

The National Archives
Education Service

Britain 1906-1918

Background and Big
Question – Gallery Five



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Gallery Background

Defence of the Realm Act (DORA)

The Defence of the Realm Act brought about some of the most important changes in Britain's history - for a short while. When war broke out in 1914 it was a very different war from recent conflicts (such as the Boer War in South Africa, 1899-1902). In 1914 Britain was concerned with two main issues:

- Defending the country from possible internal enemies and spies
- Mobilising the country behind the war effort

To help achieve these aims the government passed the Defence of the Realm Act in August 1914. The government gained an enormous range of powers that would never have even been considered outside wartime. Here are a few examples of the government's powers:

- It became illegal to photograph military bases or try and get information from military personnel.
- It was illegal to own or use equipment relating to phones or telegraph without a government permit.
- People needed a permit to keep homing pigeons.
- Flagpoles or any other equipment that could be used for signalling were banned.
- There were strict controls on firearms, chemicals and even film for moving pictures or photography.
- The military could take over any piece of land without the agreement of the owner.
- Local councils could take over land that was not being used for food production and grow crops on it.
- The sale of drugs and alcohol was strictly controlled.
- Shops had to close at 8pm.
- Lights had to be put out or kept to a minimum.

Under DORA, the government also took increasing control of industry and food production. When the war began, there were no clear plans to do this. However, as the war went on and became more intense it was clear that private companies could not cope. In 1915 there was a munitions crisis. Private companies were unable to produce enough munitions, partly because they were too small and partly because they could not get enough metal, coal, rubber and other materials. The government took control of co-ordinating the supply of materials. It also set up its own munitions factories and took control of the coal industry in 1917.

On the whole, it seems that most people accepted the restrictions that DORA brought in. The majority of arrests or cautions given by police or military authorities were for people who accidentally broke DORA Regulations rather than people protesting about government restrictions on their freedom.

[Background source 1](#)

Part of a police notice relating to the Defence of the Realm Act (showing the first regulation - there were many more) (PRO ref: MEPO 2/1636)

Recruitment and conscription

Perhaps the government's biggest challenge was finding enough men to turn Britain into the land power that was needed to win the Great War. When war broke out the British Army was hopelessly ill prepared. Part of the problem was tradition. Britain had always relied on a large navy to defend itself from invasion. The navy had also protected Britain's empire. When troops were needed, Britain could call on a small, professional army and also call up troops from the Empire. Indian troops played a key role in virtually all of the British Army's campaigns in the 19th and 20th centuries up to the end of WW2.

The problem in 1914 was that this policy was of little use. Along with artillery, machine guns, tanks and other weapons, the new type of warfare required millions of soldiers. All the other great powers had systems of conscription. Men were called up for a few years compulsory military service. This meant that Russia, Germany, Austria and France all had large armies in 1914. It also meant they could call up thousands of men who had military training because they had recently finished their service. Britain had never had a system like this because it had never needed one. There was also the fact that British people saw compulsory military service as a threat to their liberty and democracy.

[Background source 2](#)

Recruitment in Britain, 1914-15

As a result, Britain needed volunteers. As you can see from source 2, the British Army got its volunteers in the early months of the war. However, by the end of 1914 and into 1915 the pace of volunteering slowed. There were several reasons:

- Many men did not want to go to war
- As the war went on, men could earn very high wages in war-related industries
- Many men had wives, children and possibly parents to support
- There was a suspicion that in some areas men were not being pressured to volunteer, while in other areas they were
- There was confusion over whether the government wanted workers like miners or shipbuilders to join up or stay in their jobs and produce much needed materials for the war effort

All this added up to a crisis in the second half of 1915. As a result, Lord Derby was given the job of trying to boost numbers of volunteers. He had some success with a new recruiting campaign in the autumn of 1915. Recruitment rose and he got around 300,000 men to agree to attestments. This meant that they promised to join up if the situation in the war meant that they were needed. However, even with the attesters, Derby's efforts were not enough to meet the needs of the Army.

[Background source 3](#)

Cartoon from the Liverpool Echo commenting on attestments
(Liverpool Record Office: Liverpool Echo, 3 December 1915)

In January 1916 Prime Minister Asquith introduced conscription for all single men aged 18-40. It was a tough decision. No members of the government wanted conscription, but they felt that it was the only way that Britain could get all the troops it needed. It was also widely seen as the fairest and most organised way to recruit. Conscription was even extended to married men in April 1916.

