Reconstructing or Reshaping Pre-War Britain? The Repercussions of the Great War

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The First World War, rather than the Second is recognised in Britain as the Great War. For several reasons, British contemporaries and historians alike have been describing the War as the great divide, separating Victorian and Edwardian from Modern Britain. Arthur Marwick's classic account of the years 1914 to 1918 concluded that the Great War acted as a „Deluge", a flood that swept away old Britain and created a „New Society"[1]. B.B. Gilbert has argued that „A world died and a new one was born in slightly more than four years."[2] Not only Britain's unprecedented war effort, sending for the first time in its history a mass-conscript army to the continent, and its consequences, among them the drastic reduction in currency reserves spent to finance the War, but also the political and social upheaval, from the „strange death of liberal England"[3] to the rise of the labour party have contributed to this view.

As for Britain's economy, the War has been seen as a dividing line between Britain's prime and decline. Britain's economic strength was severely damaged after 1918. The postwar economic boom ended in social unrest and mass unemployment. Britain went through a protracted economic crisis along with severe poverty and unemployment. Her role as a leading creditor had been crushed. Britain had lost her status as a world power able to finance at will any engagement anywhere in the world.

In the political sphere, Ireland left the United Kingdom. The Irish question, so important before the War, seemed to have gone into demise. The extension of the suffrage to all men and most women, the expansion of

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[1] A. Marwick, 'The Impact of the First World War on British Society', JCH 3, 1968, 51-63; id., The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (1965).

[2] B.B. Gilbert, British Social Policy 1914-1939 (1970), 1.

[3] As with any other topic, timing and reasons of this event remain hotly contested, see e.g. P. Williamson, National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926-32 (New York, 1992), postdating the advent of a two party system by eight years from 1924 (according to Maurice Cowling's account) to 1932.

union membership and the rise of the Labour Party signalled not only the advent of the end of Victorian society but also the onset of class politics.

In terms of cultural and social change, it has been alleged that the 1920s saw the final breakthrough of modern mass culture. After 1918, women played a more prominent role in public life. The welfare state was beginning to take shape. The social élites of Victorian and Edwardian Britain came under increasing pressure. The landed aristocracy suffered under the combined effects of a high death toll in the war, mounting income tax rates, rising death duties, and prolonged agricultural crisis.

But the case for change is by no means as clear-cut as one might think. For one, British historians have come to challenge Marwick's interpretation and contended that the War was „at best a winter storm which swelled the rivers of change",[4] that is, it accelerated developments that had already been under way. Some even contended that Marwick's flood amounted to little more than a spell of rain that temporarily rejuvenated withering flowers, i.e. it helped Britain reconstruct herself along its pre-war structures.[5]

In contrast, the continental perspective of the First World War appears to be at best the beginning rather than the climax of the vagrancies of the 20th century. The British experience in particular resembled nothing if not relative stability. The German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman imperial monarchies were toppled by revolutions. Continental European boundaries were redrawn, new states created, monarchs dethroned and new political systems introduced. But Britain seemed to have successfully defended her state and society. Thus, what strikes modern historians, in comparison with continental societies, is the relative political stability with which the profound changes mentioned above were, or so it seemed, absorbed. Militant confrontations between the state and labour organisations remained the exception. The Conservative Party regained its strength, which it seemed to have lost at its landslide defeat in 1906, and managed to rule Britain for most of the interwar period.

What seems to be at issue in these arguments are mutually opposing notions. Enquiring into „Change and Inertia" apparently means to draw a balance sheet between two different phenomena. However, „Inertia" does not only imply a lack of change but also any state of motion that remains fundamentally unaltered. Thus, a process of change that is going on for some

[4] G.J. DeGroot, Blighty. British Society in the Era of the Great War (1996), 291. See also H. Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society. England since 1880 (1989), 224-41.

[5] DeGroot, 311, uses also a very different metaphor. „If war is the locomotive of history, the rolling stock in this case was typically British: slow, outmoded and prone to delay and cancellation".

time and keeps going on in like manner without being radically restructured by events outside its own process is a meaning of „Inertia" as well. Indeed, many of the papers suggested that while change can be mapped in a number of fields, it did not necessarily come about because of the War only, although it may have been influenced by it. Therefore, we asked all contributors to disentangle in their particular fields the elements of temporary and lasting adjustments to the needs of War, of long-term trends and their war-related amplifications or departures.

