

To what Extent was the First World War the Main Reason for the Enfranchisement of Women in Britain?

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Introduction

The subject of women's rights has become an important topic of historic debate¹. In previous centuries, the topic of women's rights was largely neglected in political debates due to the social attitudes surrounding women at the time. Of course, there were exceptions to this, such as the politician W.H. Dickenson, who passionately advocated women's suffrage during the early 1900s². But historical discussion of this topic is thrown into sharper relief given current trends in some countries which have revoked women's rights, such as female suffrage and independence in Saudi Arabia, with other countries also revoking human rights in general, such as China's re-education camps in Xinjiang targeting the Uyghur minority in that region. This essay will examine and evaluate the main factors which influenced and caused the enfranchisement of women in Britain through the Representation of the People Act, passed on 6th February 1918³. This act allowed women over the age of 30 who had a property valued at over £5 a year, or who had a husband who had a property valued at over £5 a year, to vote in parliamentary elections.

There has been much historical debate regarding the most important factor in enfranchisement of women. Some historians, such as Arthur Marwick, argue that the First World War was the key factor in the enfranchisement of women⁴. This opinion largely stems from women's increased social standing during the war and the timing in which the act was passed. However, other historians, such as R. M. Hartwell, have drawn other conclusions, believing that the First World War was not the key factor⁵. The crucial elements were, instead, the long-term influence on the social structure of society caused by the industrial

¹ Osler, 'Still Hidden from History? The Representation of Women in Recently Published History Textbooks'.

² PUGH, 'POLITICIANS AND THE WOMAN'S VOTE 1914-1918'.

³ '1918 Representation of the People Act'.

⁴ Marwick, 'The Impact of the First World War on British Society'.

⁵ Hartwell, 'The Standard of Living'.

revolution, which in the early 1900s was considered to hinder the women's rights movement⁶, and the rise of socialism, an argument which was not widely explored until the 1990s due to stigma surrounding socialism's association with the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Additionally, the suffragette movement has become widely recognised as a key factor in the enfranchisement of women, a cause that was previously discredited by many commentators due to the militant strategies adopted by the movement.

Some historians, such as John D. Fair, believe that the First World War did play a vital role in mounting pressure on the British government so that the controversial problem could no longer be ignored. Fair believed that "women's work was having a powerful effect in the formation of public opinion in favour of extending franchise to women."⁷ However, other historians, such as Keith Curry Lance, disagree, believing that the suffragette movement was the most important factor in the enfranchisement of women. Lance believed that "the suffragettes did contribute decisively to the achievement of women's suffrage in Great Britain."⁸

The long-term effects of the industrial revolution and the rise of socialism were important in influencing the suffragette movement. However, these effects were largely ignored in pre-war Britain. It was the pressures brought about by the First World War, and women's contribution to the war effort, which heightened public awareness of women's rights. Set in the general context of the long-term effects of the industrial revolution and the rise of socialism, this provided a catalyst for the Representation of the People Act to be passed in

⁶ Berg, 'Women's Property and the Industrial Revolution'.

⁷ Fair, 'The Political Aspects of Women's Suffrage during the First World War'.

⁸ LANCE, 'STRATEGY CHOICES OF THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-18'.

February 1918. Therefore, this essay argues that to a great extent, the First World War was the main factor in the enfranchisement of women in Britain

Investigation

The First World War

The First World War largely influenced the enfranchisement of women through the economic opportunities created for women which shifted the perception of women's value. The economic success resulting from women's effort in the war provoked recognition in their significant contributions to upholding British society in roles previously deemed unfit for women⁹. This acknowledged value led to shifts in public opinion concerning women's role in society. The First World War required a large number of human resources to fight battles on the front line but also to support the battles from the home front. With millions of men away fighting on the front line, women quickly assumed the manufacturing and agricultural positions left vacant on the home front¹⁰. Women's opportunities to assist the war effort were at first limited to roles in the traditional areas of domestic, clerical and medical work¹¹. However, as demand for men increased with the war raging on, more opportunities for employment opened for women. Some women took roles in the paramilitary units in the front line, directly supporting the soldiers. By 1918, 1,495,000 women were directly replacing males in their traditional employment roles, with the number of women making up the labour force increasing from 26% in July 1914 to 36% in 1918¹². The new employment opportunities brought about greater independence, an increase in rights and equality for women through more equal wages, greater financial stability for women and a movement towards equality within society. Before the war, women's wages were just under half of

⁹ Pycroft, 'British Working Women and the First World War'.

¹⁰ 'Women in WWI'.

¹¹ 'Women in WWI'.