Not everybody felt this way. Around 50 Liberal and Labour MPs voted against conscription. The trade unions opposed it because they did not trust the government not to extend conscription to industrial work as well as military service. Conscientious objectors also opposed the measure.

On the whole, however, the evidence suggests that conscription worked. It was well organised and people felt that they were treated equally. Some people were exempt, such as men in jobs which

were vital to war industries (reserved occupations). Anyone called up could appeal and have his case heard by a tribunal. Tribunals could allow men to avoid service on grounds of health, but also for family reasons or a range of other factors. Tribunals also dealt with conscientious objectors. There was little sympathy for their views, but evidence suggests that each case was treated on its own merits. Despite this, many 'conchies' were sentenced to prison terms with hard labour. Others served in industry or the armed forces in non-combatant roles.

Shortages and rationing

Food shortages were not a major problem in Britain initially. There was a lot of panic buying when war started, which caused shortages, but this did not last long. A bigger problem was rising prices. The government restricted the amount of food and other goods that could be imported, which meant costs went up. For many people, this was not too much of a problem because their wages went up. However, for the old, and poorer paid unskilled workers, rising prices did make life hard.

[Background source 4](#)

Extract from a 1918 government report on the cost of living showing the increase in spending that families had to make to feed, clothe and keep themselves warm
(PRO ref: LAB 17/1)

The situation got much worse in 1917 when the Germans adopted a tactic of unrestricted submarine warfare. They had done this for short periods in 1915 and 1916, but in 1917 it became a concerted attack. The tactic was simple - all ships supplying Britain were sunk, whether they were British, American or any other country.

The effects were devastating. Essential supplies began to run short and in April 1917 Britain was six weeks away from running out of wheat. Prices began to soar. People got very fed up with queuing, especially when the shops often ran out of food. The government introduced a voluntary rationing scheme, led by the King and Queen. The main aim was to save wheat by getting people to eat less bread. For the better off, this was not too difficult. However, the poor relied on bread as their main food - they could not afford meat or any other alternatives to bread.

By the end of 1917 resentment was rising against the better off who could still afford the rising prices and could also use the black market if necessary. In January 1918 the government introduced rationing. At first it was limited to the Home Counties in the South East of England. By April most of the country was covered. Every person had a ration card (including the King and Queen). This allowed each person:

- 425 grams of meat per week
- 142 grams of bacon per week
- 113 grams of butter or margarine per week

Sugar was also rationed, and the government controlled the availability of many other goods. As with most other areas of government control, most people accepted it even though they did not like the idea.

Rationing solved the problems of rising prices and food queues. Even more surprising, the health of the majority of people actually improved as a result of rationing! The poor got a share of better food than they could have afforded before. The well off ate less of the food that was bad for them.

The workers and the war

The war would be decided in the factories as much as it would on the battlefields. The nature of industrial warfare soon meant that the ability to produce guns, bullets, artillery pieces and shells would be vital to the war effort.

In the early stages of the war industry actually experienced some hard times. Britain's second biggest trading partner in 1914 was Germany, so when war started a lot of firms suddenly lost their markets. It was also expensive and difficult to get raw materials, so many workers found themselves out of a job.

This did not last long. As hundreds of thousands of men joined up for the Army, their jobs became empty at home. More importantly, as the war went on the government began to order enormous quantities of munitions, uniforms, vehicles, medical supplies etc. Before long there were more jobs than there were workers.

With workers in demand, employers had to pay higher wages to get them. Employers also had to compete to get the materials they needed to make their goods. The downside was that wages went up, but prices went up even faster. Eventually the government had to take control of industries like coal and munitions and also introduce rationing.

The shortage of workers was met by the recruitment of an extra 1 million women workers, doing traditionally 'men's jobs'. You can read more about women's work in the Great War in Gallery 4. The key point is that women filled the gaps in the labour market. About 950,000 went to work in munitions, and about 200,000 worked in other areas of engineering. They worked in many other areas like driving buses and taxis, and about 16,000 mostly young women joined the Women's Land Army. Women helped to meet the shortage of workers, but they did not help with one of the key problems of the war, industrial relations. In fact, the presence of women workers made the situation worse to begin with.