Whether there is a common theme to these changes is a moot point. While for the period after 1918 a central topic might be the defence of a past impossible to recapture, political actors during the War had first to organise the war effort and had little time to prepare for the time after. Just as diverse as British society and its problems were in 1914 were the multifarious effects the War had on changing it. To understand Britain's political, social and economic landscape in which political parties, trade unions, workers and middle classes found themselves during the War and had to act, a close analysis of different sectors of society and the impact of the War on them is necessary.

A common problem to all the issues in the three sections on Economy, Society and Culture, and Politics is to what extent the War forms a reasonable time frame or whether a broader time frame would be more appropriate to probe the impact of the War on developments already under way. To what extent was the Great War a machine of social, cultural, political and economic change in its own right? To what extent did it help to accelerate developments already under way? As a matter of course, there are no clear-cut general answers. The following articles demonstrate that any interpretation depends on the criteria employed and on the time frame adopted.

1. The British Economy and the Great War

For its unprecedented scale and intensity, the Great War required the mobilization of all national assets. The War created the „home front", affecting the whole economy more drastically than any previous war. Production was changed to meet military demands. The disruption of international trade called for the creation of new industries and the expansion and modernization of others. Raw materials had to be rationed and directed into those sectors with the highest strategic priorities. Market forces were substituted by state intervention. Laissez-faire was suspended and direct governmental control was introduced for prices, labour markets

and relations, capital allocation, investment and production. Ten new ministries and 160 boards and commissions were created. In 1915, the Ministry of Munitions under Lloyd George „to a large extent, took over the economy and society" and in a couple of months „mobilised Britain with a completeness never before approached".[6] The ever increasing need for funds led to drastic fiscal measures and the accumulation of a vast national debt financed mainly by American sources.

This section will look at the war-related changes of Britain's economy from both an international and a domestic perspective. There can be no doubt about the War's devastating impact on Britain's hegemony as a global centre of finance and trade, with the loss of export markets for manufactured goods, the advent of new industrial competitors, the rise of protectionism, the lasting collapse of the international monetary system and political instability. Britain had exchanged the position of the world's creditor with the less comfortable seat of a major debtor. All this affected Britain deeply, as the country traditionally drew its strength from an advanced international division of labour and a relatively free movement of capital, commodities and industrial products.

As far as domestic events are concerned, it is debatable whether state intervention, structural changes, corporatist practices and the official recognition of collective bargaining left deep traces on the face of the British economy of the 1920s and 1930s or whether the speedy dismantling of war-time controls marked a full return to pre-1914 „normalcy", as Kirby and Rose have argued. For them the War economy did little to remedy the symptoms let alone the causes of British decline. The recommitment to liberal market ideology implied the end of close government-industry cooperation and guaranteed the non-existence of any coherent industrial policy. Bernhard Alford contends that a decisive chance for „badly needed longer-term adjustments in industrial structure" was missed: „wartime profits and the defeat of Germany lulled the senses and led to the belief that somehow peace would deliver to Britain the kind of economic ascendancy she had enjoyed in late-Victorian years (...) British businessmen ... failed to exploit the benefits and opportunities which the war gave them."[7] Britain's

[6] S. Checkland, British Public Policy, 1776-1939. An Economic, Social and Political Perspective (Cambridge, 1985), 264.

[7] B.W.E. Alford, 'Lost Opportunities: British Business and Businessmen during the First World War', in N. McKendrick/R.B. Outhwaite (eds), Business Life and Public Policy (Cambridge, 1986), 225. See also ibid., 205-27; id., Britain in the World Economy since 1880 (1996), 106-35; M. Kirby/M.B. Rose, 'Productivity and Competitive Failure: British Government Policy and Industry, 1914-19', in G. Jones/M. Kirby (eds),

decline and the rise of new competitors was not a result of the War, but a development that reached well back into the 19th century. The absence of change, not war-related change, was the problem. A naive belief in free trade led to a futile search for a lost international world that was impossible to recapture. Instead of making a fresh start in 1919 businessmen invested mainly in old industries. Military victory created a sense of superiority and fostered complacency. Close cooperation with government and trade unions, which proved necessary to avert military disaster, were not continued after 1918. On the contrary, most corporatist structures were dismantled as soon as the War ended. The speedy return to pre-war practices was the overriding leitmotif.

