

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HOME FRONTS

On the home fronts, 'business as usual' was a hollow pretence by 1915. In Britain, the grim reality of war arrived with the shell crisis and the lists of dead. In Germany, it took the form of an increasingly bitter debate over war aims and submarine warfare. The occupation of a tenth of France concentrated the mind of the French wonderfully and ruled out any fond hopes of an easy war. Severe inflation saw to it that staying alive preoccupied the people of Russia. Ethnic nationalism had divided the subjects of the Habsburg Empire long before the war and now intensified, with the added complication that Slavs in the Empire were pitted against fellow Slavs in Russia. When Britain and France bribed Italy to enter the war in May 1915, the peoples of the Habsburg Empire finally had an enemy they could all dislike. Unfortunately for both them and the Italians, the only place they could meet to fight was in the valley of the Isonzo river and in the Dolomite Alps north and east of Venice. Between June 1915 and June 1917, there were ten distinct 'battles of the Isonzo', none conferring an advantage to either side for long and all adding up to abject misery comparable to the suffering the Germans and British endured in the flood plains of Flanders. German help gave the Austro-Hungarians a thin edge, culminating in the rout of the Italians at Caporetto in October 1917, sometimes called the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo. A year later, the Italians with British help broke through to Austro-Hungarian headquarters at Vittorio Veneto, in effect applying a finishing blow to the ancient Habsburg Empire.

BRITAIN: DORA AND CONSCRIPTION

The British saw no option but to use illiberal means to defend their liberal way of life. At the outset of war, in response to the public frenzy about the danger posed by German spies, the Asquith government passed the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) which in a few sentences conferred sweeping powers on the Cabinet to maintain order and security [*Doc.* 9]. The spy craze soon abated, in part because there were so few German agents in Britain, and public

support for the war remained solid, if not at the near-hysterical intensity of 1914, but the restrictions on civil liberties increased. The Irish Nationalists under John Redmond, disappointed when Home Rule for Ireland was postponed for the duration, nevertheless supported the war. Strikes suddenly gave way to labour peace, and the unionized working class proved just as willing to volunteer for service as the rest of the nation. The suffragettes in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) abruptly broke off their militant campaign to get the vote for women and supported the war. The united front of the British people ran deep.

The flood of volunteers shows the unity. Over a million men enlisted by the end of 1914, and 2.2 million by September 1915. They swamped the makeshift organization Kitchener and the War Office set up for the New Army that was to replace the Regular Army that was being decimated in France. Thousands of the volunteers went not into the New Army, however, but into existing Territorial divisions. These were units of part-time reservists formed as part of the reforms of the British Army that the Minister of War, Lord Haldane, introduced after the Boer War. Professional soldiers like Kitchener doubted the effectiveness and reliability of the Territorials, but necessity overrode such prejudices and in the end the Territorials proved to be a vital part of the British military effort. On the other hand, the ramshackle arrangements for the New Army resulted in such tragedies as the Pals battalions,* by which men joined up with their mates on the promise that they would serve together. The social catastrophe this unleashed when men from a city, town or common workplace all too often died together is still difficult to measure or grasp. Yet the example of the Pals (or 'Chums') points to the innocence of these early days, in which men joined because their family expected it, because the idea of a brief holiday with pay was attractive, because, as the song said, 'every girl loves a soldier', or because the men believed in the nation's cause.

The flood of volunteers left the authorities with two messy problems: how to train them and how to replace them in the workforce. Training remained haphazard. Retired officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were 'dug out' to provide experienced leadership, which all too often was experienced to the point of being antique. In the end, the New Army used its time in camp to become physically fit and to learn the rudiments of drill. Given the novelty of the trench experience lying in wait, its real training would have to come on the job when it reached the trenches. As for replacing the volunteers, the obvious solution was to use women but this required delicate negotiations with the trade unions, who feared that their hard-won rights and privileges would be diluted. Men who left their jobs to fight were guaranteed their positions when they returned. Because of the importance of industrial workers to the war economy, especially in metal-working and mining, they tended to be retained in their pre-war jobs more than white-collar workers were in theirs. J.M. Winter has

estimated that if the same proportion of blue-collar workers had served as did white-collar, an additional 600,000 men would have been freed up to serve over the duration of the war (Winter, 1986). Although the appearance of women in industrial jobs was much publicized, especially in munitions, most of the substitution for men took place in the commercial and non-industrial sectors. Replacement labour also came from the servant class and from the underclass that had been almost permanently unemployed before the war. Because families at the bottom of the social order received a steady income for the first time, the war improved their situation dramatically. This showed in the sudden decrease in infant mortality despite the absence of half the doctors, who were serving in the army. Mothers were able to feed their children and themselves properly.

