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Source: *Population Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Nov., 1977), pp. 449-466

Published by: Population Investigation Committee

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2173368>

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# Britain's 'Lost Generation' of the First World War

J. M. WINTER

The demographic and social consequences of the appallingly heavy casualties of the First World War have been a subject of conjecture virtually since the outbreak of war over 60 years ago. In the early months of the conflict, a number of British observers contended that the incidence of war-related mortality varied by class.<sup>1</sup> They believed that men of higher social status were more likely to lose their lives in the war than were men of lower social status. The war was thus 'dysgenic' in that it stripped this country of the most 'intelligent', virile, and creative members of the younger generation.<sup>2</sup> Although every war death was wasteful, the deaths of thousands of educated and privileged young men brought about what was called a 'Lost Generation' of future politicians, philosophers, and poets who never had the chance to fulfil their promise.<sup>3</sup>

The obvious class bias of the proponents of this thesis leads one to suspect that it is either false or exaggerated. The issues raised, though, seem to be amenable to statistical analysis. But despite the frequency with which the image of a 'Lost Generation' has been evoked to help to account for the shortcomings of the inter-war generation,<sup>4</sup> no one has assessed the underlying assertion that war casualties were unevenly distributed in the British population in a way that was unfavourable to the well-to-do and the highly educated. This paper deals with this subject.

Part of the reason why such a study has not been carried out before is that we have not had a reliable picture of male mortality at military ages for the nation as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Without such aggregate figures, it is clearly impossible to compare the relative contribution of different social groups to the war effort. In the first part of this paper we present the general data against which the idea of a 'Lost Generation' of the privileged will be tested.

In the second part we examine the three contentions which were used to support the 'Lost Generation' thesis. The first is that the well-to-do and the privileged were ideologically predisposed to join the forces early in the war and were financially able to do so. Other social groups, even if they shared the same zeal to serve, may have feared the consequences to dependants of long separation on active military service. Some may not have been fit enough to join up. Others were forbidden or restrained because they were needed on the home front. This part of the argument will be examined in terms of enlistment statistics.

Support for the idea that there was a 'Lost Generation' of elites was derived also from the view that once in uniform, a man's social class largely determined the risk he faced of becoming a casualty. This was so for three reasons. First, many working-class men were physically unfit for combat duty and were shunted into clerical and support jobs. With the notable exception of staff officers, elites were rarely excluded from the front lines. Secondly, casualty rates among officers were higher than for men in the ranks. Thirdly, the most dangerous rank in the army – the subaltern – was recruited from current pupils or old boys from the public schools and

<sup>1</sup> L. Darwin, 'On the Statistical Enquiries Needed After the War in Connection with Eugenics', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 79 (1916), pp. 159–75. Lord Bryce, 'Facts and Questions Before Us', *Hibbert Journal*, 14 (1915), pp. 65–78, esp. p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> J. Keay, 'War and the Burden of Insanity', *Journal of Mental Science*, 64 (1918), pp. 325–344, esp. p. 326. C. W. Saleeby, 'The Longest Price of War', *Manchester Statistical Society Proceedings* (1914–15), pp. 1–12.

<sup>3</sup> R. Pound, *The Lost Generation* (London, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> V. Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London, 1934). E. L. Woodward, *Short Journey* (London, 1942), p. 121. D. Portway, *Militant Don* (London, 1964), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the problems involved, and an attempt to solve them, see J. M. Winter, 'Some Aspects of the Demographic Consequences of the First World War in Britain', *Population Studies*, 30, 3 (1976), pp. 539–552.

ancient universities: the finishing schools of the propertied classes. Thus, the disproportionate share of casualties suffered by elites was a consequence of the social selection of the officer corps. The military statistics on casualties by rank and the war service records of the public schools and universities have been used to throw light on these questions.

#### I. MILITARY PARTICIPATION IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Over 6,000,000 men served in the British Army, Navy, and RFC/RAF during the First World War. The ratio of men in each of the three service arms was 17:2:1, as Table 1 illustrates. Nothing could demonstrate better the unrealistic nature of Britain's pre-war strategic planning, which assumed that her contribution to a European war would be primarily naval.

Roughly 58 per cent of all Scotsmen, Welshmen, and Englishmen aged 15–49 in 1911 served in the war. Irish participation was not as extensive (15 per cent of the same age group). But in the light of the pre-war clash over Home Rule for Ireland, it is surprising that over 100,000 men volunteered to serve Britain's King and Country. Conscription at ages 18–41 came into force in Britain in 1916, but was never enforced in Ireland. Some Irishmen working in Britain were called up in the last year of the war, but in relatively small numbers (Table 2).

Approximately one man in four of eligible age volunteered in England and Wales and the proportion was the same in Scotland (Table 3). Conscription was more effective in England and Wales than in Scotland, where a large proportion of the population was concentrated in the industrial centres of the south and employed in munitions production and other reserved occupations. Throughout the country, compulsion was less effective than free choice in drawing men into the services.

The 6,000,000 men who served formed the population at risk during the First World War. In the 1914–18 conflict, casualties were almost entirely confined to members of the Armed Services, or the Merchant Navy. Civilian losses, though, ought not to be underestimated. There were over 15,000 deaths to crews and passengers of merchant or fishing vessels and 1,266 civilian fatalities of air and sea bombardment. It was Britain's singular good fortune that of all European combatants, only her population was out of the line of fire. If we accept the definition of population at risk as those in uniform, then 40 per cent of those at risk suffered casualties. One in eight was killed. More than one in four was wounded (Table 4). Casualty rates in the Army were much higher than in the Navy or RAF/RFC where, respectively, one in 16 and one in 50 were killed. The proportion wounded in the Army was ten times higher than that in either of the other two services.

TABLE 1. *British and Irish military participation in the First World War: nationality of servicemen and branch of service*

| Branch of service                      | Country            |           |          | Total     |
|--|--------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
|  | England and Wales* | Scotland† | Ireland‡ |           |
| Regular Army and Territorial Forces    | 4,489,146          | 585,171   | 140,845  | 5,215,162 |
| Royal Navy and Allied Services         | 550,604            | 72,219    | 17,414   | 640,237   |
| Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force | 250,411            | 32,845    | 7,919    | 291,175   |
| All Services                           | 5,290,161          | 690,235   | 166,178  | 6,146,574 |

Sources: Tables 1–4, 7–9: *General Annual Report of the British Army 1913–1919*, Cmd 1193 (1921) XX. H. Newbolt, *History of the Great War, Naval Operations* (1931), pp. 433–434. H. A. Jones, *History of the Great War. The War in the Air* (1937), appen. 35–36.

\* 86 per cent of all men who enlisted were from England and Wales. Hence, 86 per cent of the totals for Territorial Forces, Royal Navy, and Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force have been designated as English or Welsh.  
 † The ratio of Scots to Irish recruited into the British Army was 4:1. Hence of the 14 per cent from those two countries, 11.28 per cent and 2.72 per cent have been designated as Scots and Irish, respectively. Irish statistics may be distorted since nationality and place of enlistment may have been used interchangeably.