In the first article of this volume, *William Garside* largely follows this interpretation and maintains that the Great War worsened economic problems already visible before 1914 such as Britain's declining international competitiveness. Additionally, the War created new problems, like the lasting disruption of the international system of trade and finance as well as Britain's massive debt. The war economy, however, also offered new opportunities such as substantial advances in mass-production techniques, new corporatist approaches to problems that the free market economy was unable to solve, high profit rates and a massive potential for future investment, as well as the beginning of the decline of traditional but highly dysfunctional barriers between different trades. These chances for effective long-term modernization were neither used nor even fully comprehended by the main economic agents. The lessons the War taught about the value of corporatism and state intenvention in the interest of growth and national efficiency were quickly forgotten after 1918. Thus, the chance for structural improvements was largely missed, while the full effect of aggrevated old and new war-related problems weighed heavily on the British economy of the 1920s and 1930s.

Heide-Irene Schmidt takes a close look at some of the cooperative structures that sprang up during the War. Within Britain, the coalition governments set up not only various new Ministries and institutions to intervene in the short run but also several committees dealing with economic reconstruction and long-term structural problems. These discussions were,

Competitiveness and the State. Government and Business in Twentieth-Century Britain (Manchester, 1991), 20-39; P.K. O'Brien, 'The Great War and the Dislocation of the International Economy 1914-1929', in W. Feldenkirchen/F. Schönert-Röhlk/G. Schulz (eds), Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Unternehmen. Festschrift für Hans Pohl zum 60. Geburtstag (Stuttgart, 1995), 245-65; id., 'Britain's Economy between the Wars: A Survey of a Counter-Revolution in Economic History', P&P 115, 1987, 107-30.

however, hampered by strong partisan stances. Conflicts between free-traders and tariff-reformers made resolutions difficult. This lack of unanimity partly explains why the will for cooperation between the various fractions fell into rapid decline once the military conflict was over. This article also describes the inter-allied cooperation which was inaugurated in order to pool economic resources for total warfare and to develop a coherent strategy for postwar planning. However, national antagonisms and narrow-minded egotisms were only temporarily overcome. Discussions proved intricate and unpleasant; progress was piecemeal and fragile. Rivalry and distrust overshadowed the allies' cooperation from the start. Britain accused the U.S. of taking an unfair advantage out of the inter-allied burden-sharing. In fact, the U.S.'s entry into the War foreshadowed in many ways the new economic and political landscape of the 1920s, in which Britain was de facto relegated to the position of a junior partner. The lack of consensus on the national as well as on the inter-allied level explains why cooperation, which was enforced by the imminent threat of military defeat, declined fast after 1918.

Antje Hagen gives a survey of Anglo-German economic relations before, during, and after the War concentrating on two essential aspects, international trade and foreign direct investment. In this perspective, the War appears to be a watershed. Intensive, but by no means harmonious trade relations were severed by the military hostilities and never fully recovered before the Second World War. Foreign direct investment, i.e. the setting up of factories or offices in other countries, took an even more destructive course. Sequestration and forced take-overs annihilated property rights, which in peace were untouchable pillars of capitalism. In wartime, private property of companies and individuals from the rival country was seen as an enemy asset and consequently lost for good. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that with the memory of recent confiscations and under the prevailing conditions of the 1920s and 1930s direct investment links between Germany and Britain were only cautiously re-established.