¹² Crew, 'Women's Wages in Britain and Australia During the First World War'.

men's, with no stability set in place. However, during the war, women's wages increased to 66% of men's wages with a minimum wage set of 5.5d¹³ an hour for adult women. Women could claim payment for heavy work, special skills or jobs involving risks¹⁴. This increased women's economic independence and security, further increasing their rights and social status. However, these statistics may not be wholly reliable as they do not include women's domestic employment, such as sowing, in the employment figure.

Women played a crucial role in the war effort in many different industries. In 1916, J.L. Gavin, the editor of the Observer newspaper, confessed that "men alone could never have maintained it [the State]" and that the state must be dependent on women also for the "progressive strength and vitality of its [the war effort] whole organisation."¹⁵ However, the Observer, being a left-wing newspaper, could have produced this editorial to support the Labour Party's policies, which advocated for women's suffrage, creating a narrative rather than a factual representation of the perceived success of female employment. Furthermore, this article was published during major battles, such as Verdun and the Somme, which caused heavy losses. The editorial could therefore also have been an effort to boost morale within Britain. Nevertheless, the undeniable success of increased female employment was becoming very evident by 1916, causing women's rights to be seriously considered in government and changing the public view of women's value, the public, for example, demanding that political prisoners for women's rights should be pardoned in 1916¹⁶.

Perhaps the most notable shift in attitude came from those who hitherto had not favoured the enfranchisement of women. Conservative and traditional country men, managers of railways

¹³ 'Money - The University of Nottingham'.

¹⁴ Crew, 'Women's Wages in Britain and Australia During the First World War'.

¹⁵ Fair, 'The Political Aspects of Women's Suffrage during the First World War'.

¹⁶ Niland, 'From the Archives'.

and other industrial concerns, had traditionally believed the importance of the role of women to be the maintenance of the home and family to create a shelter from the anxieties of modern life for men, believing that the world of politics and commerce would be corrupting to the fragile female¹⁷. However, as reported by Dame Millicent Fawcett, these individuals joined “in the chorus which was now loudly chanting the praises of women’s work.”¹⁸ Dame Millicent Fawcett was the leader of the women’s suffrage movement in Britain for fifty years, so it was clearly in her interests to promote the message that there had been a positive shift in social attitudes. Nevertheless, *The Times*, which had previously opposed the cause of women’s equality prior to the war, also published a favourable article that referred to women’s work as “one of the surprises and triumphs of this tremendous upheaval.”¹⁹ Such significant declarations of support and admiration for women from such sources showed the significant impact women’s perseverance in work had made in swaying public opinion. As John D. Fair states, by 1916 “women’s work was having a powerful effect in the formation of public opinion in favour of extending the franchise to women.”²⁰ Arthur Marwick reinforces this in his view that the total war aspect of the First World War involved the mobilisation of previously marginalised groups and led to lasting social change, with women in the forefront²¹.

The First World War confronted parliament with the urgency of granting the vote to soldiers and sailors on active duty. This re-evaluation of the voting register in conjunction with shifting social attitudes expanded the government’s attention to consider the enfranchisement of women. There was early friction in 1915 and 1916 between the Asquith government and the House of Commons over the nature and extent of the proposed registration reform. The

¹⁷ Fair, ‘The Political Aspects of Women’s Suffrage during the First World War’.

¹⁸ Fawcett, Millicent. *The Women's Victory - and After*. Cambridge University Press. 1920.

¹⁹ *The Times*, March 8, 1916, p. 7.

²⁰ Fair, ‘The Political Aspects of Women’s Suffrage during the First World War’.

²¹ Marwick, Arthur. *Total War and Social Change*. The Macmillan Press LTD. 1988.

government abdicated responsibility to the House of Commons, as the government was unable to agree on either a broad or narrow treatment of electoral reform. This led to the creation of a cross-party conference, chaired by the Speaker, James William Lowther, who acknowledged “the burning question of women’s suffrage”²². Lowther guided the conference towards compromises to achieve greater unanimity and to make the proposal more attractive when it eventually reached parliament²³. On 27th January 1917, Lowther submitted the eventual resolution of the conference to the new government under Lloyd George. The government was cautious that some of the controversial elements of the resolution could provoke active resistance within the Tory Party and so submitted the resolution for approval of the House of Commons instead of immediately translating the report into a government bill. Contrary to the apprehensions of the government, the resolution passed 343 to 64 in the House of Commons²⁴, going on to be passed as an official government bill in The Representation of the People Act on February 6th 1918²⁵, extending the suffrage to women over the age of 30 who owned property with an annual value of £5, or had husbands who did so. The impact of women’s contributions in the First World War had shifted their social status as ‘even those who had been convinced anti-feminists before [the First World War] realised that women were part of the nation’²⁶.²⁷ The role of Speaker Lowther had proved crucial. Lowther was a conservative British politician who had previously been opposed to women’s suffrage, shown by his ruling on the 1913 Franchise Bill, but was swayed by the tremendous war effort displayed by women during the First World War²⁸. His ability to guide a cross-section of parliament to enact constitutional change added some fourteen million persons to the electorate.”²⁹

²² Fair, ‘The Political Aspects of Women’s Suffrage during the First World War’.