TABLE 2. *Recruitment for the British Army 1914-1918*

| Country  | Recruited by War Office<br>4 Aug. 1914-31 Oct. 1917 |   | Recruited by Ministry<br>of National Service<br>1 Nov. 1917-11 Nov. 1918 | Total     |
|----------|---|---|--|-----------|
|          | Voluntary   | Groups and classes                              |  |           |
| England  | 2,092,242   | 1,478,250                                       | 435,666  | 4,006,158 |
| Wales    | 145,255   | 90,236  | 37,433   | 272,924   |
| Scotland | 320,589   | 173,055   | 63,974   | 557,618   |
| Ireland  | 117,063   | 5,004   | 12,135   | 134,202   |
| Total    | 2,675,149   | 1,746,545                                       | 549,208  | 4,970,902 |
|          |   | Regimental Strength of British Army 1 July 1914 |  | 244,260   |
|          |   | Total Who Served in British Army 1914-18        |  | 5,215,162 |

TABLE 3. *Proportion of male population who served in the British Army 1914-1918*

| Country           | Men volunteering as percentage<br>of male population aged 15-49<br>in 1911 | Men conscripted as percentage<br>of male population aged 15-49<br>in 1911 | Total |
|-------------------|--|---|-------|
| England and Wales | 24.2   | 22.1  | 46.2  |
| Scotland          | 26.9   | 14.6  | 41.4  |
| Ireland           | 10.7   | 1.6   | 12.3  |

TABLE 4. *Casualties suffered by British Forces in the First World War*

| Branch of service | Served    | Killed  | % Killed | Wounded   | % Wounded | POWs    | % POWs | Total     | % Casualties |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|----------|-----------|-----------|---------|--------|-----------|--------------|
| Army              | 5,215,162 | 673,375 | 12.9     | 1,643,469 | 31.5      | 154,308 | 3.0    | 2,471,152 | 47.4         |
| Navy              | 640,237   | 43,244  | 6.8      | 25,323    | 4.0       | 5,722   | 0.9    | 74,289    | 11.6         |
| RFC/RAF           | 291,175   | 6,166   | 2.1      | 7,245     | 2.5       | 3,212   | 1.1    | 16,623    | 5.7          |
| Total             | 6,146,574 | 722,782 | 11.8     | 1,676,037 | 27.3      | 163,242 | 2.7    | 2,562,064 | 41.7         |

TABLE 5. *Age distribution of men from England and Wales who served and who died in British Forces during the First World War*

| Age   | 1911 Census<br>population | Total served* | Total killed† | % Killed<br>of Served | % Killed of<br>1911 Pop. |
|-------|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 15-19 | 1,644,895                 | 494,101       | 80,248        | 16.2                  | 4.9                      |
| 20-24 | 1,502,652                 | 1,617,202     | 240,496       | 14.9                  | 16.0                     |
| 25-29 | 1,455,783                 | 1,380,732     | 139,361       | 10.1                  | 9.6                      |
| 30-34 | 1,375,872                 | 863,883       | 92,618        | 10.7                  | 6.7                      |
| 35-39 | 1,261,432                 | 539,596       | 52,711        | 9.8                   | 4.2                      |
| 40-44 | 1,075,076                 | 291,488       | 14,857        | 5.1                   | 1.4                      |
| 45-49 | 926,102                   | 93,107        | 1,305         | 1.4                   | 0.1                      |
| Total | 9,241,812                 | 5,280,109     | 621,596       | 11.8                  | 6.7                      |

Sources: *Census of England and Wales, 1911*, Summary Tables, Table 29. *Decennial Supplement to the Census of England and Wales, 1921*, Vol. III, Table 1. J. M. Winter, 'Some aspects of the demographic consequences of the First World War in Britain', *Population Studies*, 30, p. 551 (November 1976).

\* Average for 1915-18 'non-civilian' population.

† 86 per cent of total deaths for Great Britain and Ireland, according to the Prudential's estimate of age structure of war losses.

These aggregate figures can serve as a basis for putting British war losses into perspective. Taking men killed as a percentage of men mobilized as a measure, loss of life in the British forces appears to have been slightly higher than in the German or Austrian armies, similar to that in the Italian, and lower than that in the French, where one in six was lost. The British figures are much lower than those for losses suffered by the Romanian Army, which lost one in three, and in the Serbian Army, in which over 40 per cent of the men mobilized were killed.<sup>6</sup>

If we use men killed as a percentage of all males aged 15–49 as an index, Serbia and Romania still appear as the countries most severely affected by the war. France's loss of one in eight in this age group was greater than that suffered by Germany or Austria-Hungary (10 per cent) and nearly twice that of Britain (6.7 per cent).<sup>7</sup> The disturbance to nuptiality caused by the depletion of male cohorts during the war<sup>8</sup> was bound to be much greater on the Continent than in Britain.

Finally, it is possible to describe the age structure of the men who served and who were killed (Table 5). Taking figures for England and Wales only, 70 per cent of men who served were under age 30, as were 74 per cent of the men who died on active military service. Men under age 20 were most likely to be killed (more than one in six). At higher ages, the chance of a man in uniform being killed was one in seven at ages 20–24, and one in seventy at ages 45–49.

## II. MILITARY SERVICE AND SOCIAL CLASS

We can now proceed to consider the extent to which there were class variations in length of service. There is no doubt that the sons of the 'best' families rushed to the colours in August 1914. Harold Macmillan, aged 20 at the outbreak of the war, fresh from Eton and Oxford, claimed that the 'major anxiety' of his peers 'was by hook or by crook not to miss' the war. Despite an attack of appendicitis just before the war had been declared, he passed his physical examination and entered the King's Royal Rifle Corps.<sup>9</sup> Sir Oswald Mosley, of Winchester and Sandhurst, echoed Macmillan's words. 'Our one great fear', he wrote of his generation, 'was that the war would be over before we got there'.<sup>10</sup> It was not and he served with distinction in the Royal Flying Corps.

The question is whether the rest of the country followed the example set by the elite. In the first months of the war, the answer seems to have been in the affirmative. The Board of Trade estimated that roughly 750,000 men, or a little over ten per cent of the industrial work force joined up during the first two months of the war.<sup>11</sup> Proportionately more recruits were provided by the Welsh and Scots than by the English, although regional variation was slight. The lowest enlistment rates were registered in the East Midlands and in Yorkshire, and overall, among textile and clothing workers.<sup>12</sup> But overall, the deluge of working-class recruits surprised even the most patriotic observers.

Some accounts describe the rush to enlist from mining communities which, it was claimed, provided 'a larger proportion' of volunteers 'than any other industry'. One commentator remarked that miners 'seem to have been moved to remarkable enthusiasm for the war and they enlisted by the thousands after hearing stories of the British fighting and the destruction of Belgian towns'. As a result, 'in the first days of enlistment, in several streets of miners'

<sup>6</sup> L. Hersch, 'La mortalité causée par la guerre mondiale', *Metron*, 5 (1925), pp. 101–55. B. Uralnis, *Wars and Population* (Moscow, 1971), p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> Hersch, *loc. cit.* in footnote 6, p. 131. See also Table 4 below.

<sup>8</sup> L. Henry, 'Perturbations de la nuptialité résultant de la guerre 1914–1918', *Population*, 20 (1966), pp. 272–332.

<sup>9</sup> H. Macmillan, *The Winds of Change 1914–1939* (London, 1966), pp. 59–60.

<sup>10</sup> O. Mosley, *My Life* (London, 1968), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Report of the Board of Trade on the State of Employment in the United Kingdom in October 1914*, Cmd 7703 (1914–16) XXIV, pp. 28–39. Parliamentary Papers are cited in this form throughout.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

houses in the towns of Tyldesley and Atherton only one or two young men were left'.<sup>13</sup> That may well have been true, but there is evidence that the miners' patriotic response was matched throughout most of British industry. The War Emergency Workers' National Committee estimated that 115,000 members of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain volunteered at the outbreak of the war.<sup>14</sup> This represents 15 per cent of the membership of the Union<sup>15</sup> and does suggest a greater tendency to enlist among organized workers. But the enlistment figures for the mining industry, if non-union miners are also included, are not significantly higher than the national average.

