

Information sheet 1

A brief overview of the events leading to the outbreak of the First World War

By 1914, Europe was divided into two alliances. The Triple Entente was an agreement between Britain, France and Russia, and the Triple Alliance was an agreement between Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy.

Members of each alliance promised to fight for the other members if they were ever attacked. However, Italy had a secret agreement with France which meant she would stay neutral if Germany ever attacked France. The system of European alliances was so complicated it would only take a small incident to spark a war involving the whole of Europe.

Germany had been trying to build up her navy and her empire. Britain was worried about this as it threatened her own position. Both countries raced each other to build the best navy. There was tension between the two countries. There was also tension between France and Germany due to earlier battles.

The area south and south-east of Austro-Hungary was known as the Balkans. This whole area was very politically unstable. The European Alliances had different ideas on how to deal with the problems.

The crisis

On 28 June 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, drove through the Bosnian capital Sarajevo in an open-top car. During that drive, he and his wife were assassinated by a Bosnian Serb named Princip.

Austro-Hungary was outraged at the murder and blamed the Serbian Government. Germany agreed to support Austro-Hungary in any action she took to punish Serbia.

The countdown to war

Date 1914	Event
28 July	Austria declared war on Serbia. Serbia then appealed to Russia for help.
30 July	Tsar Nicholas II ordered the Russian army to mobilise.
31 July	Germany called on Russia to stop her war preparations.
1 August	When Russia did not reply, Germany declared war and began to mobilise. France, who was allied to Russia, now mobilised her army.
2 August	Germany presented an ultimatum to Belgium asking for a passage through Belgium to France.
3 August	Belgium rejected the ultimatum.
4 August	The German troops crossed the Belgian frontier. Under the terms of the Treaty of London, Britain had promised Belgium neutrality. Britain was also allied to France and Russia. At 11.00am Britain sent an ultimatum to the Germans giving them 12 hours to withdraw from Belgium. Germany refused. At 11.00pm Britain declared war on Germany. The First World War begins.

Information sheet 2

Key Events in the First World War

<p><u>Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand</u></p> <p>28 June 1914</p> <p>This was the event that sparked the First World War. A Serbian student called Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. It gave Austria an excuse to declare war on Serbia. The system of European alliances drew other powers into the conflict.</p>	<p><u>Recruitment of men</u></p> <p>7 August 1914</p> <p>Lord Kitchener was the British War Minister. He called for men to join the Army on 7 August 1914. He asked men aged between 19 and 30 years to sign up to fight.</p> <p>At first this was very successful with an average of 33,000 men joining every day. But in March 1916, as the war continued and more men were needed, conscription was introduced for all single men aged 18-41. The Post Office distributed the papers.</p>	<p><u>Battle of the Somme</u></p> <p>July 1916</p> <p>This was one of many terrible battles during the First World War. Terrible conditions combined the use of gas with heavy artillery shelling and repeated 'over the top' attacks on the enemy.</p> <p>Both sides lost hundreds of thousands of men. Nearly 60,000 British troops died on a single day, 1 July 1916. This is still the worst day in the history of the British Army.</p>
<p><u>Sinking of the Lusitania</u></p> <p>7 May 1915</p> <p>The <i>Lusitania</i> was an American passenger ship travelling to Britain.</p> <p>It was torpedoed by a German submarine, as they claimed it was transporting weapons. This event caused the USA to enter the war against Germany in 1917. American industrial power and men turned the tide against Germany.</p>	<p><u>Armistice</u></p> <p>11 November 1918</p> <p>At 11.00am on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, Armistice was declared. This was when the war ended. It was estimated that a total of nearly 9 million men had died fighting since 1914.</p> <p>It was meant to be 'the war to end all wars' - unfortunately this did not turn out to be true.</p>	<p><u>Treaty of Versailles</u></p> <p>28 June 1919</p> <p>This was the treaty between Germany and the Allies. Germany was forced to pay heavily for her defeat. She had to take responsibility for starting the war and had to pay reparations (later set at £6,600 million).</p> <p>It was considered a harsh treaty by people on both sides, but many felt it was necessary.</p>

Information sheet 3

The Role of the Post Office during the First World War

The Post Office in 1914

In 1914, the Post Office employed over 250,000 people which made it the largest single employer in Britain. It handled billions of letters and parcels each year and was also responsible for telegraphs, telephones and banking services. The First World War caused many changes to the business and the Post Office contributed to the British war effort in a number of ways.

