

Key words and definitions

Militarism: People took great pride in their armies and navies. To make sure that theirs were the best, countries spent more and more money on bigger and bigger armies. Nobody wanted the smallest army, so countries got caught up in an arms race. To many, there was no point in having a big, expensive army if you weren't going to use it, and whenever countries fell out the temptation to use those weapons was always there.

Alliances: As each country began to feel threatened, they looked for friends to back them up in a war – known as allies. Europe split into two alliances. Britain, France and Russia formed the Triple Entente, and Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy formed the Triple Alliance. The idea was to put people off starting a war as it would mean fighting against three nations instead of one. Although this made them feel more secure, it meant it would only take one small disagreement between any two nations involved and all of Europe would be dragged into a war.

Imperialism: Britain had conquered lots of land all over the world by 1914 and had a huge empire. But other nations wanted big empires too – a desire known as imperialism. The race to gain control of other nations, particularly in Africa, led to tension and fierce rivalries among European countries. They began to see each other as a threat to their overseas possessions and thought war was the only way to remove this threat permanently.

Nationalism: At the beginning of the 20th century, people started to take great pride in their countries. This is called nationalism – thinking that your nation is better than others. Unfortunately, for many leaders of Europe, the best way to prove they were the best was to have a war with their rivals.

Pals Battalions: men often went to the recruiting office with their friends and ended up in the same group (or 'battalion') of the army.

Propaganda: information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.

Key events

28 June 1914: Tensions rise across Europe. Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, is shot dead in Sarajevo, capital of the Austrian province Bosnia. Franz Ferdinand's killer, Gavrilo Princip, is backed by Serbian terrorist group 'the Black Hand'.

28 July 1914: Backed up by Germany, Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia on 28 July. Russia quickly steps in to protect the small nation and mobilises its army. Germany responds by declaring war on Russia. France is Russia's ally and begins mobilising its forces. As the armies mobilise war becomes almost inevitable.

4 August 1914: Britain and the other great powers of Europe guarantee to protect Belgium's borders. Belgium appeals to Britain and Britain declares war. After Britain's entry to the war, the German army lays waste to the country. The British Empire is also dragged into the conflict and the war in Europe starts to expand across the globe

23 August 1914: The German Kaiser orders the destruction of Britain's 'contemptible little army' and 70,000 British soldiers are attacked by 160,000 German troops. Outgunned and outnumbered Britain's tiny Expeditionary Force suffers heavy casualties and is forced to retreat.

10 October 1914: Britain calls on its Empire and 1.5 million Indian soldiers and 1.3 million Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans fight on the allied side. France also draws on its colonies in Africa.

3 January 1915: Both sides experiment with tear gas in the first winter of the war. Its effect is devastating, terrifying soldiers and causing uproar at home.

25 April 1915: The Gallipoli campaign: Bugged down in a stalemate on the Western Front, the Allies attack Germany's allies in the Middle East, the Ottoman Turks. Almost a third of the New Zealand troops are killed and there are 28,000 Australian casualties. The Turks suffer 200,000 casualties

27 January 1916: By 1916 heavy losses on the Western Front mean Britain's volunteer army needs reinforcements. On 27 January the government introduces conscription. All single men aged 18 to 41 can now be sent to war, although thousands are exempted because they have vital jobs in industry which are important to the war effort.

1 July 1916: The Battle of the Somme is one of the largest and bloodiest conflicts of World War One. Nearly 20,000 British soldiers die on the first day. It is part of a massive joint offensive by the Allies on their fronts in France, Italy and Russia. British Commander-in-Chief General Haig hopes to end the deadlock on the Western Front at the Somme. By November the Allies have advanced five miles. There are over half a million casualties on each side.

6 April 1917: In February the Germans restart their U-boat campaign against commercial ships headed from America to Britain and many American civilians lose their lives. In April, President Woodrow Wilson persuades Congress that America should declare war on Germany.

11 November 1918: Before the Allied armies can invade Germany, an armistice is signed, bringing the war on the Western Front to an end. In a train carriage at Compiègne in northern France, the Germans surrender and agree to withdraw their forces from France and Belgium. Many German soldiers feel betrayed. The fighting ceases at 11am on 11 November 1918, which for Britain, France and America becomes the time when the war dead are honoured. In 1919 The Treaty of Versailles imposes harsh terms on Germany forcing them to accept the blame for the war and pay huge reparations.