[Background source 5](#)

An armband worn by members of the Women's Land Army (PRO ref: MAF 42/8)

Industrial relations had been very poor before the war. There were many strikes for better pay or working conditions, especially in industries like coal, rail and docks. Many became bitter and violent. This bad feeling continued into the war. When women workers were brought in, many trade unions opposed them. They simply did not trust their employers. They feared that men workers would be sacked and replaced by women workers who were paid less. The unions were alarmed by Prime Minister David Lloyd George's policy of using leading businessmen to run government departments. As source 6 shows, there were many strikes. The government tried to outlaw strikes in 1915 but they had to climb down from this position after metalworkers on the Clyde (Glasgow) went on strike. The government simply could not afford to lose production. This gave the unions great strength. In 1917 and 1918 the Amalgamated Society of Engineers went on strike and forced the government to give in to all their demands.

[Background source 6](#)

Strikes in Britain and Germany, 1914-18

There is no doubt that Britain's workers supported their country and met the vital targets that ensured victory. However, it would be wrong to assume that employers and unions put aside their differences

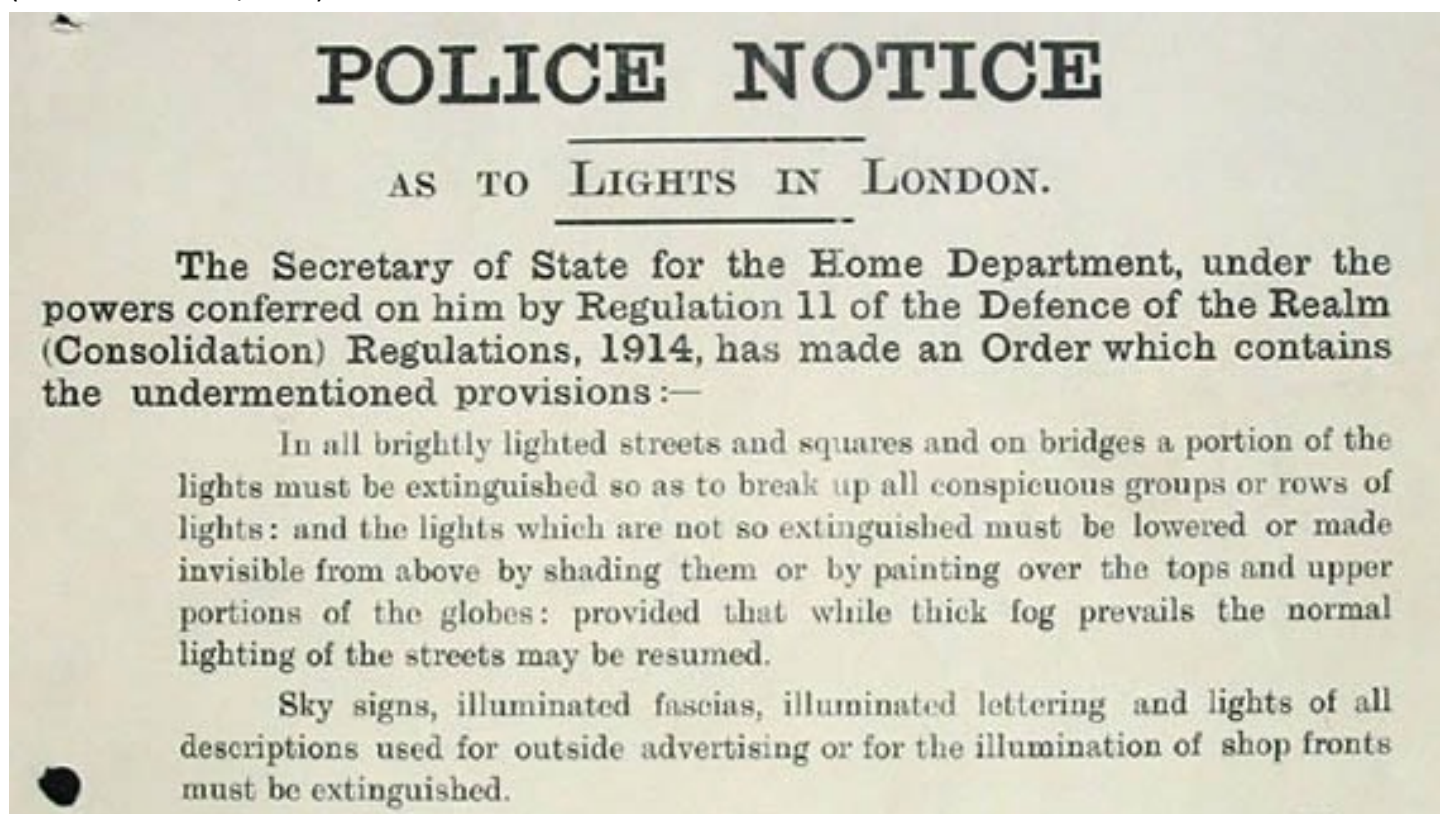
during the war. Time and again the government had to act as mediator. It was no surprise that when the war ended the bitterness and hostility continued and resulted in the General Strike of 1926.