2. Social and Cultural Change

This section examines the extent to which the War released or accelerated processes of social and cultural change. As Britain was largely spared fighting on her own territory, she is a particularly rewarding object for the examination of developments that took place far removed from the trenches and battlefields. As in the section above there is no unanimity among the historians of the First World War. Marwick argues that the Great War

created a „new society", bringing about major social changes such as new patterns of family life and consumption, recreation and leisure. „... the experience of war has been that a more egalitarian organization is more efficient organization, ... (...) All qualifications made, the fundamental fact remains that in participating in the non-military aspects of the war effort, hitherto under-privileged groups find themselves in a strong market position. (...) Both military and non-military participants gain in prestige, as having been vital to the national effort."[8]

After 1918, women played a more prominent role outside their homes. Female employment shifted from domestic services and textile industries to other sectors of the economy such as clerical work, which underwent rapid feminization. Government never fully gave up the responsibilities it had taken over during the War for social services such as housing and family care. Many of these schemes were extended after 1918. The heavy tax burden put on the rich weakened their social postition. The aristocracy never regained its pre-war strength, politically as well as economically. Thus, the break-up and turnover of their estates increased.[9] The common experience of mass destruction and prolonged service in a conscription army might have lowered cultural barriers between middle and working classes. The advent of the wireless and movies ushered in the final breakthrough of modern mass culture.

On the other hand, Wall and Winter contend that „the full effect of the war was to restore pre-war social forms rather than to undermine them"[10] and that it had surprisingly little impact on demographic trends, family and occupational patterns. The *Upheaval of War*, the title of their book, did not deserve its name. The War, so it seems from their point of view, served as a conservative rather than a revolutionary force, almost „little more than a blip in pre-war trends of development".[11] Susan Kingsley Kent has strongly contended that the War and the granting of the female vote heavily undermined the cause of women's emancipation. „Organised feminism ... never regained its pre-war status as a mass movement. By the end of the 1920s, feminism as a distinct political and social movement had become

[8] A. Marwick, The Deluge: British Society and the First World War (2nd ed. 1991), 19.

[9] D. Cannadine, The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy (New Haven, 1990), 71-87 and 443-4; R. Pope, War and Society in Britain 1899-1948 (1991), 59-69.

[10] R. Wall/J. Winter (eds), The Upheaval of War. Familiy, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918 (Cambridge, 1988), 4.

11 J. Lawrence, 'The First World War and its Aftermath', in P. Johnson (ed.), Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change (1994), 164.

insignificant."[12] The War with its clear distinction of home and front, female and male duties, did much to reassert notions of separate spheres. The rhetoric of War spilled over into the rhetoric of gender. As many legal barriers for women disappeared, more powerful psychological barriers were erected. Return to normality meant most married women returned to a traditional familiy life as mothers and housewives.

This section will look at the ways different social groups perceived their environment rather than analysing their standard of living in a material sense. The question asked is to what extent the survival of traditional cultural practices had an overriding effect on the political climate of the interwar period. Wartime images of feminity and masculinity might have undermined the cause of women's liberation in spite of the introduction of their suffrage in 1918. In what way did workers' war experience at the home or the 'real' front shape their political outlook in the 1920s? This section, as the other two, tries to draw up a balance sheet and disentangle the elements of change and inertia. Which social and cultural structures proved resistant to change? In what way did war have an impact on attitudes and beliefs, values and cultural patterns, class and gender relations and their perception?

Jay Winter traces the shift from social to cultural history in recent years and simultaneously makes a vigorous plea in favour of that shift. Winter reminds the readers that while the history of social structure and social conflict concerned with the „dignity of defiance" had been fuelled not least by the debate over Marxism, the shift to cultural history of the Great War had been induced by the experience of the Vietnam War. Winter traces the shift to the cultural history of signs and symbols by comparing the 1964 BBC production *The Great War* with the 1996 radio broadcast on the same topic: „In the 1964 series there was no voice of an African soldier; no footage on shell shock; no female narrator; no voices of sculptors and painters; no women in uniform; no discussion of children, or famine, or a dozen other topics we placed at the heart of the matter ... Whereas diplomacy, strategy, political conflict, social mobilization and military events had long been a staple of historical presentations of the war, they had never been presented to the general public as cultural phenomena". After giving a short introduction to some of the major works of recent cultural history of the War, Winter proceeds to the development and insights of comparative history.

[12] S.K. Kent, 'Love and Death. War and Gender in Britain, 1914-1918', in F. Coetzee/M. Shevin-Coetzee (eds), Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War (Providence, 1995), 154. See also ead., Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain (Princeton, 1993).

