# Chapter 1
# The First World War

At the Lord Mayor of London's annual banquet at the Mansion House on 17 July 1914, the chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, issued stern warnings about the ominous condition of British society. At home, the 'triple alliance' of miners, railwaymen, and transport workers was threatening a mass united strike to back up the railwaymen's claim for union recognition and a 48-hour week. Alongside this prospect of nationwide industrial paralysis, there was across the Irish Sea a state of near civil war in Ireland, with 200,000 or more under arms in Protestant Ulster and the Catholic south, and the likelihood of the age-long saga of Irish nationalism being brought to a grim and bloody resolution. Abroad, there were nationalist troubles in India and in Egypt. Nearer home in south-east Europe, the ethnic nationalities of the Balkans were in renewed turmoil following the assassination of the Austrian archduke, Franz Ferdinand, at Sarajevo in Bosnia on 28 June.

On the eve of world war, therefore, Britain seemed to present a classic picture of a civilized liberal democracy on the verge of dissolution, racked by tensions and strains with which its sanctions and institutions were unable to cope. And yet, as so often in the past, once the supreme crisis of war erupted, these elements of conflict subsided with remarkable speed. An underlying mood of united purpose gripped the nation. The first few weeks of hostilities, after Britain declared war on 4 August, were, inevitably, a time of some panic. Only dramatic

measures by the Treasury and the Bank of England preserved the national currency and credit. Manufacturing and commerce tried desperately to adjust to the challenges of war against the background of an ethic that proclaimed that it was 'business as usual'. The early experiences of actual fighting were almost disastrous as the British Expeditionary Force, cobbled together in much haste and dispatched to Flanders and France, met with a severe reverse at Ypres, and had to retreat from Mons, in disarray and suffering heavy losses. Reduced to only three corps in strength, its fighting force was gravely diminished almost from the start. Only a stern resistance by the French forces on the river Marne prevented a rapid German advance on Paris and an early victory for Germany and its Austrian allies.

After the initial disasters, however, the nation and its leaders settled down for a long war. Vital domestic issues such as Irish home rule were suspended for the duration of hostilities. The political parties declared an indefinite truce. The industrial disturbances of the summer of 1914 petered out, with the TUC outdoing the employers in voicing the conventional patriotism of the time. A curious kind of calm descended, founded on a broad – though very far from universal – consensus about the justice of the war. The one element required to make it acceptable to a liberal society was some kind of broad, humane justification to explain what the war was really about. This was provided by Lloyd George, once a bitter opponent of the Boer War in South Africa in 1899, and for many years the most outspokenly left-wing member of Asquith's Liberal government. Lloyd George remained suspiciously silent during the early weeks. But in an eloquent address to a massed audience of his Welsh fellow-countrymen at the Queen's Hall, London, on 19 September 1914, he committed himself without reserve to a fight to the finish. He occupied, or claimed to occupy, the highest moral ground. It was, he declared, a war on behalf of liberal principles, a crusade on behalf of the 'little five-foot-five nations', like Belgium, flagrantly invaded by the Germans, or Serbia and Montenegro, now threatened by Austria-Hungary. It was not surprising that a claim that

the war was a holy cause, backed up not only by the leaders of all the Christian Churches but by all the Liberal pantheon of heroes from Charles James Fox to Gladstone, met with instant response, not least in the smaller nations of Scotland and Wales within Britain itself.

## Pro-War Consensus

This broad consensus about the rightness of the war was not fundamentally eroded over the next four terrible years. Of course, it went through many changes, especially after the unpopular decision to impose conscription for the armed services was instituted in May 1916. Eventually, by 1917, sheer war-weariness was taking its toll, quite apart from other factors such as the growing militancy from organized labour and the Messianic appeal of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Of course, too, this consensus was sustained by subtle or crude manipulation of the news services, censorship of the press, and government-sponsored legends of atrocities allegedly committed by 'the Huns'. There was much persecution of radical or anti-war critics. In spite of government pressures, bodies such as the Christian pacifist 'No-Conscription Fellowship' and the Union of Democratic Control (which sought a negotiated peace) were by 1917 making some impact on public opinion. Lord Lansdowne's appeal for peace (29 November 1917) caused a great stir. Nevertheless, the available evidence for the war years suggests that the broad mass of the population retained its faith that the war was just and necessary, and that it must be fought until the total surrender of the German enemy, whatever the cost. Recruitment to the armed services from volunteers was heavy and enthusiastic: indeed voluntary recruitment proved more successful in swelling the ranks of the army in France in 1914–16 than was the compulsory method of conscription thereafter. The long years of military and naval conflict that dragged on from the initial stalemate on the western front in the autumn of 1914, until the final Allied breakthrough in August–September 1918 were accepted with resignation and a kind of grim endurance.

