

# THE IMPACT OF TOTAL WAR ON HINCKLEY

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The shift to total war, when mobilisation for the war effort became the overwhelming policy objective, imposed unprecedented levels of deprivation on the civilian population. Rather surprisingly, Britain, in general, and Hinckley in particular, did not suffer the social unrest which undermined the commitment to the war efforts in other countries. This article investigates why Hinckley, a market town in Leicestershire, continued to prosper during the war, and also the crucially important role played by the town's leaders in enabling its inhabitants to avoid the deprivation and social unrest which became increasingly evident during the latter stages of the First World War.

The outbreak of military hostilities in August 1914 was not only widely regarded as a conflict which would be of short duration – over by Christmas – but, more importantly, simply fought on a greater scale than previous conflicts. By 1917, not only Britain but also the other countries involved in the conflict, it had become a total war the complete mobilisation of all resources, including policy and social systems, in an effort to bring it to a successful conclusion. Both German and Russian civilian populations were forced to endure acute deprivations, which contributed to the ultimate downfall of their respective war efforts. In Russia, initially in Petrograd, riots led to the demise of the Tsarist regime and the withdrawal of the country from the war.<sup>1</sup> Whilst in Germany, food shortages led to the ‘turnip winter’ of 1917 which effectively helped to undermine commitment to the war effort, and contribute to the country's defeat.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, Britain, in general, was relatively unscathed, although there were significant differences between one urban area and another in the way they were affected by the war. Local studies of particular cities during the war tend, however, to focus more on the mobilisation and experiences of volunteers and conscripts, rather than how the community dealt with the challenges of total war.<sup>3</sup>

This article seeks to redress this omission by exploring its impact on Hinckley, a market town in Leicestershire, which managed to avoid the social unrest that arose in many industrial areas. In particular, it will explore the following themes and their relationship with Hinckley. These are: civilian leadership; a lowering of living standards, exacerbated by a rise in inflation; loss of life and prisoners-of-war; food and fuel rationing; and a breakdown in law and order. Additionally, it includes

<sup>1</sup> B. A. Engel, ‘Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I’, *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997), p. 697.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, B. *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War 1 Berlin*, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; M. Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Hapsburg Empire: Total Life and Everyday Life in World War I* (CUP, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, S. Lomax, *The Home Front, Sheffield in the First World War* (Pen and Sword, 2014).

comparisons with the way the commitment to total war affected the morale of the German population.

Britain entered the First World War with a certainty of victory, and a policy of *laissez-faire* which saw commercial enterprise able to conduct affairs free from government intervention. In explaining the initial reluctance of the government it is tempting to argue that this reflected Britain's doctrinaire commitment to this philosophy. However, as David French has shown, the reasons are more complex. Prior to the First World War the prevailing view was that as the country would be protected by Dreadnoughts, there would be minimal disruption to the country's trading relationships and, in turn, the impact on food supplies would only be slight.<sup>4</sup> As the 1905 Royal Commission on Food confirmed, the expectation was that in any naval war both sides would adhere strictly to the principles outlined by Admiral Mahan, a United States Naval Officer.<sup>5</sup> He argued persuasively that the combatants would not attack opponent merchant ships until they had annihilated the battle fleet of their enemies.<sup>6</sup> The report noted Britain's strategic weakness in her heavy reliance on imports for food and raw materials, and that the country would experience starvation and mass unemployment within a few weeks of war if the Royal Navy could not keep the seas open.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, it was considered that such an outcome for Britain was completely unthinkable, and if it occurred Britain would have lost the war, so there was no need to be concerned about the country's dependence on imported food. The British were bolstered in this belief by the support of its Empire and dominions, which, it was assumed, would be able to continue providing goods and services to Britain.

