



First World War

Great War Volunteers

Introduction

When the First World War began in August 1914 no one knew what kind of war it was going to be or how long it would last. Most people expected it to be 'over by Christmas'. Through a mix of patriotism, a sense of duty, a desire for adventure, to avenge alleged German atrocities, or just to escape from poverty at home, men rushed to join up and go to war.

Volunteers in Britain

In Britain over one million men had volunteered to fight by December 1914. All men were supposed to be between the regulation ages of 19 and 41 years old. By the end of the war more than four years later, almost one quarter of the total male population had served in the armed forces. Men were encouraged to sign up with their friends and colleagues with the guarantee that the men who 'joined together should serve together', in 'Pals' battalions.

Volunteers in the Dominions & Empire

Men in the Dominions and Empire also volunteered. Over a million men of the Indian Army served overseas in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Over one hundred thousand New Zealanders, 425 thousand Canadians and Newfoundlanders, and 230 thousand South Africans also served overseas during the war.

In Australia over 415 thousand men enlisted. One in five of them had been born in Britain and emigrated to Australia before the war. Over 330 thousand men out of a total population of under five million served overseas. The defining event for Australians and New Zealanders (ANZACs) was the campaign at Gallipoli, Turkey, in 1915-1916.

The experience of going into combat together created a greater sense of national identity for many of these nations.

Conscription

The war had not ended by Christmas 1914. All the combatant countries had to persuade more and more men to volunteer to go to war, especially as the casualties mounted. In Britain and the Dominions the issue of conscription (forced military service) caused much controversy.

In Britain the recruiting authorities had to reduce the physical requirements for recruits so that more men would be eligible for service. The height requirement for the army was five foot eight inches tall, but in November 1915, it was reduced to five feet three inches. Even so, there were still many men who were not healthy enough to go to war. Conscription was finally introduced in 1916. In 1917-1918 only 36% of the men examined were passed as fully fit for military service.

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Australian troops charging uphill during an assault at Anzac Bay, Gallipoli, December 1917
IWM Ref. Q_I 3659

Elsewhere, conscription was also a sensitive political issue. It was introduced in New Zealand (1916) and Canada (1917) but not in Australia.

Underage Volunteers

Perceptions of childhood and children were different at the beginning of the twentieth century. Until the Education Act of 1918, children could leave school at the age of 12 and go to work. The age of consent was 13 years of age. But until late in the war boys had to be 19 to serve overseas. Recruiting Officers were paid for each man who signed up and so some turned a blind eye to underage volunteers.



Photograph of young British recruits at camp in Etaples, France, in July 1918.
IWM Ref. Q_23586

The British government had originally promised that no one under 19 years of age would be sent overseas to fight. But in April 1918 they lowered the age to 18. British forces on the Western Front needed



reinforcements after suffering a near-defeat during the last German offensive there.

There are no precise figures for the number of underage boys who served in the British forces during the First World War. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records over 14 thousand deaths during the war of soldiers who were aged 18 years or under.

Women Volunteers

During the First World War women in Britain were mobilised to serve in the workforce, and eventually, in the armed services. The war substantially increased the numbers of women in paid work and the range of jobs that they undertook.

The outbreak of war interrupted the campaign for women's suffrage – the right to vote in general elections. Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the Women's Social and Political Union, had led the most militant and violent campaign. But in 1914 she asked her followers to stop their protests.

A number of the leading Suffragettes played an important role in setting up women-only organisations to support the war effort. Dr Elsie Inglis set up the Scottish Women's Hospital Units that worked in France, the Balkans and on the eastern front. Evelina Haverfield contributed to the creation of two new organisations: the Women's Emergency Corps and the Women's Voluntary Reserve. Their success influenced the decision to create branches of the armed services for women.

The first of these was the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs), which was formed in January 1917. This was followed by similar organisations for the navy and air force. By the end of the war 150 thousand women had served in the auxiliary forces. The majority of women supported the war effort by working in industry, taking on jobs done by absent husbands, brothers and fathers, and keeping households and families together.



New recruits to the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, parading in July 1917 in Rouen, France. The WAAC was the first women's branch of the armed forces, formed in 1917.

IWM Ref. Q_5734



After the war, women (over the age of 30) were given the vote in general elections for the first time in British history, under the Representation of the Peoples Act 1918. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 ruled that no one could be disqualified from any civil or judicial function or appointment by sex or marriage. However for most women the end of the war meant a return to the life they had lived before.

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