One salient feature of the early months of the war was a high rate of enlistment by skilled workers in trades that were not threatened by unemployment. Workers in engineering, chemicals, and iron and steel volunteered by the thousand. By February 1915, another five per cent of the industrial work force were in uniform.<sup>16</sup> Once more, the textile and clothing trades – by now booming with government orders for the new armies – lagged slightly behind. In contrast, 17 per cent of coal miners, 18 per cent of cycle and motor workers, and over 19 per cent of electrical engineering workers had left employment for military service during the first six months of the war.<sup>17</sup> Some unemployed workers had an economic motive for enlistment, but most men volunteered out of conviction and not out of necessity.

A host of local factors undoubtedly played an important part in regulating enlistment. The particular military traditions of a town or region, the public statements of employers, trade unionists, politicians and clergy, the efficiency and persuasiveness of local recruiting officers: all affected recruitment among industrial workers, many of whom formed 'pals' battalions, in which local traditions and loyalties were maintained in the army.

A similar pattern of enlistment can be seen among agricultural workers.<sup>18</sup> By February 1915, 15.6 per cent of the work force on the land had volunteered. Particularly high figures were registered in the South Western labour exchange district, 'since considerable numbers have been attracted in Wiltshire to the various military camps in Salisbury Plain'.<sup>19</sup> Farmers experienced difficulty in replacing the men who joined up, and consequently, the regular work force had declined by 12.4 per cent by January 1915.<sup>20</sup> Such a deficit was not a cause for immediate concern, though, since winter work required fewer hands. But the imbalance between the requirements of the army and home production, which proved so catastrophic to the German war effort, became evident in British agriculture very early in the war. The exception was Ireland, where farm labourers proved reluctant to enlist.<sup>21</sup>

Finding replacements was easier in industry than in agriculture. The Board of Trade found very little difference in enlistment rates between large and small firms, but larger firms had less trouble in making up the deficit, at the expense, it would seem, of the smaller. 'One of the tendencies of the war', concluded the Board of Trade Report in December 1914, 'is clearly to transfer a more than normal proportion of the nation's business to large concerns'.<sup>22</sup> Employers in small firms would have had a very good reason to persuade their remaining workers to resist any temptation to join up.

<sup>13</sup> W. Jett Lauck, 'Coal Mining', *British Industrial Experience during the War*, Pt. V, p. 1170. United States Congress (56th), 1917, Document no. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Lauck, 'Manufacturing Industries', *British Industrial Experience*, Pt. III, p. 946. On mining and enlistment, see *Report of the Departmental Committee Appointed to Inquire into Conditions Prevailing in the Coal Mining Industry Due to the War*, Cmd 7939 (1914-16) XXVIII.

<sup>15</sup> R. Page Arnot, *Miners: Years of Struggle* (London, 1960), p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Board of Trade on the State of Employment in the United Kingdom in February 1915*, Cmd 7850 (1914-16), XXI, Appendix 1, pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Report on Recruiting in Ireland*, Cmd 8186 (1914-16) XXXIX.

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Board of Trade on the State of Employment in the United Kingdom in December 1914*, Cmd 7755 (1914-16) XXIV, p. 9.

Elsewhere an anti-enlistment policy was in operation. With the full consent of the War Office, railway companies made every effort to convince their men to stay on the job. Here again, though, about ten per cent of the work force volunteered early in the war.<sup>23</sup> By 1915, the figure had risen to 17 per cent which was still only 60 per cent of the rate for all industrial workers.

The highest enlistment rates among employees in the early months of the conflict were registered by men in commercial and clerical occupations.<sup>24</sup> This trend continued throughout 1915 and early 1916. The pattern is illustrated in Table 6. Whereas 29 per cent of industrial workers had volunteered by February 1916, over 40 per cent of the men employed in banking, finance, or commerce, in the professions – accountants, architects, solicitors, advertising agents, estate agents; and men at work in the entertainment trades – in hotels, pubs, theatres, music halls, cinemas, and restaurants, had joined up. The Ministry of Reconstruction suggested that this surplus enlistment was related to the greater flexibility of distributive or service trades as compared with industrial trades. It was argued that the former could manage with fewer workers, and that it was easier to put a woman teller in a bank than to introduce

TABLE 6. *Sectoral distribution for the British Forces: August 1914–February 1916*

|                             | Men employed<br>July 1914<br>(000) | Men who<br>joined Forces<br>(000) | Percentage of<br>pre-war labour<br>force volunteering |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| I. Industry                 | 6,165                              | 1,743                             | 28.3  |
| Of which mines and quarries | 1,266                              | 313                               | 24.7  |
| II. Agriculture             | 920                                | 259                               | 28.2  |
| III. Transport              | 1,041                              | 233                               | 22.4  |
| IV. Finance and Commerce    | 1,249                              | 501                               | 40.1  |
| V. Professions              | 144                                | 60                                | 41.7  |
| VI. Entertainment           | 177                                | 74                                | 41.8  |
| VII. Central Government     | 311                                | 85                                | 27.3  |
| VIII. Local Government      | 477                                | 126                               | 26.4  |
| All Occupations             | 10,484                             | 3,081                             | 29.4  |

Source: P.R.O. *Reconstruction Papers* 1/832. April 1916

a woman metal worker to the assembly line of a munitions factory. More convincingly, the committee pointed out that employers in all trades did not enlist in large numbers 'owing to differences in age distribution and of business responsibility'.<sup>25</sup> In most cases, therefore, they could keep the business going even when short of staff.

Whatever the reason, the trend shown in Table 6 must have meant that men engaged in commercial or distributive trades were in uniform and at risk for longer periods and in relatively larger numbers than were industrial workers, transport workers or agricultural workers. Conscription did not alter this pattern. By July 1917, 58 per cent of all men employed in commerce were in uniform. In no other occupational group did such a large proportion of men volunteer.<sup>26</sup> Higher casualties among white-collar workers, whatever their rank, were therefore inevitable.

Another reason why industrial workers may have suffered fewer war casualties, relative to non-industrial workers or self-employed men was, ironically, the appallingly low standards

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Board of Trade *op. cit.* in footnote 16, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Public Record Office. *Reconstruction Papers* 1/832, Report on Employment in April 1916, p. 20. Some bias may have been introduced into the statistics by their concentration on large firms.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Reconstruction *2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th Interim Reports of the (Civil) War Workers Committee*, Cmd 9192 (1918), XIV, p. 655. It must be noted that the high turnover of employment in mobile sectors, such as entertainment, in peacetime, makes the comparison with less mobile sectors problematic.

of health in many urban working-class districts. Their poor physical state probably saved the lives of many industrial workers, who did not reach the minimum physical standard for military service, let alone for combat duty. Bank clerks or estate agents, not to mention the wealthy, were better-fed, healthier, and more able to stand the rigours of army life. Their physical condition made them good candidates for combat and meant that their chances of survival were smaller than those of their less privileged contemporaries. The exceptions were miners and 'outdoor workers', whose regular work involved physical exertion as demanding as those required of soldiers during the war.<sup>27</sup>

The social selection of recruits is apparent from the reports of the National Service Medical Boards which examined two and a half million men during the last year of the war. The men were placed in four categories: Grade I, men without any disability who were 'capable of enduring physical exertion'; Grade II, men with a partial disability, but who nevertheless could 'endure considerable physical exertion not involving real strain'; Grade III, men with 'marked physical disabilities' who were fit for clerical work, but not able to undergo physical exertion; and Grade IV, men 'totally and permanently unfit for any military service'. Of all men examined, 36 per cent were placed in Grade I; 22.5 per cent in Grade II; and 41.4 per cent in Grades III and IV.<sup>28</sup> In other words, over one million men examined in 1917-18 were unfit for combat duty. Men placed in Grades III and IV were ineligible for foreign service. Those not rejected outright performed garrison duty or did sedentary work in Britain.