As the rush to volunteer abated, the government had to reconsider its antipathy to conscription, which meant rethinking a basic tenet of liberalism, the aversion to state coercion. Asquith was not one to hurry a decision and handled the issue in stages. First came Lord Derby's scheme by which the eligible male population was divided into annual classes. Only single men would join up when they came of age, and instead of conscription, which smacked of Prussian militarism, they would be persuaded to 'attest' or promise to serve. Tribunals were set up to consider exemptions. Canada and Australia tried similar compromises, but the casualty rate for the infantry rendered them futile. In January 1916, the Military Service Act conscripted all single men between 18 and 41. After a muddled effort to honour Liberal principles, the government introduced universal conscription in May 1916. Even though voluntarism increased the army by 2 million men, despite 400,000 casualties, it seemed by the spring of 1916 to be another part of the old world that was vanishing. Canada followed the British example in 1917, but Australians twice rejected conscription in plebiscites. In August 1917, then Prime Minister Lloyd George put Sir Auckland Geddes in charge of the Ministry of National Service and empowered him to allocate manpower between the army and industry. In setting his criteria, he retained the existing policy that protected manual over white-collar workers.

PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP

It is tempting but misleading to attribute the unity of the nations at war to propaganda. The British in particular seemed to have mastered the dark arts of persuasion. In fact, German behaviour, as with the execution of British nurse Edith Cavell and the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania*, both in the spring of 1915, sold the war to the British public. The government did not see the need for an official propaganda organization aimed at the home front until 1918. Up until that time the main concern of the government was neutral opinion. In 1914, C.F.G. Masterman, head of the National Insurance

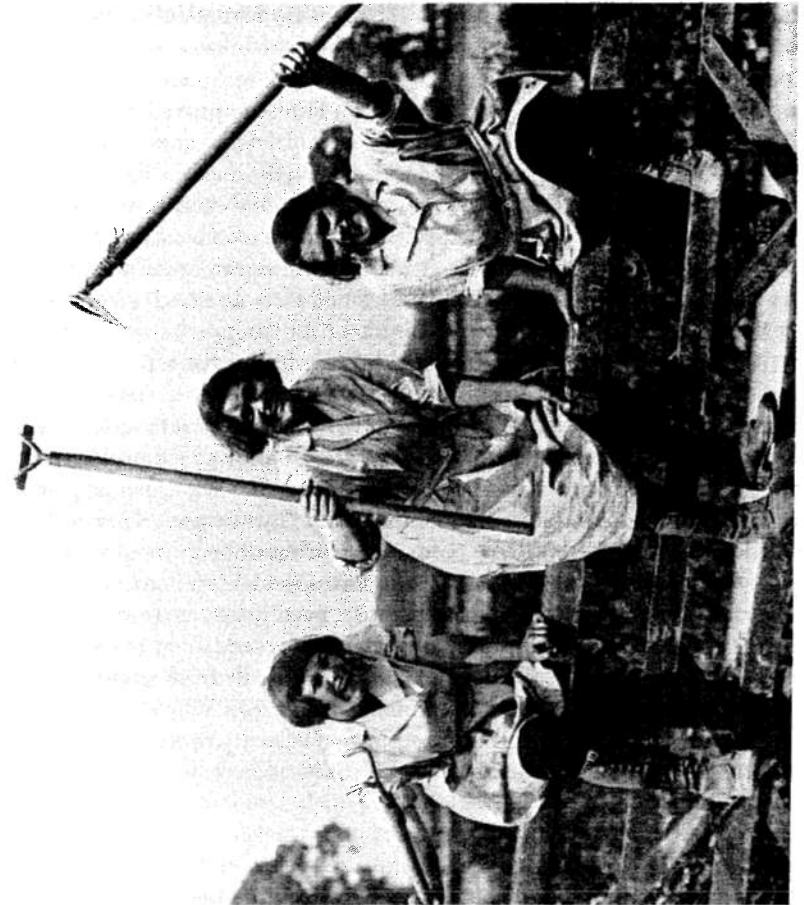


Plate 3 Women of the Land Army in Britain (Imperial War Museum Q30679).

