsing Britain, first economically and then politically (Fussell, 343). Since the American territory was not touch by the war US became creditor of last resort after 1918, so the Americans, as Marc Ferro notes, "could rightly be considered the only victor of the war" (Fussell, 343) Aldous Huxley predicted a future in a letter to his father dated May 1917: "France is already a first-class power no longer." We will continue without interruption [by rejecting a peace settlement] until we reach parity with Haiti and Liberia." And the Second World War completed the economic devastation that started with the First World War."(Fussell, 343)

The war produced geopolitical impacts as Britain's role in the world's affairs transformed fundamentally. Even though the British gained more territories and mandates, the Empire's was in decline caused by the immense strain it experienced during the war, as the conflict highlighted the deficiencies of the empire's rule. The emergence of new powers like USA and Japan further deteriorated Britain's international status. With Treaty of Versailles Germany was punished very harshly, setting the stage for the rise of fascism, national socialism and laying the foundations for the next war (Fussell 297).

Further, the war stimulated the formation of national independence movements within the English Empire. The colonies sensed Great Britain's dismal state of affairs and started demanding greater autonomy and self-determination. In Ireland, the 1916 uprising on Easter Day and the following struggle for independence paved the way for the Irish Free State in 1922, effectively ending British rule (Davis 112). Britain also saw the tide shifting against it in India. Gandhi's independence movement, which came up in the wake of the Second World War, threatened Britain's colonial rule and ultimately lead to the Indian independence after 1945.

As I already mentioned, World War I also lead to wide-scale unemployment, inflation, and economic turmoil not only in the British Isles but all over the imperial domains. The price of the war, both in regard to the social lives of people and the material resources of the state, was incalculable. The war left the United Kingdom bearing heavy financial debts and a struggling economy. In the aftermath of the war, Britain's industry significantly weakened due to reduced production and exports as the country failed to compete in the global economy with the United States and even Germany, among other developed economic powers (Davis 118). The brief period of prosperity during the “roaring twenty” came to an abrupt end after the US caused the Great Depression which had a ripple affect all over the world including Britain. The austerity policies and the budget cuts adopted by the British government during this period had a significant impact on society, which was already unsettled, causing a lot of dissatisfaction among the working class.

Legacy of World War I Compared to World War II

The First World War legacy goes far beyond the battles and the destruction it caused. The changes in the British society and culture in the decades after the Armistice, were irreversible in

many aspects (Davis 114). The lasting impact the Great War had on generations of Brits, as demonstrated in this essay, is evidence of its important place in the British history.

However, I do not think that WWI eclipses WW2 in the memory of the present-day citizens of Great Britain. Although historians connect the legacy of WWI with social changes, support for appeasement in the 1930s and the changing position of women in society; the 'Britain stands alone' imagery of WWII far outweighs the legacy of WWI in 2024. The place of Churchill, the Dunkirk evacuation, the RAF's defiance in the Battle of Britain with neutral America on the sidelines are all taught in British Schools and help nowadays define the nation in a way that WWI doesn't. WWI with the Kaiser and the Huns simply does not present anymore an enemy to a modern generation the way Hitler and the Nazis do. Books and films on WWII massively outnumber those on WWI and the cloud of the Holocaust remains present throughout modern society. Doing simple online Google search into the two wars and their impact on Britain, for example, reveals that works and discussions on WWII outnumber those on WWI. WWII with the bombed Coventry Cathedral, or the iconic picture of St. Paul's Cathedral standing alone with the fumes of the bombs surrounding it, remain a massive part of British psyche. Compared with the Britain's closest ally in WW2, America one big difference was that US cities were not levelled in a way Coventry was, for example, and the American people cannot truly understand how standing alone against the might of the Third Reich remains a part of British thinking in a way fighting in the trenches of WWI doesn't.

Of course, WWI was the beginning of the end for the British Empire, but the real blow came after the end of WW2. The terrible cost of WW1 in terms of both human casualties and financial expenditures cannot be overstated (Fussell 252). The time between the two wars was also characterized by political and economic chaos. Britain was facing significant changes as it tried to cope with changes in world order, but the British Empire remained until after WWII and Indian, Australian and Canadian troops were fighting for the British in WWII while the Americans were still maintaining neutrality.

Conclusion

From the human death toll to cultural and political changes, the Great War led to the shift in Britain in both the society and the economy. The end of the war opened the door for new ideologies like socialism, communism, and fascism, and some of those destructive ideologies are

with us even today (Eksteins 268). The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the ascendance of communism was clear and present danger to the established world order. The war stimulated the process of self-determination with the emergence of nationalist movements in Ireland, India, and many other parts of the British Empire. However, with all this considered, WWI does cast a huge shadow of British history, but in my opinion, it does not eclipse the legacy of WWII.

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