1. Recruits to the army under the 'Derby scheme', Southwark Town Hall, autumn 1915. In October 1915, Lord Derby introduced a scheme designed to preserve the voluntary recruitment system by allowing men to register to 'attest' their willingness to serve. Popular enthusiasm remained extremely high: 235,000 men volunteered under the Derby scheme in October–November 1915. But universal male conscription duly followed in early 1916

The psychological and moral impact of those appalling years sank deep into the memory and the outlook of the British people. They profoundly coloured the literary sensibilities of a whole generation. They helped shape responses to the threat of foreign war for twenty years after the Great War came to an end. The war on the western front took the unfamiliar form of a prolonged slogging match between heavily defended forces on either side, dug into slit trenches, and unable to exploit the new techniques of mobile striking power so dramatically tested in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. For almost four years, the war in France showed little movement. There were occasional British attempts to seize the initiative. Always they ended in huge casualties on a scale scarcely comprehensible to a nation which lived on the luxurious memories of a century of almost unbroken peace. The British offensive

at Loos was beaten back in September 1915. More damaging still, in June 1916 a new British advance on the Somme proved a calamitous failure with 60,000 men falling on the first day. British casualties here alone amounted to 420,000. The most terrible of these experiences came at Passchendaele in August–September 1917, when over 300,000 British troops were recorded as dead or wounded, many of them drowned in the mud of Flanders amidst torrential rain. Both the cavalry and mechanical inventions such as the 'tanks' made no impact in so immobile a campaign. The new fighter aircraft had little effect. As on other occasions, the class divide that cut off commanding officers from the rank-and-file infantrymen and hindered communication between them was fatal throughout. In effect, the British ceased to be a viable offensive force for the next few months. March and April 1918 saw the British army desperately striving to ward off a new German advance in the Amiens sector. Nor until the ultimate dramatic breakthrough by the commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig that August did the war show signs of coming to a resolution. Meanwhile attempts, advocated by Lloyd George and Winston Churchill amongst others, to circumvent the stalemate on the western front by a more peripheral 'eastern' strategy also led to successive débâcles. The Dardanelles expedition in the summer of 1915 was a colossal exercise in military mismanagement and led to further huge losses; so did the expedition to Salonika a year later. The Dardanelles in particular did immense harm to Churchill's reputation as a rational politician, from which he took years to recover. Even on the high seas, Britain's traditional area of supremacy, the one major battle, the encounter off Jutland in June 1916, was at best a draw between the British and German high fleets. The British Grand Fleet lost three battle cruisers, three other cruisers, and eight destroyers in an ill-conducted engagement.

Later anti-war propaganda depicted an angry populace displaying fierce hostility towards the military and naval commanders responsible for this terrible catalogue of disaster in almost every theatre. 'War poets' such as Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg (who fell in battle) and

Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves (who survived), stirred particularly by the carnage of Passchendaele, all encouraged the view that a mass renunciation took place of the very idea of war itself, of the carnage that could result in half an entire generation of young men being wiped out. The bare statistics of the war – 750,000 killed, another 2,500,000 wounded, many permanently disabled – reinforced this belief in a mass rejection of militarism. That was not, however, how it appeared to most people at the time, even if it should have done so. While the British commander-in-chief on the western front, Sir John French, was indeed removed from command at the end of 1915, his successor, Haig, a grim, taciturn Lowland Scot, steadily built up a massive public reputation for courage and integrity, a reputation matched by Sir Edwin Lutyens's towering war memorial to commemorate the British dead at Thiepval. Other naval and military leaders, such as Admiral Beatty and General Allenby (who conducted a brilliant campaign from Egypt, through Palestine into Syria in 1917–18, to eliminate the Turks as significant allies for the Germans), became almost popular heroes. The trenches became the symbol of stern, but inescapable, resolution. Bruce Bairnsfather's famous cartoon of 'Old Bill', urging his comrade that if he knew of 'a better 'ole' he should go to it, symbolized a popular mood of almost humorous tolerance of the terrors of trench warfare. When, after desperate military crises and with the immense military and financial aid of the United States, the British and French armies forced their way through the German lines to reach the borders of Germany itself by the time of the armistice on 11 November 1918, mass enthusiasm for the war appeared at its zenith. Britain seemed in danger of inventing a new military cult unknown in these islands since the days of Marlborough in the reign of Queen Anne.