Commission, was asked to recruit well-known writers to influence foreign opinion. Masterman's group took the name of the building in which he worked, Wellington House. It was a secret organization set up with separate bureaus to handle target countries, America being the most important. The propagandists studied the local media in their assigned countries and published pamphlets and books geared to local opinion. Even today, most of these publications appear to be impartial rather than hate-the-Hun ranting, and of course they bear no indication of their connection to the British government. For America, the Canadian-born novelist Sir Gilbert Parker analyzed press opinion and set up a mailing list of 33,000 prominent Americans. He gave American publishers commissions to publish books that Wellington House approved, which were then sent to those on the mailing list. He also organized film and lecture tours. The rule of thumb at Wellington House was to keep the message balanced and seemingly academic. The lack of any obvious connection between the British government and the propaganda helped to maintain the impression of objective honesty. The Germans also concentrated on American opinion, but their efforts were more obvious and heavy-handed and were no match for the more adroit British.

In all the countries, those on top kept popular feelings on a short leash by censoring the news. The military clamped down immediately in Germany, but neutral press reports available through Holland and Switzerland helped to offset the official version of the war. Lord Kitchener allowed a journalist to be assigned to the staff of the Commander in Chief. After Kitchener approved the reports, they were published under the byline 'Eyewitness'. Then in May 1915, the press managed to have permanent correspondents assigned to the BEF to supply more useful news. If the war correspondents failed to report the truth about the war, this was in part because, even if they were experienced and honest, grasping what exactly was happening and then expressing it clearly were almost impossible tasks. After all, not many front soldiers found the truth about the war easy to comprehend or express. Why should it have been easier for outsiders? Truth was not the first casualty of war. Truth lived, but it lived in isolation, unknowable and silent.

WAR ECONOMIES

The sword was, for the moment, as powerless as the pen. To explain the failures at Loos and Neuve Chapelle, Sir John French claimed there was a shortage of shells. The press took up his complaint. The government in turn blamed the munitions workers, and to ensure that they concentrated on their work, pubs were closed from mid-afternoon until evening. This did little to increase productivity but did play a role in improving the health of the lower classes. The BEF did indeed face a shell crisis. It lacked enough of them and those it had were often faulty and of the wrong type. Yet the same was true of

every army in 1915. No one had fully anticipated how important heavy artillery would be. Because the habit of planning and government intervention were far more prevalent in France and Germany than in Britain, these states moved quickly to set up command economies for war production. Despite the British faith in *laissez-faire* principles, part of the liberal civilization for which they believed they were fighting, they moved over to what was becoming known as 'war socialism' almost as quickly as the others. This became clear when the muddle surrounding the War Office forced the government to create the new Ministry of Munitions, under the dynamic leadership of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George.

GERMANY, WAR AIMS AND WAR MEANS: SUBMARINES

In Germany, meanwhile, the euphoria of August evaporated after the deadlock on the Marne but the *Burgfrieden* persisted. Although the left wing of the Social Democrats became increasingly sceptical about the justice of the German cause, and in particular the claim to be acting only in self-defence, the party remained loyal to Bethmann. So did the left-learning liberals, the Progressives. The more right-wing National Liberals had been deeply divided before the war between those dedicated to serving the interests of heavy industry and the status quo and those tied to commerce and light industry and interested in a modicum of political reform. Now war aims provided the line of fracture, with a majority of National Liberals favouring annexations in the east and west. The Conservatives, representing the interests of land-owners and old Prussia, and the Free Conservatives, who were close to heavy industry, were the most committed to a so-called 'peace of victory', and were angry at the refusal of Bethmann Hollweg to commit himself to such a peace openly. By the spring of 1915, the right-wing parties had formed a war aims majority in the *Reichstag*. It worked with a war aims movement outside the *Reichstag*, made up of pressure groups representing heavy industry, large agriculture and the free professions, especially academics.

The means of waging war rather than the ends for which it was waged came to threaten Bethmann's delicate balancing act and the *Burgfrieden*. In 1914-15, submarines were too new a weapon to be fully covered by international conventions and rules governing blockading at sea. With Britain's huge surface fleet and her great advantage in merchant shipping, she had only a secondary interest in an undersea weapon of stealth. By the logic of Germany's continental position and restricted access to the open sea, she should have concentrated on submarines, but Tirpitz's obsession with matching the Royal Navy in the North Sea and his exploitation of the prestige which only battle-ships offered led him to give the submarine a low priority.

Right from the start of the war the British turned the entire North Sea into a war zone in which they prescribed safe routes for neutral shipping, which

had to travel under British escort. They further declared that all goods heading for Germany, including food and raw materials, were contraband liable to seizure. This was economic war with a vengeance, and it could be argued that the British blockade* and not the German use of Zeppelins to bomb East Anglia in April 1915 or the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* was the first instance of intentionally total war, making no distinction between soldiers and civilians.