Staff leave to Fight

When war was declared in 1914, huge numbers of men rushed to enlist with the armed forces. This included 11,000 Post Office staff. Every male employee was sent a letter encouraging him to enlist and by December 28,000 staff had obliged. This figure eventually rose to 73,000 and so by 1918, the available workforce had been reduced by over a quarter. The government also used the Post Office to distribute recruitment forms to homes throughout the country.

The Home Front

With such a depletion of staff, the Post Office drafted in thousands of temporary workers, including 35,000 women in the first two years of the war. Such rapid changes upset many established employees. In July 1917, the entire telegraph system was brought down when the Central Telegraph Office in London was bombed during a Zeppelin raid. The Post Office also worked with the War Office to establish a censorship operation which monitored correspondence to countries all over the world. This was the largest operation of its kind and helped the government to catch spies, control the dissemination of military information and to compile economic data used to help the blockade of vital imports into Germany.

The Army Post Office

The Army Post Office was responsible for all of the mail for the British army, wherever it was fighting. It carried letters and parcels between battalions at the front and also ensured that all troops could stay in touch with their friends and family at home. Many of the letters and parcels bound for the troops had to be sorted at the London Home Depot. Covering five acres of Regent's Park, this was said to be the largest wooden building in the world and it handled 2 billion letters during the war. On the Western Front, base depots received the mail and got it to the troops in trains, lorries, and carts. In London, the Post Office engineering department designed telephone equipment that was used in the trenches and enabled military operations to be directed on a scale never attempted in any previous war.

Information sheet 4

The Post Office Rifles

Postmen were first asked to take up arms in 1867, when bombings occurred in London and Manchester in the name of Irish Independence. This was known as the 'Fenian Scare' and 6,000 Post Office employees volunteered for a special battalion that was created to meet the threat. When the First World War began their official name was the City of London Regiment, but they were commonly known as the Post Office Rifles.

The Post Office Rifles were an infantry battalion of Post Office employees who fought in the First World War. They travelled to the trenches on the Western Front and they were involved in some of the fiercest combat of the war, including the Battle of the Somme. They were rewarded with many military medals and the battalion has earned a prestigious place in British military history.

There were so many recruits in 1914 that a second battalion was formed, and after a period of military training they departed in March 1915 to fight alongside other regiments of the British Army on the Western Front. With battle deadlock, a line of trenches developed that stretched from the Belgian coast, across France and all the way to the Swiss Alps. Fierce battles were fought up and down this line and heavy bombardments made life in the trenches miserable for the men of the Post Office Rifles. Many of them were lost in the battle of the Somme in July 1916, and a year later more than half the battalion was killed or injured in the Battle of Wurst Farm Ridge. Of the 12,000 men who fought with the Rifles, over 1,800 were killed and 4,500 were wounded. The Post Office Rifles received 145 awards for gallantry including one Victoria Cross awarded to Sergeant A J Knight for conspicuous gallantry during the Battle of Ypres in September 1917.

The unit continued until 1921, after which the name Post Office Rifles was lost during one of many reorganisations in the armed forces.

Information sheet 5

The Queen's Westminster Rifles

The Queen's Westminster Rifles can trace their history back to the groups of volunteers raised in the city to defend this country against the threat of invasion during the Napoleonic wars. In 1860, these volunteers were known as The Queen's (Westminster) Rifle Volunteers and they were to serve with distinction in the Boer War in South Africa in 1900-1902. This service earned them the battle honours 'South Africa 1900-02'. They were allowed to display this over the portcullis coat of arms of Westminster as the battalion cap badge. With the formation of the Territorial Army in 1908, they became the 16th (County of London) Battalion, London Regiment (Queen's Westminster Rifles).

The Queen's Westminster Rifles (QWR) was one of the few territorial regiments thought fit for overseas service at the outbreak of war in August 1914. Thus, after combat training at Leverstock Green, Hertfordshire they departed from Southampton on the *SS Maidan* and landed in France on 3 November 1914.

The regular army had been decimated in the first few months of the war and the QWR soon found themselves in the front line. The 1st battalion QWR famously took part in the Christmas Truce of 1914. Written accounts from soldiers serving in the QWR have helped to establish its place in history. They were certainly a very literary group, with many educated men serving in the ranks. This may be because there was a £1.5s.0d (£1.25) signing-on fee to join the QWR at the outbreak of war.

Subsequently they were in action in other Somme battles; in the Arras offensive of 1917, in the Third Battle of Ypres at Cambrai, Canal du Nord and the advance to victory. The battalion was awarded 24 battle honours and the roll of honour lists 1,219 dead of all ranks. This roll of honour is kept in a wooden casket bearing the regimental badge in Westminster Abbey, just a few yards away from the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

After the First World War the battalion was merged with the 15th (County of London) Regiment – the Civil Service Rifles.