The report's authors rejected the view that so many fit men had volunteered by 1917 that those examined in 1917-18 were 'the dregs of a population exhausted by three years of war'.<sup>29</sup> They pointed out that many of the earlier recruits were passed fit after only the most cursory examination. Later, many were invalided out. Furthermore, by the last year of the war, the demand for new soldiers was so intense that healthy workers previously exempted, such as miners, were called up. In addition, the new class of 18-year-olds became available for military service. 'Whatever its faults', claimed its authors, 'the Report represents the only survey of the physical fitness of the male population of military age in the history of our country. . . .'<sup>30</sup>

Occupational and regional comparisons were made on the basis of a standard of fitness devised by Professor Arthur Keith. Using data on the health of 1,000 Cambridge students as those of a 'healthy' population, he deduced that an optimum distribution of 1,000 recruits would be as follows: Grade I - 700; Grade II - 200; Grade III - 75; Grade IV - 25. In other words, 70 per cent of all recruits in this ideal population would be fit for combat. If the two and a half million men examined by the military service boards had come from such a 'healthy' population, 70 per cent, or about 1,700,000 should have been placed in Grade I. The actual figure was half that number.<sup>31</sup>

In industrial areas, the proportions in Grades III and IV were considerably higher than in the total population. In Leeds, 'seven out of ten are *hors de combat* before they even shoulder a musket'.<sup>32</sup> In Stockport, the medical boards report that 'the average man here is, for military purposes, an old man before he reaches the age of forty'.<sup>33</sup> The figures for Leicester tell the same story.<sup>34</sup> Consider the 210 18-year-olds from Lancashire and Cheshire who were placed in Grade IV. Their *average* measurements were: height, 4 ft 9 in; weight, 84 lbs; chest girth, 30 in.<sup>35</sup> London and Leeds, areas in which there were large concentrations of Russian Jews, showed the worst fitness record in Britain.<sup>36</sup>

The report offered various explanations of the poor showing of certain occupational

<sup>27</sup> M. Scharlieb, 'A Terrible Census', *Nineteenth Century and After*, 88 (1920), p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of National Service, 1917-1919. *Report upon the Physical Examination of Men of Military Age by National Service Medical Boards from November 1st. 1917-October 31st 1918*, Vol. 1, Cmd 504 (1919) XXVI.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105, replete with anti-semitic remarks.



groups. The metal worker was unhealthy 'doubtless because he works in a superheated atmosphere and has to stand for long hours upon hot surfaces. These men often age prematurely. . . .'<sup>37</sup> Men in the textile trades showed the effects of cramped and poorly ventilated workshop conditions.<sup>38</sup> More generally, the report established a correlation between high female employment rates and a high incidence of children's deficiency diseases, the effects of which marked men for life. The author of the North West report blamed mothers' ignorance of even the rudiments of nutrition and child care for that region's poor showing.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in the Scottish report the 'housing, feeding and social surroundings' in which working-class children grew up were regarded as the cause of their poor health in later years.<sup>40</sup>

The major exception to this pattern of a low standard of health among the working class were the miners. The miner 'produced an excellent type of recruit, hard, well-developed, and muscular. . . . Though rather undersized and apt to be anaemic, he makes rapid improvement under the favourable conditions of training, feeding, and fresh air provided in the Army'.<sup>41</sup> Among Welsh miners, those of the Western region were the healthiest. In the Eastern region, where conditions were not as good as in the Western seams, the record was less impressive. The reason given for this difference was that good wages in the Eastern pits attracted manual workers from Bristol and other towns. Such men showed the characteristically urban lower physical profile.<sup>42</sup>

The report concluded on a patriotic note. 'We may well be surprised that with human material of such physique, it was found possible to create the armies which overthrew the Germans, and proved invincible in every theatre of war'. 'The spirit of the race', the authors suggested, 'alone made this possible'.<sup>43</sup> But, whatever were the metaphysical reasons for victory, it is clear that the British war effort was hampered significantly by the 'conditions of life created by our industrial development'.<sup>44</sup>

For our purposes, such conditions meant that the majority of working-class men were, by the medical standards of the day, unfit to shoulder the burdens of trench warfare. Consequently, despite heavy enlistment among all sections of society early in the war, casualty rates among workers were bound to be lower than among middle-class men or social elites. We have seen how proportions enlisting in the first two years of the war varied from around 30 per cent for manual workers to over 40 per cent for non-manual workers. No similar figures exist for elites, but there is every indication that rates of enlistment among them were higher still. We may conclude, therefore, that a man's class position had a direct bearing on the length of time he spent in the armed forces and on whether he was likely to see combat. Higher social status carried with it increased risks of becoming a casualty during the Great War.

### III. CASUALTIES AND RANK

The second part of the argument for a 'Lost Generation' asserts that a man's chances of survival were affected not only by the length of time he served but, perhaps more importantly, by his rank. This proposition can be tested by an analysis of the social composition of the army and RFC/RAF officer corps and of the statistics on casualties suffered by army officers and men in the ranks.

The War Office demobilization statistics, make it possible to be fairly precise about the occupational structure of the officer corps. Approximately one-third of all officers demobilized from the British Army and the RFC/RAF were professional men, students or teachers. Put another way, 44 per cent of all professional men and 38 per cent of all students and teachers who served in the army were officers. Engineering workers, nine per cent of whom served as officers, provided the sole exception to this pattern. The same correlation between occupation and rank

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

appears in the RAF demobilization statistics.<sup>45</sup> The exclusion of working-class men from the officer corps is apparent from the ambiguous, yet complimentary remark of the Chief Inspector of Mines, R. A. R. Redmayne, that in terms of patriotism, 'no section of the community did better and few as well' as the miners, 'none supplied a better type of soldier and non-commissioned officer'.<sup>46</sup> As one would expect, the class structure of British society was mirrored in the social composition of the officer corps.

If it can be shown that there was a significant difference in casualty rates between officers and men, it will be possible to conclude that the social bias of rank in large part determined the social distribution of casualties. How can we break down the army casualty figures? Official documents distribute casualties among service arms and by theatre of operation. Thus, we know that the infantry was the largest part of the army and, proportionately, suffered the heaviest casualties. Whereas roughly two out of every three men in the army served in the infantry, more than four of every five men killed were infantrymen.<sup>47</sup> 96 per cent of the men who died in the infantry did not have commissions. Even the most elitist observer could not deny that over 450,000 infantrymen who served in the ranks were killed.

We also know that the deadliest theatre of operations was, as expected, France and Flanders, where for every nine men sent out, five were killed, wounded or missing. This figure is well above that for any other combat zone.<sup>48</sup> But what we do not know and cannot determine from the official military statistics are the numbers of corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, etc., and the number of casualties they suffered. The only distinction is made between officers and the rest, which joins together General Haig and Robert Graves, a privilege neither would have appreciated, justifiably because it is odd to lump together the chances of survival of the many staff officers who never saw a trench and those of the junior officers who never saw anything else.<sup>49</sup> During the First World War, junior officers shared more of the reality of war with N.C.O.s and the men in the ranks than with senior officers, but the statistics have it otherwise.

Still, though we cannot determine the number of junior officers who served and who were killed, we can at least compare the overall figures of officers who served with those who were killed, wounded or missing. Suppose that ten per cent of the army were officers. If the ratio of officer casualties were, say, 20 per cent, it would be safe to conclude that officers bore a disproportionate share of war losses.