Aribert Reimann examines the impact of the War on popular culture. He demonstrates that traditional practices and images were revived and strengthened, thus reconstructing a sense of British identity that was based on older, mostly conservative middle-class values. The discourse took up worries about national and „racial" decline that increasingly disturbed Britain's middle and upper classes from the 1890s onwards and reached an unprecedented climax during and after the Boer War. Under the extreme pressure of total warfare from 1914 onwards, traditional values were again applied. Among them the following stood out: Religious faith and mythology, the imagery of gentlemanly fair play as a universal guide not only in sports, male chivalry and female need of protection, the importance of physical strength for the fulfilment of „male duties" within reinforced patterns of traditional gender roles, romantic images of pre-industrial landscapes as symbols of national identity and peace, and finally the notion of the racially superior Anglo-Saxon. From this viewpoint the Great War acted as a strong conservative force reconstructing popular as well as political culture in a traditional fashion.

Marion Hausmann focuses on the debate about women's suffrage from 1906 to 1918. Her paper compares the debate on this issue before and during the War and in particular the objections against an extension of the franchise. Employment of women both in industry and in war-related government services - nursing, women's auxilliary corps - increased during the War and „die-hard anti-suffragists ... seemed to be fighting a lost cause". But Hausmann can prove from her in-depth analysis of British newspapers that „the introduction of women's suffrage did not go together with a change of the general attitude to women's position in society." The concept of separate spheres did persist and even gathered new vitality during the War.

3. Political Change and the Impact of War

Due to the pressing need of organising the war effort, the strategic framework for the principal political actors, the Liberal and the Conservative Party, changed immediately with the outbreak of War. „Any competent prosecution of the war ... depended on the government's ability to command the consent or at least the tolerance of all parties in the Commons ..."[13]

[13] S. Pedersen, 'From National Crisis to „National Crisis": British Politics, 1914-1931', JBS 33, 1994, 329.

While no general elections could be held and propaganda against the political opponent within Britain was severely restricted during the war, this very fact must not allow us to take the enforced internal political unity of wartime at face value. Although the coalition government aimed at the integration of British society for the sake of the war effort, it made the representation of labour by the Liberal Party, already precarious before 1914, even more problematic. A wave of unofficial strikes in May 1917 forced the coalition „to come to terms with the possibility of revolutionary change, and to set their minds to containing it at the same time as merely winning the struggle with the central powers".[14] Thus, the need for coordinated action to win the War seemed to channel all those groups not covered by this new agenda into a perceived extraparliamentary opposition. The decision of the coalition to perpetuate its existence after the War stems from this challenge and was secured not least by the timing of the General election in 1918, which helped to minimize the role of the soldiers poll. The Conservatives perceived the advent of peace as the real threat to political stability. The confrontation of the National Government and the labour class seemed to have become a legacy of the War. The expanded electorate helped the Conservatives to regain and sustain power. The political leadership of the Tories did not substantially change. „The older men hung on to the positions of power without being challenged until the thirties."[15] No major reform of the political system occured. Proportional representation was rejected by parliament in 1917. The ambitious reconstruction programme of building a „Land fit for heroes" failed in many of its central aspects because of the traditional instinct of keeping tax rises in check.

Neither did popular attitudes towards national authorities undergo fundamental change. Secret police observing workers in the 1920s reported with much relief that Royal visits were still very popular, football and horse races more attractive than socialism, and the Northcliffe press more widely read than the *Daily Herald*.[16] During the interwar years around 60 per cent of working class electors refused to vote Labour. The War had done a great deal to reassert patriotism, traditionalism and a sense of Britain's natural superiority. All these were genuinely conservative values.

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[14] J. Turner, British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict, 1915-1918 (1992), 191.

[15] C.L. Mowat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (1955), 9; A.F. Havighurst, Britain in Transition (Chicago, 1979), 136.

[16] C.J. Nottingham, 'Recasting Bourgeois Britain? The British State in the Years which Followed the First World War', IRSH 31, 1986, 246.