²³ Fair.

²⁴ Fair.

²⁵ ‘1918 Representation of the People Act’.

²⁶ Strachey, ‘The Women’s Movement in Great Britain. A Short Summary of This Rise, Methods and Victories’.

²⁷ George, ‘From the Archive, 22 August 1918’.

²⁸ PUGH, ‘POLITICIANS AND THE WOMAN’S VOTE 1914–1918’.

²⁹ Fair, ‘The Political Aspects of Women’s Suffrage during the First World War’.

Socialism

However, some historians believe that the First World War was not the main factor in the enfranchisement of women. Historians such as, Jane Rendall, Marie Kennedy and Chris Tilly, consider socialism to be the most important factor in influencing the suffrage of women. Marie Kennedy, a professor of urban planning, and Chris Tilly, a professor of economic and social development, believe that “only socialism could carry out the full Liberation of women.”³⁰ Their studies compare socialist feminism in Britain, France and Germany and the discrepancies that occurred with the extension of the suffrage to women in the different countries. Jane Rendall states that there was a clear “relationship between the women’s movement in Britain and the politics on the left”³¹. None of these historians take into account the drastic shift in social attitude caused by the war efforts from women and overstate the extent of the relationship between feminism and socialism before the First World War. In Britain, for instance, the Labour Party did not agree with the suffrage of women on the same terms as men, disagreeing with the feminist movements who believed that the terms should be equal.

Some historians have discredited the First World War’s role in the suffrage of women altogether, arguing that enfranchisement would have been extended to women regardless of the First World War. Whilst this is counterfactual history, and is therefore impossible to prove, this was true for Sweden, which remained neutral during the war yet approved the suffrage of women in 1919 and confirmed this in 1921. However, other countries, such as Switzerland, which also remained neutral in the war, did not grant women the vote until 1971. Following the war, many countries forced women to give their jobs back to the men

³⁰ Kennedy and Tilly, ‘Socialism, Feminism and the Stillbirth of Socialist Feminism in Europe, 1890-1920’.

³¹ Rendall, J. (1991). ‘Uneven Developments’: Women’s History, Feminist History and Gender History in Great Britain

who had returned, with governments' post-war training programmes for women focusing on domestic instruction³². France fought during the First World War yet only granted women the vote in 1944. Yet, a women's suffrage bill was passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 1919, showing the change in public attitude. Nevertheless, the bill did not pass as it was blocked by the senate which continued to do this each time it was reintroduced, even with a majority of 495 to 0 in 1936. The fact remains that social attitudes in Britain drastically changed during the war, becoming far more accepting of women's rising status and independence.

It is probably fairer to say that the First World War united and removed hostilities that the various feminist and socialist ideologies felt towards each other by displaying women's crucial war effort which shifted social attitudes. The British socialist movement was diverse and decentralized³³, having two clear centres of the Labour Party and Social Democratic Foundation (SDF). There was an overlap between these groups and the suffrage movement as there was a large working-class faction of the suffrage movement, characterized by male and female members of trade unions, cooperatives and members of the SDF and the Parliamentary Labour Party. Additionally, British politics became characterized by the large overlap between the mainstream socialists, the Labour party, and the mainstream women's movement, the National Union of Women's Suffrage who worked together formally before the war proposing arguments to the governments concerning women's rights. For example, women's suffrage was debated in British politics as early as 1866 through the union of socialism and feminism which was able to pass, among other reforms, the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, allowing women to keep their income, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1886³⁴, which helped to create protection and regulation in prostitution.

³² Pyecroft, 'British Working Women and the First World War'.

³³ Kennedy and Tilly, 'Socialism, Feminism and the Stillbirth of Socialist Feminism in Europe, 1890-1920'.

³⁴ McGrath, 'The Married Women's Property Act 1882 and Its Relevance Today'.

However, the feminist movements did not believe that regulation was enough, proposing that women in prostitution also be offered economic alternatives, illustrating the rifts within the union of ideologies. It was the shifting social attitudes and increased political pressure resulting from women's war efforts that forced Labour to compromise and advocate for women's suffrage on terms more equal than they had wanted. However, Labour was not in power during the years of the war and this, therefore, would have limited socialism's direct influence on the enfranchisement of women.

