

#8 VVV

The Deluge - British Society and the First World War

and

The Downfall of the Liberal Party - 1914-1935

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Change is painful. This point is clearly brought out in The Deluge - British Society and the First World War by Arthur Marwick. Marwick describes the tremendous changes that occurred in British society as a result of Britain's involvement in World War One. Many of these changes resulted in progressive transformations in British society. But a stiff price was paid for these changes - in blood.

Marwick shows that ^{The} British ^{were} ~~was~~ entirely unprepared to go to war when they decided to fight Germany and Austria-Hungary, and clearly did not know what they were getting themselves into. Not only did the British lack the kind of army necessary to fight a war on land, they were entirely unprepared by temperament to accept the kind of government regulation that the prosecution of a total war would require. Marwick writes that in January 1914 the Regular Army "numbered less than a quarter of a million men scattered about the four corners of the globe" (page 15) and that "in Britain there was a stronger individualism, a stronger resistance to too much action by the State" (page 16) than that found in the continental countries. Moreover, the country was rigidly divided along class lines and was generally ^{but richer than most other countries} poor. Marwick writes that on the outbreak of war, the population of Britain could be divided "into 80 percent working class, anything from 10 to 18 percent middle class ... and the remainder upper class" (page 23) and that "on the eve of the war ... less than seven percent of the occupied population" (page 21) were income tax payers. Other problems afflicting the population were poor diet and bad housing (see page 24).

Yet, despite their serious domestic problems and military unpreparedness, the British were not only willing, but eager, to go to war. Marwick writes that the British "were a belligerent and jingoistic lot" (page 26) and that "war, when it came, was extremely welcome" (page 27). In addition, "when the British declaration of war upon Germany was issued at the Foreign Office it was greeted with 'round after round of cheers'" (page 31). Marwick shows that there was opposition to the war by the Labor Party and women. However, although this opposition was striking, it was "no more striking than the speed with which the bulk of it dissolved" (page 32). Marwick shows that support for the decision to fight for France, to whom it was felt Britain had a "moral obligation" (page 31), and to defend Belgian neutrality, which Britain had no obligation to defend, cut across class and political lines. It was a Liberal government that declared war on Germany, and if the Liberals were in favor of war, the Conservative opposition certainly had to be too.

only at the very last minute - is invasion of Belgium

Some?

it was legally bound to guarantee Belgium's neutrality - But then we go Germany

Marwick shows how the British people had no inkling of what the consequences would be of their decision to enter the war. It is as if the British people had gone temporarily mad. Marwick describes how a "business as usual" attitude toward the war became pervasive, and in fact became the slogan that was officially endorsed in the first war budget introduced by David Lloyd George on November 16, 1914 (see page 39). And there was "business as usual" in politics too. Marwick writes how the issue of Irish Home Rule provoked bitter debate while the first war budget was being prepared.

and every other people?

But it was just a matter of time before "business as usual" would give way to the realization of what the war actually meant. Marwick writes that after Britain entered the war "there were sharp price rises" (page 42). In addition, Britain had to cope with an influx of over 100,000 refugees from Belgium (see page 43). But what was even worse, Britain itself soon came under attack. Marwick writes that on December 16, 1914 a German cruiser shelled three towns on the east coast, killing 137 and injuring 592 (page 44); and on February 18, 1915 Germany imposed a submarine blockade. "Business as usual" finally ended after the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, which resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and reports of faulty British shells that had failed to cut barb wire.

Under the exigency of war, the British government, as Marwick shows, enacted measures which brushed aside the constitutional rights of the people and gave the government sweeping powers to conduct the war. On August 8, 1914, the Defense of the Realm Act was enacted, which gave the government the authority to court martial and punish persons "in a like manner as if such persons were subject to military law and had on active service committed an offence under section five of the Army Act" (page 37). A Ministry of Munitions was created and a Munitions of War Bill was presented to the House. This Bill prohibited strikes and lockouts in all industries covered by the Munitions Act; in these factories all trade union practices were to be suspended for the duration of the war (see page 60).

But the measure that clearly had the most far-reaching social and economic consequences was universal conscription. Marwick writes that "the bulk of the country ... disliked the notion of conscription" (pages 77, 78). According to Marwick, out of 2,179,231 single men of military age, only 1,150,000 had attested to serve if called, and of married men, only 1,152,947 out of 2,832,210 had attested (page 78). In addition, "the imposition of universal conscription was an event of central importance in the social history of the war" (page 79). As a result of universal conscription, which became law in May 1916, the labor shortage was greatly exacerbated. This "marked the lowering of the remaining barriers of prejudice to the full-scale employment of women" (page 79) and "it brought first-hand experience of the horrors of war, not just to a couple of million volunteers and horny-handed professionals, but willy-nilly to twice as many ordinary unadventurous civilians - one on three of the adult male population" (pages 79, 80).