However, Asquith's Liberal government's commitment to 'business as usual' was unable to cope with the problems arising from the indiscriminate enlistment of men into the Armed Forces, and the shortage of munitions on the Western Front. In an effort to maximise government support he formed a coalition in May 1915, but this government was unsuccessful and unpopular as the war continued to go badly. The press, in particular, blamed Asquith's procrastination for the deadlock on the battlefields. This led to David Lloyd George, another Liberal, forming a coalition government in December 1916, and being appointed Prime Minister of the United Kingdom by King George V. From the outset, Lloyd George assumed total control in a way unthinkable to Asquith or his predecessors.<sup>8</sup> He appointed a five-man War Cabinet to take major strategic decisions. Lloyd George created a new Cabinet Secretariat, based in nearby Whitehall, to act as a central organising machine.<sup>9</sup>

According to conventional wisdom as Fig. 2 shows, it was Lloyd George's ability to harness together successfully the interests of labour and capital, which

<sup>4</sup> D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning*, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Supply of Food and Raw materials in time of war (1905) p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (1890) and *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892).

<sup>7</sup> *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (1890) and *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892).

<sup>8</sup> M. Fry, 'Political Change in Britain, August 1914 to December 1916: Lloyd George Replaces Asquith: The Issues Underlying the Drama.' *Historical Journal* 31. (1988), pp. 609–27.

<sup>9</sup> K. M. Burk, (ed.), *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government 1914–1918* (1982).

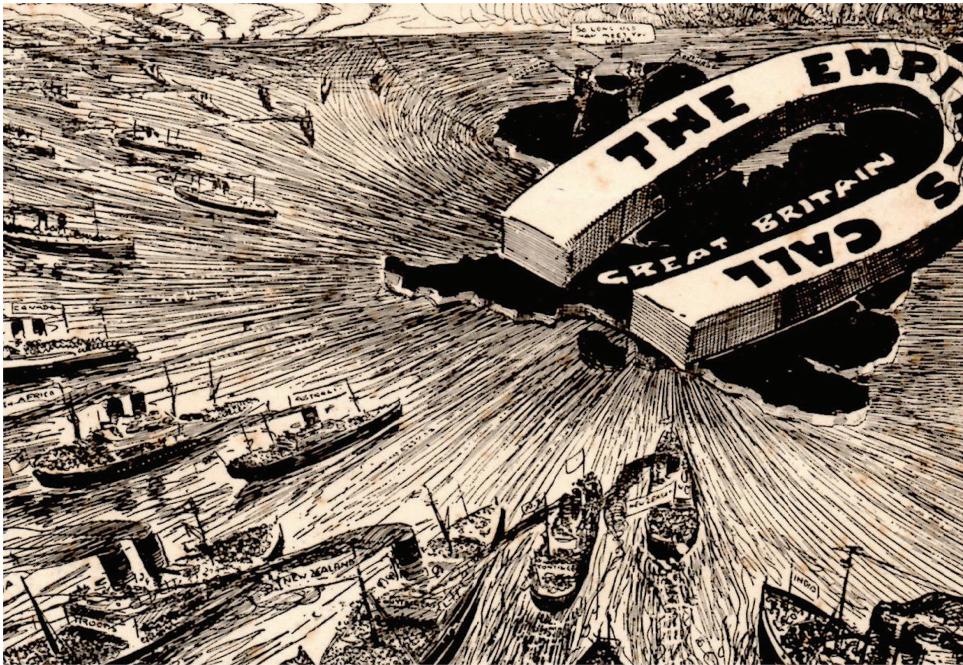


Fig. 1. An early patriotic postcard depicting the Empire hurrying to the aid of the Mother Country (from the private collection of R. D. King).

was instrumental in enabling the country to emerge victorious in the First World War. Contemporaries hailed him as the man who had won the war, and in 1918 the coalition won a huge majority. Praise of this degree fails to take into account the extent to which placing the economy and society on a total war footing led to unrest. By 1917, high prices, shortages, and social deprivation, which impacted mainly on the working classes, began to take its toll on commitment to the war effort. As Pitt noted, 'by the end of 1917 the drab burdens which war had imposed upon the British at home had to a great extent damped their natural amiability'...but... 'in the end they did not doubt they would win the war'.<sup>10</sup> Pitt points out that there was an irrationality in the British optimistic view that was based on the fact that they had not suffered invasion for a thousand years.<sup>11</sup> He offered no explanation as to how this trait was sustained, particularly at a local level.

<sup>10</sup> B. Pitt, *The Last Act*, (1918), p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> B. Pitt, *The Last Act*, (1918), p. 35–6.





**DELIVERING THE GOODS.**

Fig. 2. Punch cartoon showing Lloyd George 'Delivering the goods'.