The hypothesis of 'surplus' officer deaths seems to hold for other armies and during other wars. One scholar, N. N. Golovine, was convinced that whichever of the numerous Russian sources is used, First World War losses among officers exceeded losses among men in the ranks of the Czarist army.<sup>50</sup> Studies of the French Army in the 1914-18 war provide similar evidence for every branch of service.<sup>51</sup> The one dissenting voice is that of A. Vagts, a student of the Second World War, who believed that after the first months of open warfare in 1914, 'as trench warfare followed, losses became more or less even among officers and the rank and file'.<sup>52</sup> But to Gaston Bodard, the evidence has always pointed the other way. In 1916 he wrote:

The officers of an army almost always show a much higher percentage of casualties than the men. This is to be explained by the effort of the officer to set before his men a good example

<sup>45</sup> *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War* (London, 1922), pp. 707, 713.

<sup>46</sup> R. A. R. Redmayne, *The British Coal Mining Industry during the War* (Oxford, 1923), p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> *General Annual Report of the British Army 1913-1919*, Cmd 1139 (1921), XXIV Pt. IV, War Casualties.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> There is a marvellous juxtaposition of a picture of a real trench at the front and a 'model' trench surveyed by staff officers, in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1976), p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> N. N. Golovine, *The Russian Army in the World War* (Oxford, 1931), p. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Lt.-Col. Larcher, 'Données statistiques sur les forces françaises 1914-1918', *Revue militaire française* (1934), pp. 558-559.

<sup>52</sup> A. Vagts, 'Battle and Other Combat Casualties in the Second World War', *Journal of Politics*, 7 (1945), p. 284.

in cool and courageous conduct. In several armies the relative loss of officers and men has not varied in the course of the wars of the last 150 years; hence the casualty loss of the men can be calculated with reasonable certainty from that of the officers . . .<sup>53</sup>

When measured against total numbers serving in the First World War, British officers did suffer higher casualties than did men in the ranks (see Table 7). For example, on 1 October 1914, 33,393 officers were serving in the British Army. During the next twelve months, 4,735 officers were killed. These need not have been the same men as were enumerated on 1 October 1914, since the size of the army was constantly changing and it grew especially rapidly in the first year of the war. But the same variations applied to the men in the ranks, and we still find that 14 per cent of the officer corps against only six per cent of the rank and file were killed in the first year of the war. This surplus of officer deaths continued, although at a slightly lower level, throughout the war, and a similar, though, less extreme surplus of officers wounded as a percentage of officers serving over men wounded as a percentage of men serving may be derived from Table 7. It is only among missing soldiers that the proportions even out.

Confirmation that a disproportionate share of war casualties was borne by officers may be

TABLE 7. *Army casualties*

| Period          | Regimental strength at beginning of period |             | Percentage |     |         |      | Missing and prisoners of war |             |
|-----------------|--|-------------|------------|-----|---------|------|------------------------------|-------------|
|                 | Officers                                   | Other ranks | Killed*    |     | Wounded |      | Officers                     | Other ranks |
| 1.10.14-30.9.15 | 33,393                                     | 1,293,979   | 14.2       | 5.8 | 24.4    | 17.4 | 3.7                          | 2.9         |
| 1.10.15-30.9.16 | 92,578                                     | 2,383,186   | 8.0        | 4.9 | 17.4    | 14.0 | 1.3                          | 1.3         |
| 1.10.16-30.9.17 | 110,786                                    | 3,233,011   | 8.5        | 4.7 | 17.6    | 12.3 | 1.5                          | 1.1         |
| 1.10.17-30.9.18 | 143,533                                    | 3,739,484   | 6.9        | 4.0 | 17.1    | 13.9 | 3.4                          | 3.4         |
| 1.10.18-30.9.19 | 147,738                                    | 3,690,527   | 1.0        | 1.1 | 3.3     | 2.2  | 0.1                          | 0.1         |

\* Including Missing, presumed dead

obtained by examining the military statistics from another angle. If we take as our base population not the total number who served, but the total who were killed, we find that the proportion of officers killed was higher than the proportion of officers in the army. As in Table 8, for example, from 1 October 1917 to 30 September 1918, 159,113 British soldiers were killed. Among them were 9,880 officers, or 6.2 per cent of all deaths. On 1 October 1917 and again on 1 October 1918, only between 3.6 and 3.8 per cent of the army were officers. The same pattern may be seen in the figures for officers wounded as a proportion of total wounded. Again, a rough parity is reached in terms of missing and prisoners of war.

These data may be supplemented by figures from those regimental histories and war memoirs which discuss casualties. Despite the variation among units, the overall 'surplus' of officer deaths is common to virtually all of them. These figures are useful only for the purpose of corroborating the record of the army report. But since so many men served in more than one unit and the size of units was constantly changing, there are no statistics about the percentage of officers in each unit. Furthermore, the proportion of officers serving in an artillery battery, a tank unit, an infantry battalion, and a casualty clearing station was not the same. The different responsibilities of leadership in different service arms meant different casualty rates for each. In addition, the age structure of units varied. To judge by the lists of medical

<sup>53</sup> G. Bodard, *Losses of Life in Modern Wars* (Oxford, 1916), p. 18.

men trained at Scottish universities who entered the army when aged over 50,<sup>54</sup> the average age of RAMC officers must have been higher than that of men in other units. Their mortality rate would certainly reflect this age differential.

The limitations of the statistical record make it just as difficult to prove that within the officer corps, the junior officers bore the heaviest casualties. But, aside from common sense, there are reasons for believing that this must have been true. The 28th Battalion of the London Regiment, The Artists' Rifles, was a unit which specialized in training subalterns, and the men who passed through it suffered higher casualties than those of any other battalion, regiment, or division.<sup>55</sup>

The number of officers serving in the British Army on 4 August 1914 was 28,060. During the war, combatant commissions were granted to 229,316 men. In addition, 5,053 chaplains and 12,692 doctors served as officers. Approximately 22,000 officers relinquished their commissions during the war, but this does not affect the total of 275,121 men who served as army

TABLE 8. *Casualties among Army officers as a percentage of total Army casualties*

| Period          | Percentage of officers among |         |                     |                | Percentage of officers in army at beginning of period |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------|---------------------|----------------|---|
|                 | Killed                       | Wounded | Missing or captured | All casualties |   |
| 4.8.14–30.9.14  | 8.1                          | 7.2     | 2.4                 | 5.6            |   |
| 1.10.14–30.9.15 | 5.9                          | 3.5     | 3.1                 | 4.0            | 2.5   |
| 1.10.15–30.9.16 | 5.9                          | 4.6     | 3.8                 | 4.9            | 3.7   |
| 1.10.16–30.9.17 | 5.1                          | 4.7     | 4.4                 | 4.9            | 3.3   |
| 1.10.17–30.9.18 | 6.2                          | 4.5     | 3.7                 | 4.7            | 3.6   |
| 1.10.18–30.9.19 | 3.6                          | 5.6     | 4.2                 | 4.9            | 3.8   |

officers during the war.<sup>56</sup> This represents 5.28 per cent of all men who served in the army. This figure seems to be very much in line with that of officers' deaths as a percentage of all army deaths, 5.57 per cent. This similarity is deceptive, though, since the monthly accounts of the army's regimental strength show that on average, 3.55 per cent of the army were officers.<sup>57</sup> High losses among junior officers provide the only explanation for the difference between the average monthly figures and the proportion of officers in the army. A constant stream of new men replenished the British officer corps. More and more men from the ranks were granted commissions as the carnage continued, which further complicates comparison.

The pattern of higher officer losses is not repeated in the Navy, where 8.65 per cent who served were officers, but 6.79 per cent of all sailors who died were officers. The obvious explanation for this discrepancy between the Army and the Navy is that when a ship went down, everyone went down with it. This helps to account for the fact that more men in the Navy were killed than were wounded. In the RFC, the officer 'surplus mortality' reappears. Because almost all aircrew were officers, three out of four RFC men killed were commissioned.