## Total War

A major factor in the widespread popularity of the war – and also in its subsequent bitter unpopularity – was the involvement of the whole population and the entire social and economic fabric in total war. After a

leisurely start, in 1915–16 the war brought about a massive industrial and social transformation; it erected a leviathan of state power and collectivist control without precedent. The forces of production and distribution in industry and agriculture were all harnessed to fuel the needs of a mighty war machine. The model was set by the new Ministry of Munitions of which Lloyd George assumed control in May 1915. Created to deal with bottle-necks in the supply of arms and ammunition, the ministry became the engine of a massive central machine which invigorated the entire industrial structure through its 'men of push and go'. It achieved an immense impact as well on such different areas as social welfare, housing policy, and the status of women. The coal mines, the railways, and merchant and other shipping were all taken under State control. The old pre-war shibboleths of *laissez-faire*, including the hallowed principle of free trade itself, were bypassed or ignored. Equally, the traditional system of industrial relations was wrenched into totally new patterns. The Treasury Agreement of March 1915, negotiated between the government and the trade unions (except for the miners), forbade strikes but also guaranteed collective bargaining and, indirectly, a new access to government for trade union leaders.

The Treasury Agreement certainly did not achieve its aim of universal industrial peace during the war years. There were major disputes in the coal industry, notably a successful official strike by the South Wales Miners' Federation in July 1915. The work of the Ministry of Munitions in trying to 'dilute' the work-force by introducing unskilled workers (especially women) into engineering factories, and in trying to control the movements of labour in the armaments industry, brought much trouble, notably on Clydeside. The unofficial activities of shop stewards in Scotland and also in Sheffield in 1916–17 remind us that the consensus of the war years was a shallow one and very far from unanimous. Nevertheless, the war did ensure a continuing corporate status for the unions – and also for employers, newly combined in the Federation of British Industry. A new, organic, planned system of industrial relations

appeared to be possible. It was significant that powerful businessmen such as Sir Eric Geddes and Sir Joseph Maclay, Lord Devonport and Lord Rhondda, appeared in key departments of central government. This symbolized the transformation in the relationship of industrial and political leadership that was taking place. Edward VII's Liberal England was being turned into a corporate State, almost what a later generation would term 'Great Britain Limited'.

## Social Reform

Over a vast range of social and cultural activities, the collective impact of the Great War was profound indeed. Left-wing opponents of the war, such as Ramsay MacDonald of the Labour Party, noted ironically that the imperatives of war were achieving far more for social reform than had all the campaigns of the trade unions and of progressive humanitarians in half a century past. New vistas of governmental activity were being opened up. Fresh layers were being added to the technocratic, professional, and civil service elite that had governed Britain in the years of peace. The administrative and managerial class expanded massively. Social reformers such as William Beveridge or Seebohm Rowntree, even the socialist Beatrice Webb, became influential and even honoured figures in the recesses of central government, especially after Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as prime minister in December 1916. Wages went up; working conditions improved. The 1917 Corn Production Act revitalized British agriculture and gave a fresh lease of life to tenant farmers and their labourers. Attention was also paid to technical and other education, notably through H. A. L. Fisher's act of 1918 which made free elementary education general and sought to create a ladder of opportunity from the elementary to the secondary and higher levels of education. Governmental inquiries, one of them headed by as conservative a figure as Lord Salisbury, opened up new vistas for state housing schemes, an area almost totally neglected by the New Liberalism before 1914. The principle was laid down for a system of subsidized local-authority

houses, to provide the hundreds of thousands of working-class dwellings for rent that were required, and to remove the blight of slums in city centres and older industrial areas. Concern was voiced, too, for public health. The supreme irony was that a war which brought the loss of human life on such a colossal scale also saw the preservation of life at home through improved medical arrangements, better conditions for children, old people, and nursing mothers, and such innovations as the Medical Research Council. By the end of 1918, the government was committed to the idea of a new Ministry of Health to co-ordinate the services for health and national insurance, and to take over the duties of the Local Government Board.