**Industrial prosperity**

In terms of investigating the extent to which Hinckley was affected by the challenges imposed by total war, it is important to stress that the town itself was in an advantageous position during the conflict, thanks to its prosperity – which was based on the thriving hosiery and footwear industries. Prior to the war, the town's boot and shoe industries had concentrated on the production of hard-wearing cloth, and heavy boots suitable for work people. Although it was not recognised at the time the divergence of local manufactured goods was to be of great significance. The nearby Nottingham area specialised in the manufacture of higher quality cloths for gentlemen's suits and women's evening gowns, and the Northampton area specialised in hand-crafted boots and shoes for the gentry and aristocracy. They were, therefore, slow to adjust their manufacturing methods to meet the rapidly

Year	Sales £	Profit/loss £	Comments
1914 (half year)	56,801	+1,255	
1915	72,054	+2,040 (first 6 months)	
1916	78,611	+5,534	
1917	111,957	+11,125	
1918 (half year)	65,497	+7,012*	Excess profit duty
1919	154,265	+12,261	

\* Payment of Excess Profit Duty of £3,480.

Table 1. Sales and profits of the Leicester Co-Operative Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Society Ltd 1914–19.

increasing military requirements demanded by the British army for strong, hard-wearing material used in the manufacture of military uniforms, webbing belts and boots.<sup>12</sup> Hinckley factories were in a prime position to meet this wartime requirement and were awarded financially advantageous government contracts. Hinckley also had a large dyeing facility to support the hosiery producers, along with a large coal-producing capacity from Leicestershire coalfields, to power the factory machines. On the outbreak of war the factory owners were in positions of authority, and were well-placed to influence the course of the town's actions during the conflict.

Both the manufacturers and the shopfloor workers found themselves in an increasing advantageous position as the war dragged on. It is difficult to obtain accurate profitability figures for companies due to industrial confidentiality. However, an insight into the footwear industry can be gained from a study of the Leicester Co-Operative Boot and Shoe manufacturing facility, as the result of the imposition of an excess profit duty. This was a tax introduced to counter the outcry that whilst men were fighting and dying, others, such as manufacturers of war materials, were making huge profits at their *perceived* expense. The duty was designed to tax the difference in profits made in a 'normal' trading year and during war time, and was originally set at 50 per cent in 1915, rising to 80 per cent of profits in 1918.

Prosperity also extended towards the hosiery shopfloor workers by means of cost-of-living increases, thinly disguised as war bonuses. In April 1915 the Hinckley and District Hosiery Union joined with the Trimmers' Union and the Warehouseman's Association to present to the Manufacturers' Association a demand for a 20 per cent war bonus for both male and female workers. This demand was as a result of wages not keeping pace with rising prices, and resulted in a payment of 7.5 per cent for men and 5 per cent for women. The post-1916 period saw four war bonuses paid to local hosiery workers and demonstrates why wartime inflation did not impact on the Hinckley workforce to the same extent as in other industrial centres.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *The Hinckley Town Guide*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> R. Gurnham, *The Hosiery Unions 1776–1976*, p. 76.

Date of award	Bonus awarded
18 April 1917	2½d in the 1s to men earning up to 60s and women earning up to 30s
3 December 1917	3¾d in the 1s to men earning up to 50s and to women earning up to 25s
19 June 1918	5d in the 1s on all wages, to both men and women
7 December 1918	6½d in the 1s on all wages, to both men and women

Table 2. War bonuses obtained by the Hosiery Unions in 1917 and 1918.

A crucial point is that it was only union members who were guaranteed these extra benefits. The ready availability of war-time contracts, allied to the wartime bonuses, saw an unprecedented growth in local trade union membership. Gurnham, quoting from the *Hinckley Union Minutes* of 4 February 1918, records that John Bailey, the Union Secretary, was able to inform the Hinckley Annual meeting that with two war bonuses awarded in the same year (1917), ‘the Hinckley Union had grown more rapidly during 1917 than in any previous year in the union’s history’.<sup>14</sup>