Table 9 provides data on percentage killed of those who served by branch of service. Of all army officers who served, roughly one in seven was killed, which is lower than the officer death rate in the French Army. In the British Navy, roughly one officer in twenty was killed, whereas in the RFC, roughly one in six was killed. Again, mortality rates for army and RFC

<sup>54</sup> J. E. Mackenzie (ed.), *University of Edinburgh Roll of Honour 1914–1919* (Edinburgh, 1921).

<sup>55</sup> *The Regimental Roll of Honour and War Record of the Artists' Rifles* (London, 1922).

<sup>56</sup> *Statistics of the Military Effort*, p. 235.

<sup>57</sup> P.R.O. War Office Papers. *Monthly Reports of Regimental Strength of the British Army, 1914–1918*.

men in the ranks were lower than for officers. Only in the Navy did officers stand a greater chance of survival than did the men they led.

The second part of the claim for a 'Lost Generation' seems to be well-founded. It would be interesting to compare the impact of the war on each combatant nation in terms of the phenomenon of 'surplus' officer deaths. For instance, the French appear to have lost a greater part of their officer corps than the British. Of 195,000 officers mobilized in France, 36,179 or 18.6 per cent were killed, compared to 16.1 per cent of the men who served in the ranks. The French statistics also provide data on death rates in various service arms and in combat and non-combat units. Overall, 29 per cent of all infantry officers were killed, against 23 per cent of infantrymen. All other service arms show the same pattern of 'surplus' officer deaths. In all units engaged in combat, the proportion of officers killed (22.1 per cent) was greater than that of the men they led (17.9 per cent).<sup>58</sup> All these figures point to the fact that the depletion of the French Army during the war was greater than that of the British. It is not surprising, then, that it was the French Army and not the British that mutinied in April 1917.

One statistician reasoned that 'the proportion of losses among officers is much greater than that of the ranks since leaders in the French Army always make it a point of honour to lead by example above and beyond their professional obligations'. The same observer noted that it was the young who suffered most, largely through 'inexperience, enthusiasm and the

TABLE 9. *Distribution between officers and men of British war losses in the First World War*

| Branch of Service | Officers |        |      | Men       |         |      | Total     |         |      |
|-------------------|----------|--------|------|-----------|---------|------|-----------|---------|------|
|                   | Served   | Killed | %    | Served    | Killed  | %    | Served    | Killed  | %    |
| Army              | 247,061  | 37,484 | 15.2 | 4,968,101 | 635,891 | 12.8 | 5,215,162 | 673,375 | 12.9 |
| Navy              | 55,377   | 2,937  | 5.3  | 584,860   | 40,307  | 6.9  | 640,237   | 43,244  | 6.8  |
| RAF               | 27,333   | 4,579  | 16.8 | 236,842*  | 1,587*  | 0.7  | 291,175   | 6,166   | 2.1  |

\* Includes cadets in training.

impetuosity of youth'.<sup>59</sup> Whether or not he was right, it is clear that casualties were distributed disproportionately between officers and men in more than one combatant force during the First World War.

#### IV. THE DECIMATION OF SOCIAL ELITES

The third part of the claim for a 'Lost Generation' is that since officers were drawn from the well-educated and well-to-do middle and upper classes, these groups suffered disproportionately heavy losses during the First World War. The best evidence about the war-related losses of social elites can be found in the numerous Rolls of Honour published in memory of the educated elite: university graduates and undergraduates and old boys of public schools.

We know that roughly twelve per cent of all men mobilized in Britain during the First World War were killed. If more than twelve per cent of serving members of universities were killed, we may conclude that university men bore a disproportionately heavy burden of war losses. Such a surplus, if it exists, could be accounted for by the fact that, for example, almost

<sup>58</sup> Larcher, *loc. cit.* in footnote 50, pp. 558-559.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

TABLE 10. *Military participation in British Forces of members of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge by year of matriculation*

| Year of matriculation | Oxford |        |                 | Cambridge |        |                 |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|-----------------|-----------|--------|-----------------|
|                       | Served | Killed | Per cent killed | Served    | Killed | Per cent killed |
| — 1884                | 490    | 25     | 5.1             | 476       | 36     | 7.6             |
| 1885–1889             | 483    | 23     | 4.8             | 495       | 38     | 7.7             |
| 1890–1894             | 761    | 73     | 9.6             | 860       | 80     | 9.3             |
| 1895–1899             | 1488   | 223    | 15.0            | 1520      | 170    | 11.2            |
| 1900–1904             | 1923   | 347    | 18.0            | 1926      | 283    | 14.7            |
| 1905–1909             | 2421   | 556    | 23.0            | 3151      | 567    | 18.0            |
| 1910–1914             | 3216   | 942    | 29.3            | 4358      | 1138   | 26.1            |
| 1915–1918             | 428    | 37     | 8.6             | 340       | 52     | 15.3            |
| 1919                  | 1850   |        |                 |           |        |                 |
| Not matriculated      | 343    | 343    |                 |           |        |                 |
|                       | 13403  | 2569   | 19.2            | 13126     | 2364   | 18.0            |

all Oxford and Cambridge men recruited received commissions, the great majority as junior officers. Of nearly 1,000 Balliol men who joined up, only three per cent served in the ranks.

In Tables 10 and 11 the war records of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the First World War are given. The published lists are flawed for our purposes, since they include some men twice, such as Lawrence of Arabia, and they incorporate Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, South Africans, Indians, Americans, Serbs, French, Italians and Russians (but not Germans or Austrians) who fought in the war. In the charged atmosphere of the immediate post-war period, it was apparently impossible for Oxford and Cambridge to admit enemy dead to the lists of the fallen.<sup>60</sup>

The university war lists also include those British graduates who found their way into other armies during the war, such as three Oxford men and three Cambridge men who wound up in the French Foreign Legion. Because of the variation in casualty rates in allied forces, I have presented figures in Table 10 that relate only to university members who served in British forces. The national average of one man killed for every eight who served was exceeded among members of every Oxford college but one, and all Cambridge colleges but one. In some cases, particularly those of King's, Balliol, New College, University, Oriel, Worcester, Pembroke (Cambridge), and both Corpus Christi, Oxford, and Corpus Christi, Cambridge, the ratio of those killed to those at risk (in uniform) was double the national figure.

One difficulty in interpreting the casualty statistics for Oxford and Cambridge is that the compilers of their respective war lists disagreed about who was to be included. The editors of the Oxford list considered it appropriate to inscribe the names of ex-soldiers who went up to Oxford after the armistice. Since many of those men would have matriculated during the war years, they were deemed to merit places in the university war list. The compilers of the Cambridge war list thought otherwise. They decided that men who came into residence in 1919–20 were not members of the university during their military service, and were therefore not eligible for inclusion in the Cambridge war list. We do not know how many Cambridge men who matriculated in 1919 and 1920 served in the war, and consequently, a precise comparison of Oxford and Cambridge war losses must adopt the more exclusive Cambridge approach.

Removing nearly 2,000 names from the Oxford war list obviously decreases the number at risk and thereby affects the calculation of casualty rates. For purposes of clarity, statistics – without post-war matriculants – are given in Table 10. These show that Oxford war losses were proportionately greater than those of Cambridge.

<sup>60</sup> J. M. Winter, 'Balliol's "Lost Generation"', *Balliol College Record* (1975), pp. 10–14.