## Women

One important element of British society above all other gained from the wartime experience – indeed for them (a majority of the population, in fact) this was an era of emancipation. Women in Britain were supreme beneficiaries of the war years. Thousands of them served at the front, often in medical field hospitals. The spectacle of Nurse Edith Cavell martyred by the Germans for assisting in the escape of British and French prisoners of war in Belgium added powerfully to the public esteem of women in general. At home, suffragette leaders such as Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and her elder daughter Christabel (though not her socialist younger daughter, Sylvia) aided in recruiting campaigns for the government. More widely, women found vast new opportunities in clerical and administrative work, in munitions and other engineering factories, and in many other unfamiliar tasks previously reserved for men only. The very dissolution wrought by total war exerted powerful pressures in eroding the sex barriers which had restricted British women over the decades. It was hardly possible to argue now that women were incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship to the full; in the 1918 Representation of the People Act, therefore, women aged 30 and over were given the vote. It was almost anti-climactic. A long, bitter saga of persecution and prejudice ended with a whimper. Here as elsewhere, by

emphasizing the positive, progressive consequences of the war, with the full panoply of 'reconstruction' (ill-defined) which was supposed to be launched when peace returned, the government contrived, perhaps unintentionally, to extend and fortify the consensus of the time.

## Politics

For British politics, the Great War produced massive and tumultuous changes. At the outbreak of war, the House of Commons was still largely dominated by the Gilbertian rivalry of Liberals and Conservatives (or Unionists). However, for the Liberal Party the war brought disaster. Partly this was because of the serious inroads into individual and civil liberties that war entailed. Partly it was due to a deep-seated ambiguity about the very merits of the war that many Liberals harboured. The

2. Lloyd George talking to Indian soldiers near Fricourt, on the Somme, September 1916. Both as secretary of State for war (July–December 1916) and as prime minister (from December 1916), Lloyd George projected his personal leadership by visits to soldiers on the front in France

turning of Asquith's Liberal administration into a three-party coalition in May 1915 marked a new stage in the downfall of Liberalism. Thereafter, Asquith's own apparently lethargic and fumbling leadership was accompanied by severe internal party divisions over the fundamental issue of military conscription. Lloyd George and Churchill both endorsed conscription as the symbol of whole-hearted commitment to 'a fight to the finish'. More traditional Liberals such as John Simon and Reginald McKenna were hesitant. Asquith himself dithered unhappily. In the end, conscription came for all adult males aged between 18 and 45, but criticism of Asquith and the Liberal ethic generally continued to mount.

In December 1916 the final crisis came. There had been complaints for months over government failures, not only in the field, but also over the inability to resolve the Irish question and to settle labour disputes at home. Between 1 and 9 December 1916 there followed political manoeuvres of Byzantine complexity over which historians continue to dispute like so many medieval schoolmen. Lloyd George joined with two leading Unionists, Bonar Law and the Irishman Sir Edward Carson, in proposing to Asquith a new supreme War Committee to run the war. After days of uncertainty, Asquith refused. Lloyd George then resigned and, in a crucial trial of strength between 4 and 9 December, emerged as prime minister of something like an all-party coalition. It included not only all the Unionists but also (by a very narrow majority on the National Executive) the Labour Party as well, in addition to roughly half the Liberals in the House of Commons. Henceforth, between December 1916 and November 1918, Lloyd George built himself up into a semi-presidential position of near impregnability. He was the prime minister of a supreme War Cabinet, backed up by a new Cabinet office and a 'garden suburb' or kitchen cabinet of private secretaries. Beneath this apex extended a mighty machine of centralized power. Lloyd George's triumph helped to win the war – but for his own Liberal Party it meant a débâcle. The party remained split, weakened at the grass roots, ineffective and divided in Parliament, shorn of much of its morale and

impetus in the press and in intellectual circles. The New Liberalism, which had animated so much social reform before 1914, just spluttered out. When the war ended in November 1918, the Liberals were a divided, much weakened rump, a supreme casualty of total war.