Hinckley’s continued prosperity was in stark contrast to that of Blackburn, which relied as much on the cotton manufacturing trade as Hinckley did on hosiery manufacturing. When the historical phases of Hinckley are applied to Blackburn, there are distinct similarities. During the nineteenth century influential citizens came to the fore and like the Hinckley factory owners, their Blackburn counterparts built large mansions as a display of ostentatious consumption. There was a direct comparison between them in that factory owners in both towns built far enough from town to escape its squalor and fumes, but near enough to be able to deal with business.<sup>15</sup> Hinckley and Blackburn now transferred hosiery and cotton manufacturing from peacetime to a wartime footing. The Blackburn cotton mills, unlike the Hinckley hosiery factories, could not adapt their machinery to large-scale government production, as the looms, designed for the Indian trade, could only manufacture coarse cotton cloths and were not easily converted for alternative use.<sup>16</sup> This failure to adapt resulted in widespread redundancies and subsistence allowances being paid by the government-appointed Cotton Control. Blackburn did receive some contracts for tents, bandages and aeroplane fabric, but these were relatively insubstantial. In August 1918 a general strike was called throughout the cotton manufacturing areas. The workers were out for a week, but were then forced to return to work with no improvements to their wages. Wilson quotes from the subsequent tribunal, held to investigate the stoppage which found ‘relatively to the cost of living the operatives are substantially worse off than before the war’.<sup>17</sup> This was in contrast to the Hinckley hosiery operatives who received cost-of-living bonuses during the conflict. These production environments were to continue throughout the war – desperately poor for the Lancashire cotton workers, and financially productive for the South Leicestershire hosiery workers. Hinckley had

<sup>14</sup> R. Gurnham, *The Hosiery Unions 1776–1976*, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> [www.cottontown.org](http://www.cottontown.org)

<sup>16</sup> [www.cottontown.org](http://www.cottontown.org)

<sup>17</sup> T. Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, p. 657.

practised a *de facto* system of voluntary rationing from the early days of the war in an effort to minimise the effect of food shortages; this was not the case in Blackburn. Here ‘there was a rise in food prices and housewives began stockpiling provisions, in case of future shortages’.<sup>18</sup> Marwick argues that food was not necessarily in short supply in the large conurbations – it was a lack of money that prevented the poorer classes paying for the food that was available.<sup>19</sup> As inflation rose, the only other possible strain on food supplies to the larger cities was, as in the case of London, the lack of railway transport.

### LEADERSHIP

In terms of explaining the ability of Hinckley to avoid the deprivation and unrest which characterised many other areas, credit must be given to the civil leadership and actions of influential citizens and aid societies. These were instrumental in providing support to the less fortunate townspeople and for strengthening the resolve of the local population. At a town council meeting held on 24 July 1917, the following resolution was adopted: ‘That on this, the third Anniversary of the Declaration of a righteous war, this meeting of the Hinckley Urban District Council records its inflexible determination to continue to a victorious end the struggle in the maintenance of those ideals of Liberty and Justice, which are the common and sacred cause of the Allies.’<sup>20</sup> The Central Committee of National Patriotic Organizations in London was to be notified of its ratification. There was willingness, almost amounting to a duty, to provide a firm direction to the wartime activities of the town. This continued to be accomplished through the Hinckley Urban District Council in conjunction with the District Relief Committee or one of its sub-committees..

Nationally, the challenge was particularly acute in terms of ensuring that the country was adequately fed. By early 1917, the Commissioners on Industrial Unrest reported that rising prices, exacerbated by the faulty distribution of available supplies, were sources of dangerous discontent. Indeed, in the spring the House of Commons was informed that the country only had three or possibly four weeks of supply of food available.<sup>21</sup> As a result, each local authority was required to establish a Food Control Committee (FCC) in order to safeguard the interests of consumers.<sup>22</sup>

In Hinckley the combined efforts of the FCC, along with the support of the other civic groups, was instrumental in promoting a voluntary system of coal and food rationing, initiatives which were particularly effective in preventing the unrest that prevailed in many other areas. As research by Karen Hunt has shown, unrest usually originated out of the experience of having to live in densely populated neighbourhoods, with the conflict being sparked by isolated examples of profiteering by butchers, bakers and other food retailers dealing in the essentials of everyday

<sup>18</sup> [www.cottontown.org](http://www.cottontown.org)

<sup>19</sup> A. Marwick, *The Deluge*, p. 239.

<sup>20</sup> The Leicester County Record Office File number DE3640/21. Hinckley Council Minutes, 3 April 1917–1 April 1919.

