

Year 8 Learn Sheet

Final Assessment *The First World War: life in the trenches*

Recruitment:

- For the first 2 years of the War, signing up to fight was **voluntary**;
- By the end of the second month of the war, **750,000 British men signed up**;
- This incredible success was due to a number of reasons; the government promised that the war would end quickly; the army 'sold' the idea of fighting by emphasising how much of an adventure/how much like a game it would be; young men signed up alongside their friends or workmates, creating **Pals Battalions**;
- British government **propaganda posters** persuaded men to join up by exaggerating how enjoyable the fighting would be;
- The Commander-in-Chief of Britain's army, **General Kitchener**, was used to



directly appeal to British men to fight for 'King and Country'.

Reality:

Soldiers soon experienced the reality of fighting. By the beginning of 1915, British, French and German soldiers had 'dug in' realising that the war would not finish quickly. Life in these trenches was hard:

Dangers:

- Going 'over the top';
- Enemy snipers;
- Exploding shells creating shrapnel;
- Gas (mustard, chlorine) attacks;
- Trench foot;
- Rats and lice due to the large number of soldiers living together.

Food:

- Rations were provided for soldiers;
- Tinned food like 'bully beef' was most common;
- Sometimes fresh meals were carried up the communication trenches;
- Communication trenches were targeted to prevent good food from arriving.

Daily life:

- Trench life was often quiet and dull;
- Soldiers would write letters/postcards home but these would be censored to prevent morale (confidence) from dropping back home;
- Soldiers were superstitious – they sometimes shook the hand of a dead man (sticking out of a parapet; the side of a trench) for good luck.

Case Study: The Battle of the Somme – 1916

- At different points, both the Germans and the British/French tried to break through the line of enemy trenches;
- In Feb 1916, the Germans tried to push through the French trench line at **Verdun**. The British knew that this could lose them the war, so they decided to distract the Germans by attacking them at the **Somme** between **July-November 1916**;
- The week before the battle the British, led by **General Haig**, fired **1.7 million shells** at the German trenches. The British were so confident that these explosives would have destroyed the German trenches that on the morning of the 1st July 1916, British soldiers were told to **walk over no man's land to capture the German lines**;
- However, the Germans had built deep **bunkers** that weren't destroyed by British shells. The Germans were able to use their machine guns. In the first hour and a half of battle, around **60,000 British soldiers were wounded or killed**;
- The British eventually improved their tactics by using tanks in September 1916, but by November the battle had no winner.

Positives

- The British Empire captured **70 square miles** of land.
- The battle **distracted the Germans** and bought the French enough time to re-organise their army at Verdun;
- There were **500,000** German casualties.

Negatives

- It was the bloodiest battle in the history of the British Army;
- Only **limited land was gained**, and it was lost back to the Germans only a few months afterwards;
- The war was **no closer to an end**.