TABLE 11. *Military participation of British university graduates and undergraduates during the First World War*

| University or college                | Number killed | Number served | % Killed |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|
| 1. Aberdeen                          | 317           | 2540          | 12.5     |
| 2. Birmingham (to Dec. 1917)         | 115           | 785           | 14.6     |
| 3. Bristol (to Nov. 1917)            | 80            | 937           | 8.5      |
| 4. Cambridge                         | 2364          | 13126         | 18.0     |
| 5. Durham                            | 325           | 2464          | 13.2     |
| 6. Edinburgh                         | 877           | 5828          | 15.0     |
| 7. Glasgow                           | 717           | 4300          | 16.7     |
| 8. Liverpool                         | 158           | 1505          | 10.5     |
| 9. London City and Guilds College    | 184           | 882           | 20.9     |
| 10. London Royal School of Mines     | 29            | 161           | 18.0     |
| 11. Manchester                       | 418           | 2532          | 16.5     |
| 12. National University of Ireland   | 43            | 479           | 9.0      |
| 13. Oxford                           | 2569          | 13403         | 19.2     |
| 14. Royal Technical College, Glasgow | 612           | 3217          | 19.0     |
| 15. St Andrews University            | 115           | 900           | 12.8     |
| 16. Trinity College Dublin           | 454           | 3015          | 15.1     |
| 17. Wales                            | 286           | 1801          | 15.9     |
| 18. Gray's Inn                       | 44            | 467           | 9.4      |
| 19. Inner Temple (to Dec. 1916)      | 146           | 1083          | 13.5     |

## Sources:

1. M. D. Allardyce (ed.), *University of Aberdeen Roll of Service in the Great War 1914-1919* (Aberdeen, 1920).
2. *The Mermaid Guild of Graduates Supplement, 1917* (Birmingham, 1917).
3. *University of Bristol Annual Report of Council to Court, 1917* (Bristol, 1918).
4. Carey, *War List of the University of Cambridge*.
5. *University of Durham Roll of Service* (Durham, 1922).
6. J. E. MacKenzie (ed.), *University of Edinburgh Roll of Honour 1914-1919* (Edinburgh, 1921).
7. *Members of the University of Glasgow and the University Contingent of the Officers Training Corps Who Served in the Forces of the Crown 1914-1919* (Glasgow, 1922).
8. *University of Liverpool Roll of Service in the Great War 1914-1919* (Liverpool, 1921).
9. *Register of the Students of the City and Guilds of London College 1884-1934* (1936).
10. *Register of the Associates and Old Students of the Royal School of Mines* (1935).
11. *Manchester University Roll of Service* (Manchester, 1922).
12. *The National University of Ireland. War List. Roll of Honour* (Dublin, 1919).
13. Craig and Gibson, *Oxford University Roll of Service*.
14. *The Royal Technical College, Glasgow, Sacrifice and Service in the Great War* (Glasgow, 1921).
15. *University of St Andrews Roll of Honour and Roll of Service 1914-1919 for King and Country* (Edinburgh, 1920).
16. *University of Dublin, Trinity College. War List* (Dublin, 1922).
17. *University of Wales Roll of Service 1914-1918* (Bangor, 1921).
18. *The War Book of Gray's Inn* (1921).
19. C. Darling, *Inner Templars Who Volunteered and Served in the Great War* (1924).

Table 11 shows that this pattern of exceptionally high death rates among university undergraduates and graduates was not repeated uniformly throughout Britain and Ireland. In some provincial universities, such as Liverpool or Birmingham, the ratio of men killed to men serving was much closer to the national average of one in eight. This distinction within the educated population may be explained in part by the fact that a smaller proportion of men from provincial universities served as officers.<sup>61</sup> In addition, many of these men, and those from Scottish universities, were trained in science, engineering, or medicine and served in the Royal

<sup>61</sup> For instance, only 'a majority' of members of Bristol University held commissions. 60 per cent of the members of Leeds University were officers, whereas the proportion of Oxford and Cambridge men is over 97 per cent. *British Universities and the War: A Record and Its Meaning* (London, 1919), pp. 22, 26, 32.

Army Medical Corps, the Royal Artillery, or the Royal Engineers, in some sections of which casualty rates may have been lower than in the infantry, where most Oxford and Cambridge men with classics degrees served.

It is not possible, though, to maintain without serious qualification that more 'humanists' than 'scientists' were killed in the war. This difficulty is demonstrated in the following comparison of casualties suffered by members of the Universities of Liverpool and Birmingham. The percentages killed of Liverpool men who served are, by subject studied: arts – 19 per cent; science – 13 per cent; medicine – 8 per cent; dentistry – 6 per cent; veterinary science – 5 per cent; law – 14 per cent; engineering – 12 per cent.<sup>62</sup> Here it was the 'Arts men' whose death rate exceeded the national average of one in eight. But in Birmingham the opposite is true. By subject studied, percentage killed of those who served are: arts – 8 per cent; commerce – 28 per cent; medicine – 11 per cent; science – 18 per cent. Thus, in arts and commerce together one in eight of those who served was killed, whereas in medicine and science the ratio was one in six.<sup>63</sup> The latter results are consistent with the very high death rates suffered by members of the Imperial College of Science (Royal School of Mines, and City and Guilds College) and of the Royal Technical College, Glasgow.

A more satisfactory explanation of the variation in death rates among university men who served may lie in their length of service. Provincial university men may not have been able for financial reasons, even if they were so inclined, to drop their studies or careers and to join the army. They therefore may have spent less time at risk than did Oxford and Cambridge men, many of whom did not face such difficulties. Furthermore, many graduates of the ancient universities of England were professional soldiers, who fell in great numbers in the early months of the war, while the New Armies were still in training.<sup>64</sup>

The extent to which Oxford and Cambridge men of all ages suffered casualties well above the national figures is shown in Table 10. For instance, Oxford men who matriculated in 1894 would have been on average aged 38 at the outbreak of the war. Of the 205 men of that year who served in British forces, 27 or 13.17 per cent were killed. From that year on, the percentage killed rises until for 1913 matriculants it reaches the staggering figure of 31 per cent killed. The same pattern is repeated in the mortality statistics of Oxford men who served in other allied armies. In the case of Cambridge, the curve is not as steep, but the figures show the same progression.

Young Oxford and Cambridge men were more likely to be killed during the war than were their peers at other British universities (Table 12). This concentration of deaths in the two youngest cohorts is not surprising, but the particular intensity of war losses by age for Oxford and Cambridge accounts for the overall higher casualty rates of these two universities, compared to other universities. For every age group, death rates for Oxford and Cambridge are well above the national figures. The appalling mortality rate of one in four among men who served and who were under age 25 in 1914 helps to explain why contemporaries wrote repeatedly that a whole generation fell on Flanders fields. Such comments, while elitist, at least had the merit of accuracy. H. A. L. Fisher, President of the Board of Education, spoke with some justification, then, when he said in 1917 that 'the chapels of Oxford and Cambridge display long lists of the fallen, and no institutions have suffered greater or more irreparable losses than have these ancient shrines of learning and piety'.<sup>65</sup>

Fisher can be forgiven for having overlooked the fact that equally high casualty rates were suffered by members of British public schools who served in the war. One commentator

<sup>62</sup> *The University of Liverpool Calendar 1918-19* (Liverpool, 1918), p. 197.

<sup>63</sup> *The Mermaid Guild of Graduates Supplement* (Birmingham, 1917). No figures exist for the entire war period.

<sup>64</sup> A. N. Clutterbuck (ed.), *The Bond of Sacrifice* (London, 1915). This book is a collection of biographies of all officers killed in 1914.

<sup>65</sup> *British Universities and the War*, p. xii.



