

Question:-

What effects did World War One have on social classes?

This TMA question, like many before, poses a short, succinct question to which the answer is anything but. The first hurdle encountered is how we deal with what is meant by the term 'class'. There are also sub-divisions within a class, which may affect its status at the end of the war, such as religion, nationality, culture and gender, as well as whether it was on the victorious side, or not. The second deals with the many differing ideas on the nature and position of pre-war society.

The use of the term 'class' when used under Marxist conditions makes a distinction between a class 'in itself' and 'for itself'. "A class was only considered fully mature when it recognised its own interests, which were in conflict with those of other classes, and acted for itself in support of these interests." (Unit 3 page 106). Neither this view of the term 'class' or Weber's version, which separates 'class' and 'status' are used in unit. Instead, it is defined by Arthur Marwick as 'social structure' or 'social stratification'. In each of the European countries the collective populations were separated into social groups by differing "levels of wealth, power, freedom of various sorts, and by different patterns of living conditions and cultural behaviour." (Unit 3 page 105).

In order to ascertain the effects of world War one on social classes it is necessary to establish their positions pre-war to obtain the initial datum. Differing theories put forward by Mayer and Maier divide pre-war societies into either "bourgeoisie or

aristocratic old regime” (Unit 7-10 page 95). Maier’s theory was that after World War One when various “socialist and revolutionary elements threatened the existing

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order of ‘bourgeoisie’ Europe, governments and establishments rallied and adopted policies which skillfully maintained the essential features of pre-war society.”(Unit 7-10 page95). Alternatively, Mayer believed “that monarchies, aristocracies and landed welfare retained the greater part of political power and social influence.” (Unit 7-10 page 95). Both authors are giving us their idea of prewar society by stating, in Maier’s case, that a ‘bourgeoisie’ society was maintained, and in the case of Mayer that aristocratic society held onto its powerbase. I personally support the view that the aristocratic landowners still had the edge over the bourgeoisie in 1914 society, even though they may have begun to be infiltrated by the industrial revolution’s ‘new money’ businessmen and entrepreneurs. As emphasized in the unit, for both of these theses the term which can be used to best described the society is the most important factor and say are both based in theory, rather than observation or experiment, where class structure is seen “as an aspect, rather than a definition, of a society.” (Unit 7-10 page 95). I think that this is the most sensible way to explore the subject, as to use class as a definition seems to be too much of a generalization to be used on such a large section of people, who may be of the same class but divided by religion, nationality, politics or culture.

Whilst on the subject of generalizations, when considering Europe it is important to bear in mind the diversity of European society and classes. Some European

countries were still semi-feudal and relatively untouched by industrialization unlike Britain and Germany. The table in unit 3 page 107 gives five different classes,

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a)aristocracy or landed class/bourgeoisie/gentry b) Mittelstand, middle-class or lower middle-class c) peasants d) working-class e) riff-raff/underclass or residium.

However, all five classes were not necessarily present in all countries, some of the more advanced societies may not have had any ‘peasants’ or ‘riff-raff’, whereas these people may be in the majority in a country whose economy was based in agriculture. I will use the term ‘class’ in the same sense as it is used in the unit, i.e. defined as social structure or social stratification. In the pre-war society of 1914, the aristocratic landowners, or upper class, still retained a majority of the wealth, status and power. At this point, there are now only two other factors to consider with regard to the question posed. The first being, if there was a change in the social classes between 1914 and 1921, can this change be directly linked to the war? Secondly, what kind of change to the pre-war social structure took place, long-term, short-term, permanent or temporary? When in 1914 countries were plunged into the First World War the smooth, silent background mechanism, which maintained the status quo of the various societies, was immediately threatened from many directions. Instantly economic pressure came from the lack of trade with those who were now the enemy, and the source of some raw materials and was lost. Production was switched to the war effort, and shortages resulted in a different

economic direction, all of which had a varying effect on the social structures of the countries involved.

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I will now consider the effects of World War I on the different classes separately. I shall begin with the class that lost the most, in terms of “ political influence, economic position and social standing across Europe.” (Unit 7-10 page 98). The aristocrats. The reasons behind this group in society being the worst hit by the war has a lot to do with it being the smallest group in numbers. I have often heard that in this country 10% of the population own 90% of the wealth, behind wealth power inevitably follows. This, along with a fine aristocratic tradition of a career in the army, meant that a disproportionate number of the young aristocracy were lost in battle compared to those of other classes. “For mobilised men in *toto*, the death rate was 12%. For students from Oxford and Cambridge who served in the war it was, respectively 19 and 18%. For their members of the peerage it was 19%.” (Unit 7-10 page 99 from Wilson *The Myriad Faces Of War*, 1986). Of course, here we are talking about Britain but the trend was sustained across Europe. At its largest margin there was a difference of 7%, however, the larger numbers of those in the other classes, especially the working class, meant that the 12% loss could be overcome. The 19% loss amongst the members of the peerage represented a far more crippling blow. Another factor tied into this disproportionate death rate is that of death duties, which if similar to those levied in Britain, could have a dramatic

effect on aristocratic families. The result of the war for these aristocratic families, who if they lived in Britain, would emerge on the victorious side but could be left in the position of having lost the father and, or, sons and owe a substantial amount in

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death duties to the government. There would also be less acceptable suitors to court the daughters of these families, and continue the line. These factors would inevitably combine to form the plutocracy mentioned in the unit. This ‘watering down’ of the aristocratic classes came about mostly by marriage. The heirs from the ‘new money’, upper middle class, whose families, through industrialisation and wartime manufacturing had made vast fortunes became upwardly mobile, - the first ‘yuppies’. They began to intermix with the upper classes until they had infiltrated to such an extent that they became a new ‘lower upper class’, without the family lineage or great tracts of land, but with money and eligible bachelors.