Diplomatically, the Germans had no effective answer. They already guessed that the submarine would be the only way to counter-blockade and were reluctant to denounce ruthless methods they might have to use themselves. Yet they were cornered strategically as well, because the only way that they could gain the advantage at sea would be if the Royal Navy was inept enough to be lured into a pitched battle on German terms. The Royal Navy, however, had seized the initiative at the start, much like the Germans did on land, and was determined not to lose it through careless adventures. Late in 1914, the German admirals threatened to use submarines to blockade the British coast, but the threats were hollow, if only because the Kaiser flatly opposed all-out submarine warfare and Germany had only a handful of submarines available.

The Kaiser's scruples get to the heart of the German dilemma. He thought that drowning innocent civilians was frightful. Yet why should the German counter-blockade with submarines be more frightful than the British blockade with surface ships? It was because of the nature of the particular weapon. Using surface ships, the British could board a neutral ship, inspect the cargo and confiscate any war goods, with a promise to compensate shippers after the war. The intercepted ship and crew could either be sent on their way or escorted to a British port. Submariners worked differently. They preferred to attack on the surface, using torpedoes and deck guns to sink ships. Travelling submerged was reserved for running to and from station by stealth. Such attacks meant destroying the cargo and drowning the crews because the small size of the submarines prevented them from picking up survivors.

The Germans wrestled with the problem of what to do for six months. Neutral nations, led by America, were unwilling to pay Germany the respect they showed Britain for the simple reason that Germany had only 22 submarines, of which only a third could be patrolling on station in the war zone at any given time. In February 1915, the Germans formally initiated submarine warfare. They declared that German submarines would sink every enemy vessel encountered in the waters around the British Isles. They would spare neutral ships, but given the British habit of sailing under neutral flags and given too the accidents normal to war, neutrals would be well-advised to stay away. The Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral von Pohl, actually wanted to sink neutral ships on sight, thus launching unrestricted submarine warfare right away, but Bethmann and the Kaiser, already nervous about the American reaction, overruled him.

The February declaration gave Britain the excuse to make her blockade of Germany total, so that all trade with Germany, even through neutral ports, would henceforth be stopped. The German decision brought an angry protest from President Wilson, who informed Germany that America would hold her fully accountable for any indiscriminate attack on American ships and would even go to war to defend the freedom of the seas. The worst thing about the German bluff was that it was quickly seen to be hollow, so that the neutrals kept on trading with Britain.

On 7 May 1915, a German submarine sank the British Cunard liner *Lusitania* off the Irish coast. The attack conformed to the policy that Germany had announced in February, and technically the liner could be classed as an auxiliary cruiser and thus a legitimate target. Although only 128 of the 1,200 victims were American, the earlier German attempt to frighten neutrals now came back to haunt them, and in America, one would have thought the *Mayflower* had been sunk. In a series of notes, Wilson first insisted that all forms of submarine warfare were illegal, because even if a submarine attacked on the surface like a cruiser, it could not take care of survivors. His third note, in July, admitted the novelty of the submarine and thus the irrelevance of any appeal to traditional restraints. It went on to point out that, since the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Germans had indeed found it possible to limit the use of submarines to surface interception and thus to abide by 'cruiser rules'.* So the war at sea could be limited, and if the Germans nevertheless reverted to terrorism, America would be forced to consider war. Germany quietly backed down. The German navy fitted the submarines with deck guns, which allowed them to surface, inspect neutral ships to ensure they were not carrying contraband and, if they were, to evacuate the ships before sinking them. In the period between May and July 1915, submarines were able to deal with 86 per cent of the merchant ships they sank in this limited or cruiser method.

In August, a U-boat sank another British liner, the *Arabic*, despite explicit orders from the Kaiser that all large passenger liners were to be spared. Again, President Wilson protested angrily, and this time, thanks to the support of the Kaiser, the civilian leaders of Germany prevailed over the admirals. The U-boats were ordered not to sink enemy passenger liners without warning. When Tirpitz denounced such a weak response to American threats, his loyal supporter, the chief of naval staff, was replaced with one more in tune with the chancellor. By late 1915, nine months of crisis over the submarine had settled down into a German-American detente.* The Germans had forced the world to concede that the submarine, when used like a surface cruiser, was a legitimate means of war, while the Americans had forced the Germans to forego the most ruthless and effective use of the weapon. For Americans, there was still the parallel outrage of the British blockade, but by helping to support the price of cotton, hard-hit by the loss of German markets, the British appeased American opinion more effectively than the Germans could or would.

Bethmann had dodged a political crisis and preserved the shell of the *Burgfrieden*, but at a heavy cost. If and when the German admirals built a fleet of U-boats sufficient to counter-blockade effectively, his concern about the American reaction would pale beside the imperative of using a war-winning weapon [Doc. 2].