TABLE 12. *Age distribution of British Army and British universities' war losses 1914-1918*

| Age*     | Percentage killed of those who served |              |           |             |       |          |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-------|----------|
|          | British Army                          | Universities |           |             |       |          |
|          |                                       | Oxford†      | Cambridge | Manchester† | Wales | Aberdeen |
| under 20 | 16.3                                  | 23.7         | 26.7      | 13.4        | 14.1  | 10.9     |
| 20-24    | 14.9                                  | 27.2         | 21.8      | 20.2        | 18.0  | 18.7     |
| 25-29    | 10.1                                  | 20.6         | 17.6      | 18.5        | 15.4  | 13.9     |
| 30-34    | 10.7                                  | 17.9         | 12.9      | 12.5        | 16.5  | 15.8     |
| 35-39    | 9.8                                   | 12.5         | 10.0      | 12.9        | 15.1  | 5.9      |
| 40-44    | 5.1                                   | 8.1          | 8.8       | 9.7         | 10.0  | 8.0      |

Sources: Craig and Gibson, *Oxford University Roll of Service*; Carey, *Cambridge War List*; *Manchester University Roll of Service*; *University of Wales Roll of Service*; *University of Aberdeen Roll of Honour*.

\* For university men, age in 1914 determined distribution by cohort, which was the base population of those at risk. For the army, the base population of those at risk was the average ages of men from England and Wales who served in British forces in 1915-18.

† Excluding 1919-20 matriculants.

pointed out that the large boarding schools contributed more to the war effort than did day schools. With 'greater wealth and influence behind them', members of the former 'could consequently face with the more equanimity the risk to them and theirs in throwing up their posts in civil life. . . .' Furthermore, it was these schools which 'stocked the old Army with most of its Officers'. As a result, 'the death roll of the Public Schools was far heavier in proportion than the general average'.<sup>66</sup> Of course, many names listed therein also appear in the Oxford and Cambridge statistics. But many others by-passed the universities and entered the army directly from school. The 53 schools for which full data have been collected lost about one old boy of every five who served. Thus, both public school and university war statistics show mortality rates significantly higher than those of army officers or of the army as a whole. The likely explanation, advanced in R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End*, is that subalterns were drawn almost exclusively from this section of the educated population. Replying to criticism that his play had 'too much of the English public schools about it', Sherriff wrote that 'almost every young officer was a public schoolboy, and if I had left them out of *Journey's End*, there wouldn't have been a play at all'.<sup>67</sup> The Bishop of Malvern made a similar point when he dedicated the war memorial of Malvern College. The loss of schoolboys in the war, he said, 'can only be described as the wiping out of a generation'.<sup>68</sup>

The war experience of the same social class is described in the service lists of Members of Parliament, Peers, and their sons. Of the 22 M.P.s killed in the war, 13 had been at Oxford, and nine at both Oxford and Eton.<sup>69</sup> The overlap with university statistics is not, therefore, surprising. Some of the peers were of very advanced age during the war and, like the Royal Family, appear on service lists as a courtesy. But taking only peers and their sons under age 50 in 1914, 18.95 per cent of those serving were killed.<sup>70</sup>

C. F. G. Masterman who had been a Liberal M.P. before the war, pointed out in a book published in 1922 that not since the Wars of the Roses had the English aristocracy suffered

<sup>66</sup> A. H. H. Maclean, *Public Schools and the Great War 1914-19* (n.d.), pp. 17-18.

<sup>67</sup> R. C. Sherriff, 'The English public schools in the war', in G. A. Panichas (ed.), *Promise of Greatness* (London, 1968), p. 134.

<sup>68</sup> C. F. Kernot, *British Public Schools War Memorials* (London, 1927), p. 136 and *passim* for public school war losses.

<sup>69</sup> E. W. Moss-Blundell, *The House of Commons Book of Remembrance 1914-1918* (London, 1931).

<sup>70</sup> H. A. Doubleday and Lord Howard de Walden, *The Complete Peerage* (London, 8 vols, 1932), viii, Appendix F, by Major E. Martin and H. A. Doubleday.

such losses as those they had endured during the Great War.<sup>71</sup> The figures provided by Hollingsworth in his study of the peerage for deaths from violence support this contention. Whereas 46 per cent of male members of ducal families born between 1330 and 1479 died violent deaths, 48 per cent of the cohort born between 1880 and 1939 did so.<sup>72</sup> Since casualties in the Second World War were much less heavy than those of the 1914–18 conflict, these figures provide further substantiation of the claim that the Great War produced a 'Lost Generation' of social elites.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The examination of military statistics on which this paper has been based indicates that the demographic consequences of male mortality during the Great War varied by class. The most severely depleted social groups were the most privileged, whose marriage patterns were inevitably distorted by the absence of so many marriageable young men. Marriage statistics of the period do not distinguish between social classes, but it seems likely that young women of what we now call Class I faced the real possibility of enforced spinsterhood at the end of the war. They may have decided to marry men of different social status and age than those whom they would have married had there been no war. Such adjustments took place in France where casualty rates were higher throughout society.<sup>73</sup> It is less likely that British working-class women were faced with as severe a problem, since the proportion of young men of their class killed was somewhat lower. Furthermore, many young working girls had migrated to the large urban centres to staff the munitions factories, and thereby enlarged both geographically and numerically their pool of potential marriage partners. And since working-class women formed the majority of the female population, it is not surprising that celibacy rates in England and Wales did not rise much.<sup>74</sup> After the war, most women who wished to marry did so, despite the depletion of the male population.

More work needs to be done on other aspects of the war's demographic effects, such as on the ageing process<sup>75</sup> and on the structure of the labour force. It is equally important to study the demographic history of the civilian population in order to see whether there were improvements in public health which to some extent compensated for the war-related depletion of the British population.<sup>76</sup>

Popular perception of the war's effects on population movements is a subject which also requires further investigation. We have demonstrated that the 'Lost Generation' is not a myth. But in the inter-war years it became a legend which, though it had a basis in fact, took on a life of its own. Remembering the slaughter of elites seemed to take precedence over recognizing that such casualties were but a small fraction of total British war losses.

The force of the legend is in part a result of the quality of many war novels and memoirs. But of equal importance is that the discussion of war losses fitted into a much wider debate about the declining rate of growth of European populations. To many writers, the fall in the birth rate, which had begun well before the war, foreshadowed the inevitable downfall of European power. The 'threat' was not only from the more fecund non-white races, but also from the poorer classes of Europeans whose fertility levels were much higher than those of their social superiors. Thus, contraception had done in one way what the war had done in

<sup>71</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *England after the War: a Study* (London, 1922), pp. 31–32.

<sup>72</sup> T. H. Hollingsworth, 'A Demographic Study of the British Ducal Families', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History* (London, 1965), p. 359.

<sup>73</sup> Henry, *loc. cit.* in footnote 8, *passim*.

<sup>74</sup> L. Hersch, 'Demographic Effects of Modern Warfare', in N. Angell *et al.*, *What Would be the Character of a New War?* (London, 1933), p. 305.

<sup>75</sup> E. Rosset, 'War as a Population Ageing Factor' in his book, *Ageing Process of Population* (Oxford, 1964).

<sup>76</sup> J. M. Winter, 'The Impact of the First World War on Civilian Health in Britain.' *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 30, 1977 (in press)

another. They both undermined the strength and 'vitality' of European society and its ruling class, which to many people were interchangeable terms. Hence the elaborate mourning for the future leaders who never were. Their loss added one more nail to the coffin of European supremacy, and that of its traditional elite.

It is difficult to-day to imagine how widespread was such eugenic thought in the days before Hitler made unpalatable some of its primary assumptions. But such ideas of racial decline were very much alive during and after the Great War. They helped shape perceptions of the impact of war and to give to the image of the 'Lost Generation' its peculiarly compelling force.