<sup>21</sup> W. Beveridge, *British Food Control* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 2; J. Burnett, *Plenty and Want* (London, 1966), p. 218.

<sup>22</sup> *The Times*, 30 August 1917.

life.<sup>23</sup> Monitoring and regulating what the food retailers in Hinckley were doing, and stressing the need for voluntary restraint on behalf of both retailers and consumers, enabled Hinckley to avoid food riots over the high price of potatoes, which took place in a number of other areas, including several towns in West Cumberland in early 1917, and the riots over high meat prices which prevailed in Spitalfields in the summer of 1917.<sup>24</sup>

### War savings, and the Hinckley War Savings Committees

Nothing highlights the affluence of Hinckley more than the War Savings' collections. These were an example of a national initiative that required implementation at the local level. Marwick states that British governments had sought to raise money to meet the costs of war by borrowing from the public, but this was in itself divisive, as only those with unused capital were able to make finance available.<sup>25</sup> War savings certificates first appeared in early 1916, achieving their greatest success in the last two years of the war. This was democracy in action as the certificates were available to all, to a maximum holding of 500 units. Conservatively put, the total investments for Hinckley were between £800,000 (£16,000,000 in today's money) and £900,000 (£18,000,000 in today's money). Additionally, the committee established 27 Savings Associations.<sup>26</sup> These figures show clearly that wealth was inherent within the town. This was not surprising, as the Hinckley hosiers' and footwear manufacturers' were in receipt of substantial government contracts, which in turn cascaded down to the shopfloor workers. What the final sums of money do not show is the distribution of that wealth. Whilst the manufacturers and workers were enjoying full order books and employment, there were others, such as war widows, who still remained in need of charitable relief. In Hinckley this was at least partly addressed by local initiatives, in particular the Ladies Visiting Committee, who found themselves in straightened circumstances. As the war ground on relentlessly, the burden of leadership continued to fall on the influential citizens serving on both the Town Council and the District Relief Committee to alleviate the worse effects of the distress.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> K. Hunt, 'The Politics of Food and Women's Neighbourhood Activism in First World War Britain', *International Labor and Working Class History* 77 (2010), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> A. Coles, 'The Moral Economy of the Crowd: Some Twentieth Century Food Riots', *Journal of British Studies* 18 (1978), pp. 157–76, J. Bush, *Behind the Lines: East London Labour 1914–1919*, (London 1984) pp. 81–2.

<sup>25</sup> A. Marwick, *The Deluge (Second Ed.)*, p. 169.

<sup>26</sup> Leicestershire Records Office, File Number 1961. In a hand written report, dated 12 May 1922, Mr. G. E. S. Coxhead, Honorary Secretary of the Hinckley Savings Committee, detailed its activities to Mr. A. S. Atkins. In a covering letter Mr. Coxhead stated that he had omitted certain details, for example no one individual Saving Association had been mentioned by name, as he was presenting a report on Hinckley as a whole. The report was his own work and was unauthenticated by a fellow member of the Savings Committee. He would, however, be submitting a copy of the report to them in the future, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> J. Martin and R. King, 'The Emergence and Functioning of District Relief Committees during World War One: a Case Study of Hinckley', *LAHS* 90 (2016).



### Prisoners-of-war

Morale was boosted by the entry of the United States into the war on 6 April 1917, with the advance of battlefield technology it would bring – foremost amongst which was the tank with its ability to break into well-entrenched German positions. These were coupled with the effectiveness of the Royal Naval distant blockade, which began to have a significant impact on Germany. In response, Germany launched a final massive assault on the Western Front in the Spring of 1918, causing the number of Hinckley prisoners to rise to 90. However, the high proportion of reserved occupations in the hosiery industry, which was producing uniform cloth and webbing belts for the military, meant that conscription was kept to the very minimum.<sup>28</sup> Wilson aptly sums up the situation when he described the plight of the internees as being ‘near-starvation in a semi-starving nation’.<sup>29</sup> This comment underlines the effectiveness of the Royal Naval blockade, in that the German nation was in little better physical condition than the prisoners-of-war. The local solution was to establish a sub-committee charged with raising the sum of £2,000 (equivalent to £165,000 in 2017), and once again the townspeople rallied round to help their own men. There was a ‘Prisoner of War Week’ held in July 1917, supported by manufacturers, shopkeepers and private individuals. Children gave up their sugar ration and donated it to the sub-committee for re-sale. A fête held on 13 July raised £500. The village of Burbage, adjacent to Hinckley, made its own contribution with a garden fete that raised £37.