It is, however, only against the continental turmoil of revolution and constitutional breakdown that the fissures of Britain's political landscape during the first two decades of the twentieth century seem to disappear. For these decades saw the breakaway of Ireland, the rise of labour and profound changes in the relation of state, economy and civil society. To map these changes, both John Turner and Andreas Helle put them into perspective of developments under way in British politics from the 1880s.

John Turner provides both a narrative in depth of the momentous and dramatic political conflicts prior, during and after the War that remained the steady diet of contemporary political actors and an analysis of deeper currents of change. Even prior to the outbreak of war, both Liberals and Tories found themselves increasingly unable to negotiate a solution to the Home Rule problem. Britain seemed, at least to some observers, on the brink of civil war by 1914 and Prime Minister Asquith greeted the outbreak of War as a „great stroke of luck". To some extent, going to war saved British politicians from a number of hard choices the Irish question might have prompted them to answer. To some readers this concept might sound similiar to those arguments put forward to analyse German foreign policy under the notion of „Social Imperialism", i.e. aggressive foreign policy as an instrument to pacify domestic unrest.[17] And indeed, recent accounts of the „Crisis of Conservatism" in the immediate pre-war era do use this concept. But Turner's argument is more complex. He pinpoints changes in the relation of state, society and economy - with the state and its apparatus gaining influence - a process actually going on since the late nineteenth century.

Among the major developments, Turner names the continuing strength of the Conservative Party, the threat of Labour, and the first steps towards a welfare state. In each of these areas, his analysis of change is set against „the dynamic process of political change in the early twentieth century [during which] the first World War should not lightly be taken as a monocausal explanation of anything". While most of these shifts of relations must thus be classified as „inertial changes", in other respects one has to defy this category. The discovery of parts of the labour movement as an enemy within was indeed directly linked to and taking place during the War. From the Coal Strike in 1919, the government itself provided strikebreaking and the maintenance of essential supplies, not the employers: „The anti-labour activities of the British State, as distinct from those of any political party, became an unremarked part of the political system". On the whole, however,

[17] H.-U. Wehler, Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918 (Göttingen, 1980), 172-81.

the „increasing penetration of the state into the private sphere, the preoccupation of governments with delivering economic and social policies to deflect discontent, the blurring of boundaries between government and private agencies, and the growing defensiveness and secretiveness of British government in response to perceived threats" were not just impacts of the war, but part of the whole shifting configuration of political power in Britain during the years before, during and after the war".

Andreas Helle dwells on this general shift by concentrating on a single issue that to his mind was crucial in initiating it, i.e. the process of democratization from the 1880s. He traces a development of bureaucratic centralization - and asks whether that came about by a continuing transformation or a succession of crises. The competition of the political parties for the increasing electorate by means of state intervention led to a long-term transformation of the British state. That in turn caused a crisis of party politics and the growth of interest groups within the parties. Both Liberals and Tories were increasingly dependent on the support of special interest groups, i.e. Irish Nationalists, Labour or Unionists. This fragmentation of the party system made it increasingly difficult to achieve broad consensus within each political alliance while rebellions from party fringes became more likely.

Helle sees one solution to this problem in the approach of the Lloyd George National Coalition. Prompted by the impact of War, it sought to construct a national government, asserting a definition of being British as reflecting an opposition to organised labour. That is, Helle takes up the problems Turner discussed with reference to the challenge of War and places them in the context of party competition in an age of a mass electorate. While politicians like Gladstone or Roseberry had fought and won campaigns around a single issue believed to be relevant for the moral values of Victorian liberalism that both Tories and Liberals adhered to, that strategy had been proving increasingly divisive within each of the political parties, as both the Home Rule and the Tariff Reform issues showed for the Liberals and the Tories respectively. From the Conservative Party leader Salisbury onwards, parties attempted to organise their campaigns around central negative dichotomies - such as propertied against propertyless - and attempted to hold together their supporters by fear of what their political opponent might do rather than by allegiance to specific political programmes.

That change, Helle argues, came about with the demise of High Politics from the 1880s and the dismantling of Victorian liberalism as a common framework for both parties. This did not mean class politics as such, but a politicization of society. Thus, while the demise of Victorian Britain and its dominant political force, liberalism, since the late nineteenth century is a core theme of both papers, both see the War as only indirectly promoting the changes they cover.