At the peak of the aristocratic class, and therefore all classes, are the royalty. Their position at the end of the war was pivotal upon whether they were on the side of the victors or the vanquished. Many of the European kings lost everything purely because they countries were aligned with Germany’s cause. Of the victors, Russia’s tsar stands out as being on the victorious side but still losing all due to the countries revolution. Along with the loss of the tsar the whole of the Russian aristocracy was either killed or forced into exile, and its lands divided up and given to the proletariat. The Russian aristocracy were not the only members of their class to see their lands either eroded or disappear, as the formation of new states in

Europe at the end of the war and the movement of borders caused many of the landed gentry in these areas to now own land inhabited by peasants of a different nationality, or to lose it altogether. Elsewhere, land reforms promised by governments during wartime, were acted out which had a detrimental effect on the

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aristocrat's economic position. For example, in eastern and Central Europe it is thought that 60 million acres was transferred from the upper class to the peasants. (Figures from Roberts page 298).

If the upper classes appeared to do quite badly from the war, what of the middle classes? This group is the hardest to pinpoint as the blurring at its upper and lower limits was beginning to be as pronounced in 1919 as it is today, and the term middle class was defined differently across Europe. At the top end, the richest of the class had begun to infiltrate the upper class, as previously discussed, and at its lower end what exactly separates working class and middle class in employment terms is still unclear today. Although not to the same extent as the upper class, the middle class suffered from disproportionate war dead also, due to its members generally having smaller families than the lower classes. Economically, the same factors, that crippled the upper classes, were filtered down to the middle class, where the inflationary effects on savings were felt the hardest. The lack of spending power and disposable income affected the shopkeepers and craftsmen greatly, whilst the inflexible way in which the middle classes were paid i.e. salaried meant that they lagged behind both prices and the wages of the working class. In general, the wars effect on Europe's middle classes was degrading, however, even though post-war

inflation continued to affect savings the capitalist nature of the economy, throughout most of Europe, ensured that these effects were relatively short lived.

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If the upper echelons of society had suffered at the hands of the war what of the lower half of the table? Industrialisation again becomes a factor for the conditions of the working class, due to the nature of this first ‘total war’. The massive bombardments at the front lines required mass production of shells, armour, tanks and ammunition at home, this dependence on mass production made the industrial working classes across Europe very important in terms of their war effort. It is only common sense to look after those upon whom you are dependent, therefore by the end of the war the ‘lot’ of the industrial working classes was generally better than it was in 1914. It was not a major shift in their favour, more a realignment, “the proportion in poverty in 1924 was little more than half that in 1913”. (A.L.Bowley quoted by Trevor Wilson Unit 7-10 page 103). Using the example of a cake Bowley goes on to state that, “the better off were getting marginally less of it at the later date and the worst off marginally more”. (The dates being 1913 and 1924). As previously mentioned, in relation to the salaried working class, wages kept up with inflation due to trade union pressure which also brought about recognition of the eight-hour working day throughout most of Europe. France was the one notable exception to this upturn in fortunes for the working class. She was less industrialised than the other major European powers and still relied heavily on her

agricultural industry, which coupled with, fighting taking place within her own borders and a proportion of the country being occupied, meant that her industry became fractured and not one cohesive unit, giving its workers less influence, hence power.

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The table in unit 3 page 107, under peasants, lists farmers, smallholders, and land less labourers amongst others. I feel that the term 'peasant' is one left over from the time of feudal landowners and their status as a 'class' was becoming dated, as was the feudal system. A theory put forward by Norman Stone expresses the thought that in the first ten years of the 20th-century a great 'mobilisation' and reform of European peasants was underway, certainly this class, mainly based in agriculture, may have had its stimulation accelerated by the war. When the war came to an end the new national states formed in Central and Eastern Europe found that the majority of their population was now peasant based, therefore their needs and conditions needed to be considered when making policy on subjects such as land reform. Peasants as a class, I believe, were waning in numbers, due to industrialisation spreading throughout Europe; they were being assimilated into the working classes. The war, by its nature of 'totality' accelerated this process.

Industrialisation is the key to the changes in Western Europe. Mass production, accelerated by the war effort, raised the living standards and income of the largest class- the working class. It also made the products, produced by mass production, cheaper and therefore more affordable by the working and middle classes, who worked in, managed and owned the factories. So began the development of the

‘mass society’ where the “common mans appetites had become more important and politicians and businessmen alike had to cater for them or exploit them as never before.” (Unit 7-10 page 105). This transformation inevitable due to the nature of capitalism, was accelerated due to World War One, although those members of the

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aristocracy who retained most of their land and money managed, on the whole, to retain their power base, the war being a short, to medium term ‘blip’ in their fortunes. Eastern Europe saw larger post-war changes for both the upper and lower classes, but these were due more to the restructuring geographically of the region than reform. Russia was still in revolutionary turmoil at the end of the war, all members of all the classes were paying the price of revolution.

As we have seen the effects of World War One on social classes varied due to many different factors. Generally the upper classes did not come out of the war as well as the lower classes, however, because the fundamental basic structures of society remained in place they were able to recover their positions of power. In post war industrialised Europe the upper classes would never enjoy the same extent of power over the middle and working classes though, as their importance and power had become recognised due to the ‘total’ nature of the war and would continue as the seeds of the ‘mass society’ had been sown.

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