### Law and order

Pitt argues that a breakdown in law and order could result from the loss of men to war and their replacement by women at work, who would have customarily enforced discipline within the home.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, civil infringements such as drunkenness could become a problem. It is contended that a primary cause of the breakdown of law and order could be the lack of employment, causing widespread dissatisfaction that could lead to strikes and industrial unrest. Before the war, Hinckley’s industries had experienced industrial unrest, which had led to the implementation of a formal disputes procedures, consisting of the establishment of arbitration boards to settle industrial disputes – leading to generally good relationships between management and workers. The commencement of war in that year was to bring significant improvements to local prosperity such as government contracts for military uniforms and boots, with work for women replacing men who were conscripted. Along with local coal miners, another reserved occupation, affluence was afforded to the majority of the town’s population who were working long hours with good pay; these were not the customary breeding grounds for industrial strikes and general dissatisfaction. This is borne out by a survey of the *Hinckley Times*, which does not

<sup>28</sup> See J. Martin and R. King, ‘The Derby Scheme and the Hinckley Local Military Service Tribunal’ *LAHS* 91 (2017).

<sup>29</sup> T. Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, p. 559.

<sup>30</sup> B. Pitt, *The Last Act*, p. 36.

reveal evidence of a breakdown in law within the community. Typical of the reports is the following from the edition of February 1917: ‘His Honour Judge Moore Cann was only occupied for a few minutes at Hinckley County Court on Monday. There were only sixteen cases, and several of these were dealt with by the Registrar (Mr. S.H.Pilgrim) His Honour went through the remaining judgement summonses in a few minutes. There were no cases of a contentious nature.’<sup>31</sup> This was not a local Magistrates Court, but a County Court judge hearing cases. Whilst these are not itemised in detail, the very banality of the article gives the lie to any widespread disaffection.

### War weariness in Germany

The foregoing analysis begs the question as to what effect the war was having on the German population as a whole. General histories of the Great War tend to focus on the entry of the United States of America into the conflict in 1917, bringing with it large numbers of fresh troops to the Western Front. The Royal Navy, the largest in the world, stopped and searched neutral vessels of all countries to prevent war material, and contraband, reaching Germany and its allies, and preventing food reaching its destination.

The German military forces would soon understand that their relatives in their homeland would be suffering shortages and economic instability. In Germany, the winter of 1916–17, later known as the ‘Turnip Winter’, was exceptionally cold years in wartime Germany. The shortage of agricultural labour, compounded by a wet autumn, led to a disastrous potato harvest, and much of the produce that was shipped to German cities being affected by the cold. The loss of the potato crop forced the German population to subsist on turnips as an alternative. This effectively helped to undermine commitment to the war effort and contribute to the country’s defeat.<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

It is tempting, although rather disingenuous, to attribute Britain’s ability to cope with the impact of total war to Lloyd George’s coalition government. Such an interpretation pays scant regard to the experiences of different towns. In the case of Hinckley, the town derived immense benefits from the wartime prosperity of the local hosiery and footwear industries. These industries shielded Hinckley from the worst of war weariness resulting from engaging in total war. That they suffered the loss of their menfolk to military action is undeniable, but the town largely escaped the distress suffered by other localities. This case study demonstrates that to a large extent important government contracts ensured reserved occupation status. Strong leadership, secure employment, and war bonuses which offset rising prices, all went

<sup>31</sup> *Hinckley Time*, 10 February 1917.

<sup>32</sup> B. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War 1 Berlin* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); M. Healy, *Vienna, and the Fall of the Hapsburg Empire: Total Life and Everyday Life in World War I* (CUP, 2004).

towards preventing noticeable civilian unrest. The introduction of voluntary food rationing, and coal rationing, further demonstrate the impact of strong leadership. This situation was considerably more successful than in many other towns in Britain, and certainly those in Germany, where social unrest and disillusionment with the war were major causes of the Armistice of 1918.

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