One result of universal conscription was the emergence of a new class of person - the conscientious objector. Marwick writes that there were about 16,000 conscientious objectors. Out of these, 1,500 absolutely refused alternative service, and for them the government provided only repeated arrest, court-martial and imprisonment. About 70 men died from their prison treatment (see page 82).

This is important Another development of great importance was the increase in power and status acquired by labor. This is shown by Marwick, who cites the inclusion of trade unionists in Lloyd George's

Henderson?
War Cabinet in December 1916 and the success of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in a dispute with the War Office over the matter of exemptions from military service (see page 84).

But perhaps the most dramatic change that occurred in British society during the war was the emancipation of women, which was the direct result of their entry into the work force. Marwick cites various statistics which show the tremendous increase in the number of women workers. According to Marwick, "in industry as a whole the total employment of women and girls over ten as between 1914 and 1918 increased by about 800,000, from 2,179,000 to 2,971,000" (page 91); "in banking and commerce there was a fantastic rate of growth - from a mere 9,500 female employees in 1914 to 63,700 in 1917" (page 92); and "the number of women and girls employed in the whole of commerce and its allied occupations rose from 505,000 to 934,000" (page 92). Marwick brings out how women acquired new economic power, social independence, and gained a new self-consciousness and a new sense of status (see pages 93, 94). Marwick also points out that on February 6, 1918 the Special Register Bill was passed which gave women over 30 the vote.

In his book Marwick makes two statements that must be specifically addressed. Firstly, on page 293 Marwick writes: "The working class, though suffering many hardships and grievances, derived a number of permanent advantages from their favorable market position - wage rates were doubled, the average working week was reduced from 55 hours to 48 - and more important still, they got a taste of the better material comforts of modern

civilization. Conceding that Marwick is correct, the economic gains made by the working class must be measured against the losses suffered by the British during the war. Were these economic gains worth "the loss of 745,000 of the country's younger men ... and the 1.6 million wounded" (page 290). This is a moral question. Marwick seems to suggest that it was worth the price. He writes: "But no one but a romantic reactionary would wish to regret the world which disappeared in the deluge of 1914-1918" (page 313). Perhaps the families of these dead soldiers would have felt differently.

Is he suggesting this?

The implication, surely, is that it would have disappeared anyway

Secondly, on page 292 Marwick writes: "What was wrong with Britain in the twenties was that she suffered from what the war had done, and failed to profit from what the war had taught - her government was composed of sadder but not wiser men." But the British did profit from what the war had taught - that war should be avoided and that the wholesale slaughter of their army is intolerable - and acted on these lessons. They appeased Nazi Germany in order to avoid war and during World War Two advocated strategies that would minimize losses on the battlefield. Maybe in the domestic area the British continued to rely on outdated methods to deal with social problems. But in the areas of foreign policy and war strategy the British had learned their lesson well.

With success?

a provocative conclusion

Solid summary

In The Downfall of the Liberal Party - 1914-1935, Trevor Wilson examines the collapse of the Liberal Party as a viable political force. Wilson rejects the proposition that the Liberal Party was already dying prior to Britain's entry into the war in 1914. According to Wilson, "the intransigence of the House of Lords, wide-scale industrial unrest, the excesses of the suffragettes, and the imminence of bloodshed in Ireland" (page 17) between 1910 and 1914 were problems that the Liberals were capable of managing. Wilson writes that "some of the problems were passing: the Upper House had been put in its place, and the strike-wave seemed to be receding. The other problems were not manifestly insoluble" (pages 17, 18). In addition, Wilson refutes the suggestion that the Labor Party was a danger to the Liberals. Wilson writes that "in the general elections of 1910, and in the by-elections from 1911 until the outbreak of war, Labor fared abysmally in contests with the Liberals" (page 17).

The downfall of the Liberal Party was brought on by the war. Wilson is unambiguous on this point. He writes: "The outbreak of the First World War initiated a process in the Liberal Party which by 1918 had reduced it to ruins" (page 23). This occurred, according to Wilson, because the principles upon which the Liberal Party was founded were rendered irrelevant by the war. Wilson writes: "As Liberals were often the first to recognize, the onset of war jeopardized the existence of a party whose guiding principles were international conciliation, personal liberty, and social reform" (page 23).

Wilson also shows ^{that} while the war was a bane to the Liberals, it was a great benefit to the Conservative and Labor Parties. Wilson writes that "from the outset the war redounded to the advantage of the Conservatives. It seemed to vindicate their pre-war conduct, particularly their hostility to Germany, their advocacy of a tariff policy (amongst other things) against German trade, and their demand for increased armaments and peacetime conscription" (page 28). As for the Labor Party, the war, according to Wilson, "proved in the long run of the greatest benefit to Labor" (page 28). Wilson writes that "the impact of the war on the nation's economy so increased the importance of the trade unions, and so stimulated their political consciousness, that it correspondingly enhanced the position of the Labor Party, which had all along derived much of its limited importance from its association with organized labor" (page 29).