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution was the origin of the social change that emerged in the early 19th century. Industrialisation brought better wages and higher standards of living. This led to the formation of female consciousness, demanding the female rights to education and jobs, and would eventually lead to the formation of the suffragist and the suffragette movements³⁵. Additionally, the industrial revolution was one of the first opportunities for women to have equality within their families. The new jobs for both men and women created more buying power, which improved equality and balance within families as women were the chief buyers due to their knowledge of where money needed to be spent in the family³⁶. However, much of this equality and change in social attitudes was only present during the early part of the Industrial Revolution, transitioning back to patriarchal beliefs alongside the social transition of many families from the working-class to the middle-class. This transition consolidated social ideologies from the middle-class which were patriarchal and limited the female world to domesticity³⁷. Moreover, the social ideologies also separated women from authority and power, internally within the family, and externally. Working-class women were hindered in their expression and development of views, not only by patriarchal male workers, but also by

³⁵ TILLY.

³⁶ Berg, 'Women's Property and the Industrial Revolution'.

³⁷ TILLY, 'Women, Women's History, and the Industrial Revolution'.

structural factors such as limited alternative job opportunities from domesticity. Additionally, women had fewer capital resources than men which increased their economic reliance, and therefore submission, to men. The shift in social attitudes therefore stagnated and, to some extent, reversed. If there had been steady progression in cultural change during the Industrial Revolution, women's enfranchisement would likely have occurred earlier. It was the First World War that once again challenged the social status of women and crucially boosted the cultural attitudes that had begun to shift from the early industrial revolution.

Social Movements

The social movements of the suffragists and the suffragettes were significant factors in the enfranchisement of women as they succeeded in making votes for women a serious political issue and increased public support for women's suffrage³⁸. Beginning in 1866, the suffragists peacefully protested social appeals with the limited support of socialist labour. By the turn of the century, the suffragists had failed to win public support, with the government ignoring many of their requests. This caused Emmeline Pankhurst, who had previously been a suffragist and had recognised the necessity for a change in strategy to progress women's suffrage, to form the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) on October 10th, 1903³⁹. Pankhurst developed a national constituency and adopted a militant strategy that ultimately hindered the overall success of the movement as it caused anger among the public, shown by the anti-suffragette group set up in 1908⁴⁰. However, Keith Curry Lance believes that "the suffragettes did contribute decisively to the achievement of women's suffrage in Great Britain."⁴¹ The proposed Conciliation Bill in 1910, which would have granted some women

³⁸ LANCE, 'STRATEGY CHOICES OF THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-18'.

³⁹ 'Women's Social and Political Union | British Organization | Britannica'.

⁴⁰ 'The Anti-Suffragist | Description & Facts | Britannica'.

⁴¹ LANCE, 'STRATEGY CHOICES OF THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-18'.

the vote, was a response to the successful militant campaigns. These strategies gained some public sympathy, recruited new members and embarrassed the government⁴². Following the proposition of the Conciliation Bill, the suffragettes declared a truce on militant action so that parliament would be able to proceed with female emancipation without appearing to succumb to the suffragette's militancy. However, the bill was abandoned due to the upcoming general election that year as politicians considered the enfranchisement of women to be an unnecessary risk to the balance of power in the House of Commons. With the government seemingly not taking women's suffrage seriously, the WSPU retaliated by resuming militant action in the form of violent attacks on private and public property. This led the government to turn to overt suppression, driving the organisation underground. The suffragettes were successful in increasing public sympathy for the movement, with a medical journal condemning the force feeding of suffragettes as 'torture' in 1912⁴³. However, it was the First World War that provided a boost to the suffragettes fortunes. The outbreak of war led to a second truce between the government and the suffragettes with the movement redirected, by Pankhurst, into supporting the war effort. Not only public opinion, but also political opinion on women's suffrage was significantly influenced by this action, meaning that by 1917 virtually all opposition to women's suffrage had evaporated⁴⁴.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the First World War was the most important factor in the enfranchisement of women as it heightened the impact of other underlying factors. The impact of the Industrial Revolution, changing social attitudes and the demand for women's rights were revived and heightened due to the widespread change in social attitudes during the First World War. The

⁴² LANCE, 'STRATEGY CHOICES OF THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-18'.

⁴³ Niland, 'From the Archives'.

⁴⁴ LANCE, 'STRATEGY CHOICES OF THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-18'.

impact of the rise of socialism and feminism was heightened during the war ,which helped to unite both ideologies and focus their goals, beginning with women’s suffrage, rather than socialism’s goal of universal adult suffrage. Additionally, the impact of the social movements of the suffragettes and the suffragists was heightened during the First World War. Public support was massively increased for women’s suffrage during the war and opposition to the movement was eroded by the outstanding war effort by women, which forced politicians to seriously consider and fight for women’s suffrage. The militant action undertaken by the suffragettes prior to the war alienated parliamentary support as the suffragettes became branded as traitors, but the First World War provided a unique opportunity for women to demonstrate the advantages and justice of female emancipation. Therefore, to a great extent the First World War was the main factor in the enfranchisement of women in Britain.

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