

HOMWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

BACKGROUND

In August 1914 war was very popular - crowds cheered, wave of patriotism. Everyone thought it would be a short war - "all over by Christmas. Many people were caught up in the wave of patriotism and did not think about what war meant. Opponents of the war did not speak out because they did not want to seem unpatriotic. Government propaganda and newspapers whipped up anti German feeling. British newspapers and politicians had portrayed Germany as a bully and a threat to peace long before war broke out. Many people believed Britain had a duty to defend Belgium against the German invasion.

- When war broke out over 1 million men volunteered for the army. Kitchener's recruiting campaign was a big success. The war was seen as a great adventure.
- Young men thought it would be a great adventure and joined the army. They were encouraged by propaganda or by wives, mothers and girlfriends. Many of them spoke of not wanting to miss out. They had no idea of how bad conditions were in the trenches.
- It soon became clear that the war would last for a long time. The army suffered huge losses at the Somme in 1916. More and more recruits were needed to replace those who had been killed. No one knew how long the war would last.
- Soldiers on leave told how bad conditions were in the trenches. Families no longer encouraged their sons to enlist. Women no longer encouraged men to join up as they did at the start of the war. In 1916 compulsory military service was introduced for men aged 18 years to 41 years.
- By 1916 many volunteers had been killed and men were no longer keen to join up. The government was forced to introduce conscription under the Military Service Act.
- Compulsory Military Service for all men aged 18-41 was introduced in 1916. All men and women aged 18-65 had to register at labour exchanges for war work.
- Under the Military Service Act some men were excused service. Those who were mentally or physically disabled or unfit ; men who were working in essential war industries; men whose families would suffer extreme hardship; and men who objected to military service for religious or moral reasons.
- Some men refused to serve in the army because they had moral objections to killing. They were 'conscientious objectors'. Some agreed to serve as stretcher bearers at the front. Others were 'absolutists who refused to help the war effort in any way. Many were jailed and treated very harshly by the authorities and often by their families, friends and neighbours.
- A system of tribunals was set up to decide who would be excused service. All around the country there were Local Tribunals and in London there was a Central Tribunal which judged appeals.
- Most of the tribunals were made up of military men, local councillors and businessmen. They were not very sympathetic to men who applied to be excused military service. Most men were refused exemption and handed over to the army.
- Conscientious objectors who refused to obey orders were taken before a court martial. They were then put in a military prison or in some cases taken to the Western Front where they were given field punishments such as being tied to a gun wheel under shell-fire.