Wilson assigns major responsibility for the ~~fall~~ ^{fall} ~~destruction~~ of the Liberal Party to David Lloyd George. Wilson portrays Lloyd George as a deceitful, unscrupulous opportunist who helped wreck the Liberal Party to gain political power. According to Wilson, "Lloyd George, it appeared to many Liberals, welcomed the Tory embrace for its own sake, and not merely because he saw in Tory ideas the best way of winning the war; welcomed it, that is, because he realized that by forming an alliance with the Conservatives he could unseat Asquith and seize the premiership" (page 43).

Lloyd George's apparent duplicity should not have surprised

he is writing the history of the party from the perspective of me & me Asquith's faction

the Liberals. Wilson writes that "even before the war [Lloyd George] was considered insecurely attached to his party and spoken of as a likely successor to Joseph Chamberlain, who had begun as a Liberal social reformer and then deserted to the enemy" (page 52).

Lloyd George also believed in coalition governments, as Wilson shows. Wilson writes that "in 1910, when the House of Lords crisis was at its height, [Lloyd George] had put forward an incredible scheme for a coalition government whose program would include a form of compulsory military service" (page 52). The war gave Lloyd George the opportunity to push for a coalition government, to the disadvantage of the Liberal Party and to Herbert Asquith in particular. Wilson writes that "already by the end of 1914 [Lloyd George] was profoundly dissatisfied with the way his colleagues were conducting the war and more than ready to make this known to the Conservatives, so weakening the government and encouraging its opponents to attack it" (page 52). Wilson shows that Asquith agreed to the formation of a coalition government in May 1915 because "Lloyd George (according to Churchill) threatened resignation if Asquith did not agree" (page 53). As a result, Lloyd George, "far from helping the Liberal government, contributed to its fall" (page 53).

After the coalition government had been formed, Lloyd George's attacks on Asquith did not stop. Wilson shows how Lloyd George put pressure on Asquith to introduce conscription. Wilson writes that Lloyd George "presented Asquith with what was popularly dubbed an 'ultimatum', stating that unless married

men were conscripted immediately, he would resign" (page 74). In May 1916 "the government agreed to the immediate conscription of all men of military age" (page 78). The "year-long struggle over conscription" ~~had~~ left the Liberals in Parliament divided (see page 78). And the condition of the Liberal Party did not improve after Lloyd George became Prime Minister in December 1916. Wilson writes that "in a sense, from December 1916 there were two Liberal parties in Parliament, for one group of prominent Liberals sat on the front bench government, and another on the front opposition bench" (pages 105, 106). Thus Liberals sat opposite each other in Parliament.

*Some of this
may be
unfair
to LG*

According to Wilson, Lloyd George's undermining of the Liberal Party continued after the war. Wilson writes that "Liberals were slow to believe, even after 1918, that Lloyd George intended to separate from them for good. But during 1919, to their mounting indignation, his intentions became increasingly evident. He kept up the attack on Liberals in by-elections" (page 192).

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Wilson further shows that Lloyd George wanted to form a Centre Party that would bring together Conservatives and Coalition Liberals. Lloyd George had warned that Liberalism had no future (see page 193). But such a plan "clearly meant abandoning any distinctive liberal position" (page 196). Wilson suggests that Lloyd George's plan was an example of "unblushing opportunism" (page 196) insofar as he wanted to create a fusion party of that would advance conservative views under a liberal "garb" (page 197). But the Liberals "could not bring themselves

*This
seems very
unfair*

to turn their backs completely on their Liberal past and submerge themselves in the Conservative ranks" (page 198).

Another reason offered by Wilson for the disintegration of the Liberal Party was lack of financial support. Wilson writes that "defections from the Liberals since 1914 had increased the number of wealthy people to whom the Conservatives could look for finance, and Labor was finding hitherto untapped source of income in the trade union levy.... But the Liberals were losing their old source without finding a new one" (page 290).

Wilson writes that "by the end of 1931 the Liberals had entirely lost their bearings" (page 369) and "that since 1933 the party had failed to recover the raison d'etre which it had lost. By 1935 the Liberals were reduced to the status of a minor party.

The precipitous decline of the Liberal Party can be seen in the following figures: in August 1914 there were 261 Liberals in the House of Commons; in 1935 there were 21. The reasons for this decline is that the principles of the Liberal Party became superfluous as society changed as a result of the war. Lloyd George may have been an opportunist, but he was a realist too. Lloyd George saw that the Liberal Party was a sinking ship and he tried to redefine the role of the party to help keep it afloat. However, his proposals were rejected since it was perceived that it would mean the end of the Liberal Party as an independent political entity. The downfall of the Liberal Party was inevitable. Lloyd George merely hastened its demise.

any
extraordinary
phenomenon

This does
not seem
to me to be proved

A very good essay.