Their place was taken, quite unexpectedly, by the Labour Party. This party had also been much divided by the outbreak of war. In contrast to the patriotism of trade union leaders, MacDonald and many on the socialist left had been opponents of entering the war. MacDonald had to resign his leadership of the parliamentary Labour Party in consequence. Issues during the war such as the impact of conscription (military and possible industrial), and the decision over whether or not to serve under Lloyd George, also plagued the Labour Party. Nevertheless, the long-term consequences of the war for the party were wholly beneficial. The trade unions on which Labour depended were much strengthened by the war experience. Their membership roughly doubled to reach over 8 million by the start of 1919. The party was also given new stimulus by the revolution in Russia, and by the wider anti-war radicalism in the last two years of the war. In effect, Labour was serving in government and acting as the formal Opposition at one and the same time. It was ideally placed to exploit the internal difficulties of the Liberals. Finally, the 1918 franchise reforms extended the electorate from about 8 million to over 21 million. This meant a huge increase in the working-class vote and an encouragement of the tendency to polarize politics on grounds of class. The 1918 party constitution gave the party a new socialist commitment and, more important, a reorganized structure in the constituencies and in Head Office, dominated throughout by the trade unions. The advance of Labour was a powerful political consequence of the war, though quite unforeseen at the time.

The real beneficiaries were the Conservatives. The war encouraged a process by which they became the natural majority party. Apart from being united by the call by war, as the patriots they claimed to be, after being divided over tariffs and other questions before 1914, the

Conservatives became increasingly dominated by business and manufacturing interests. They were now largely urban or suburban in their base, not a party of squires. At the end of the war, with new business-oriented figures such as Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain coming through, the Conservatives were poised, like the Labour Party, to destroy the Edwardian political system. When the war ended on 11 November 1918, Lloyd George assumed total command. His rump of Coalition Liberals were in electoral alliance with the Conservatives, in opposition to the 'pacifists' of the anti-government Liberals and the 'Bolsheviks' of the Labour Party. A new era of right-wing domination was in the making.

## The British Empire

Externally, the war years encouraged further changes. It was, in all senses, a profoundly imperial war, fought for empire as well as for king and country. Much was owed to military and other assistance from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and India. Anzac Day (with memories of Suvla Bay, Gallipoli) became a tragic, symbolic event in the Australian calendar. In 1917 Lloyd George actually convened an Imperial War Cabinet of prime ministers to assist the Cabinet of the mother country. A powerful empire statesman like General Jan Smuts of South Africa was even called upon to participate in the deliberations of the British Cabinet. In commerce, imperial preference was becoming a reality. The imperial mystique was a powerful one at this time. The main architect of the day, Edwin Lutyens, had been in his younger days a disciple of the arts and crafts movement inspired by William Morris. Now he and Herbert Baker were turning their talents to pomp and circumstance by rebuilding the city of Delhi. It was to be dominated by a massive viceroy's residence and secretariat buildings as symbols of classical authority. During the war years, the imperial idea was taken further than ever before. Indeed, the secret treaties of the war years ensured that at the peace the mandate system or other stratagems would leave Britain with an imperial domain larger than ever, with vast

new territories in the Middle East and up from the Persian Gulf. Buoyed up by the eccentric operations of individualists such as 'Lawrence of Arabia' and fired by the heady prospects of vast oil riches in Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the Middle East, the bounds of the British Empire extended ever wider.

Yet in reality it was all becoming increasingly impractical to maintain. Long before 1914, the financial and military constraints upon an effective imperial policy were becoming clear, especially in India with its growing Congress movement. There was something else now – new and increasingly effective nationalist uprisings against British rule. Unlike Wales, which was almost mindlessly patriotic with Lloyd George at the helm, Ireland offered a disturbing spectacle of colonial revolt. The Easter Rising of April 1916, conducted by a few republicans and Sinn Fein partisans, seemed to be a fiasco. But, aided by the brutal reaction of Asquith's government, by mid-1918 Sinn Fein and its republican creed had won over almost all the 26 southern Irish counties. A veteran home ruler such as John Dillon was being swept aside by new nationalist radicals such as Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera. By the end of the war, southern Ireland was virtually under martial law, resistant to conscription, in a state of near rebellion against the Crown and the Protestant ascendancy, or what was left of it. The long march of Irish nationalism, constitutional and largely peaceful in the decades from Daniel O'Connell in the 1840s to Charles Stewart Parnell in the 1880s and John Redmond after 1900, seemed on the verge of producing a new and violent explosion. One clear moral of the war years, therefore, was that the political and social consensus, fragile enough for Clydeside and the Welsh mining valleys, did not extend at all to southern Ireland. With the powerful thrust of Irish republicanism, a new kind of nationalist revolt against the constraints of imperial rule was well under way. Indians and Egyptians, among others, were likely to pay careful heed. The war left a legacy of a more integrated but also a more isolated Britain, whose grandiose imperial role was already being swamped by wider transformations in the post-war world.

Kenneth O. Morgan

# TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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