Sources

Background Source 1

Part of a police notice relating to the Defence of the Realm Act (showing the first regulation - there were many more)

(PRO ref: MEPO 2/1636)



Transcript**AS TO LIGHTS IN LONDON.**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department, under the powers conferred on him by Regulation 11 of the Defence of the Realm (Consolidation) Regulations, 1914, has made an Order which contains the undermentioned provisions:-

In all brightly lighted streets and squares and on bridges a portion of the lights must be extinguished so as to break up all conspicuous groups or rows of lights: and the lights which are not so extinguished must be lowered or made invisible from above by shading them or by painting over the tops and upper portions of the globes: provided that while thick fog prevails the normal lighting of the streets may be resumed.

Sky signs, illuminated fascias, illuminated lettering and lights of all descriptions used for outside advertising or for the illumination of shop fronts must be extinguished.

Background Source 2

Recruitment in Britain, 1914-15



Background Source 3

Cartoon from the Liverpool Echo commenting on attestments
(Liverpool Record Office: Liverpool Echo, 3 December 1915)



Transcript

IT LOOKS FINE!

How the young man feels when he has elected to "do his bit," and has the "outward and visible sign."

Background Source 4

Extract from a 1918 government report on the cost of living showing the increase in spending that families had to make to feed, clothe and keep themselves warm

(PRO ref: LAB 17/1)

-	Increase in Expenditure, 1914 to 1918	
	Actual	Per cent.
Skilled	33s. 1d.	67
Semi-skilled	31s. 4d.	75
Unskilled	29s. 6d.	81

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Background Source 5

An armband worn by members of the Women's Land Army



Background Source 6

Strikes in Britain and Germany, 1914-18

STRIKES IN BRITAIN & GERMANY, 1914-18

YEAR	NUMBER OF STRIKERS		WORKING DAYS LOST	
	BRITAIN	GERMANY	BRITAIN	GERMANY
1914	326,000	61,000	10,000,000	1,715,000
1915	401,000	14,000	3,000,000	42,000
1916	235,000	129,000	2,500,000	245,000
1917	575,000	667,000	5,500,000	1,862,000
1918	923,000	391,000	6,000,000	1,452,000

Gallery five: The Big Question

In this task you will have to use your imagination a little. The year is 1939 and you are an adviser to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. The situation is serious, and it looks as though war with Germany is very likely. The Prime Minister wants to make some plans about how to run the country if war breaks out. He has many advisers looking at many different issues.

Your job is to look back at some of the measures that were taken in the First World War. The Prime Minister will then decide whether those measures should be used again.

You have four areas to look at:

DORA

Recruitment

Shortages and rationing

The workers

For each area you must look at:

The actions taken by the government

How these actions affected people

THE BIG QUESTION IN THIS GALLERY IS:

**HOW DID THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR
AFFECT CIVILIANS IN BRITAIN 1914-18**

How people reacted to government actions

You could add an optional section on whether you think the measure would be a good measure to use again.

You may be asked to work in pairs or small groups by your teacher, so you personally may only need to look at one of these areas.

Whichever way you work, the Prime Minister needs to see a summary of your findings. This could be as written report, a presentation or a table like the one suggested online.

Remember that the Prime Minister does not want your guesses or assumptions. Support everything you say with evidence – examples, facts and figures, and references to sources.