How did the government get people to fight?

As soon as war broke out in August 1914, the British government asked for volunteers to fight. To begin with, there was a great rush to join up as men decided to ‘do their bit for King and country’. By December 1914, one million men had enlisted, keen to get involved in a war they thought might be over soon. Army leaders, however, weren’t so optimistic. Some felt the war would go on for at least three years – and knew the government would have to work very hard to get enough soldiers.

Britain’s leaders used a number of techniques to encourage and persuade men to join up. To begin with, a huge propaganda campaign was started throughout the country. Leaflets and posters were issued that tried to persuade men to join up. They appealed to their patriotism and sense of honour, saying it was their duty to defend their country against the evil enemy. The posters always made any British soldiers look like heroes, while any enemy soldiers were made to look like cruel savages (see Source A). Newspapers carried long articles of battle victories, while defeats were hardly mentioned.

Source A • This poster shows a German nurse pouring water on the floor in front of a thorny, injured British soldier. The Red Cross helped wounded soldiers on both sides – the Iron Cross is a German medal for bravery. Two fat Germans laugh in the background. How do you think this made some British men feel?

The government also agreed to keep friends together who joined up at the same time. These units were called ‘Pals Battalions’ and sometimes whole football teams, orchestras, cricket teams or bus depots would sign up together, or perhaps groups of friends from the same school, street or village. Sadly, whole groups of friends would die together.

Women also played a major part in getting men to fight. The White Feather Campaign was a way of trying to shame men into joining up. Groups of women would patrol high streets and town centres handing out white feathers – a symbol of cowardice – to any man who seemed fit to fight and who was not in a military uniform. This sort of public humiliation was enough to see some men join immediately (see Source C).

The recruitment campaign worked very well. By January 1916, about 2.5 million men had agreed to fight. But then the steady stream of volunteers began to dry up. People had begun to realise that war was not the big adventure that some had imagined – men were actually dying out there and many others were returning home wounded or crippled for life. The government responded to the lack of volunteers by introducing conscription. A new law said that any man aged between 18 and 41 could be forced to join the army if their name was randomly selected. Some refused to join when the ‘call up’ letter dropped through the letterbox but, by April 1918, an extra 2.5 million soldiers had been found through conscription.

Source C • Women in the East End of London hoist the ‘White Feather’ flag, denoting those not enlisting in a time of war with the message ‘Serve your country or wear this’.

The message of the poster.

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When the war started, people in Britain confidently expected that it would be over in months, even weeks. ‘Over by Christmas’ was a common saying in August 1914. After all, the last major war, between France and Prussia, had lasted just 32 weeks! So why did the war last so long?

**Failing plans**

Each fighting country had carefully prepared attack plans. Germany’s plan was to defeat France in six weeks by invading at high speed through Belgium. Then the German army would turn around and march east to fight Russia. This was known as the Schlieffen Plan, after the German Minister of War who thought it up.

But the Schlieffen Plan failed. The Germans thought the Belgian army would be easy to beat as they marched through their country on their way to France. They were wrong. The Belgians put up a fierce defence, helped by the British (who the Germans thought would never help Belgium). As a result, it took the Germans longer than expected to reach France. By September 1914, the German army was only 30 miles from Paris. There, however, along the River Marne, a million French and British troops stood in their way. As a battle began, both armies dug trenches in the soil to defend themselves. News then arrived that Russian troops in the east had attacked Germany. The Germans never imagined that the Russians could get their soldiers ready this quickly. In fact, German forces never got any closer to Paris than this – their Schlieffen Plan had failed. Even at this early stage, a high-ranking German general told the Kaiser, ‘Your majesty, we have lost the war’.

**A stalemate develops**

As neither side could go forward, each tried to outflank (move around) the other. As the armies marched north, trying to get around behind each other, they dug trenches as they went. By November 1914, both sides had reached the English Channel. The lines of trenches stretched the other way too, eventually reaching from the Channel to Switzerland, a distance of 400 miles.

In the east too, Russian troops faced Austrian and German forces. Each side dug trenches to stop the other side from advancing. These trenches were protected with sandbags and barbed wire. They were defended by millions of men with rifles, machine guns and hand grenades.

On both of the Western and Eastern fronts (a ‘front’ is an area where fighting takes place), the war was now at a stalemate – a complete inability to move forward and a solid determination not to be pushed back. In 1915, Britain’s Minister of War, Earl Kitchener, summed up the stalemate when he said, ‘I don’t know what is to be done … but this isn’t war!’