The First World War

The First World War, also known by other names such as The Great War or World War One, was a brutal and horrifying event in our world's history. The conflict lasted four years, three months and fourteen days from 28th July 1914 until 11th November 1918. It is estimated that a total of over seventeen million civilians and military personnel died as a direct result of the war, however many millions more suffered indirectly as a result of illness or famine.

Trench Warfare

The First World War was different from previous wars, with tactical advances in technology and industry changing the methods of combat. For example, this was the first large-scale use of aeroplanes in warfare, for example for **reconnaissance**. Tanks were also used for the first time – although they were primitive compared to their modern equivalents, with top speeds of only 4 mph.

Trench warfare, where armies from both sides fought from long, narrow ditches in the ground called trenches, was a key feature of this war. Soldiers spent much of their time in these trenches, locked in a **stalemate** with the enemy for many months at a time. However, when ordered to, they would climb out and advance through **No Man's Land** towards the other side. This was known as going 'over the top'.

The Christmas Truce

Whilst the First World War was a war of destruction and disaster, there were stories of hope and humanity. One such story was that of the Christmas **truce**, a famous and mythologised tale of a ceasefire between enemies.

Propaganda from home promised that the war would be over by Christmas 1914. However, by December, the **stalemate** continued. Both sides had lost many casualties and were weary of war. It was late on Christmas Eve when the faint sound of carol singing could be heard from the German side of the trenches. The British troops could also see small fir trees and brightly-lit lanterns decorating the German trenches.

The following day, soldiers met in **No Man's Land** to shake hands, exchange Christmas gifts and take photographs. They even played impromptu games of football. Alas, due to the generals' disapproval, the **truce** was called to an end.

The Changing Roles of Women on the Home Front

Women were required by the government to make a significant contribution to the war effort at home (known as the 'Home Front'). As more and more men departed for combat, the need for women to partake in what had previously been thought of as 'men's work' became increasingly important in order to keep the country running smoothly; indeed, the situation was desperate by the time **conscription** was introduced in 1916. Consequently, the government used propaganda – such as in persuasive posters – to push women away from traditional roles and into work.

Women began work that was formerly reserved only for men. They started jobs as bank clerks, ticket collectors, postal workers, firefighters and police officers. Some of the work was very physical and required great strength; women led horse-drawn ploughs on farms or worked with heavy machinery in engineering. Despite this, they did not receive equal pay to the men.

When the need for **munitions** intensified as the war went on, large numbers of women were brought in to work in **munitions** factories. The highly dangerous chemical TNT was used in bombs and working with this would turn the skin a yellow colour. This is how these women earned the nickname 'The Canary Girls'. The women also experienced other side effects including: sickness, chest pains and skin sores. By 1918, over a million women were employed in some aspect of munition work.

It is important to remember that in addition to paid employment, women were also running the household. This involved queuing for rations, sewing new clothes and mending old ones, gardening for home-grown food and raising their children, often alone.

Lest We Forget

11th November 2018 marks the **centenary** of the end of the First World War. Each November, we commemorate the lives of the casualties of war by holding a two-minute silence on Armistice Day, also known as Remembrance Day or Poppy Day.

Did You Know...?

- 'Lest we forget' is a commonly used phrase in war remembrance services. It is a plea not to forget past sacrifices made for our freedom today.

- Wild poppies spontaneously grew all across the old battlefields, symbolic of the bloodshed and tragedy of war.

- The Royal British Legion in the UK sells poppies.

Glossary

centenary – The hundredth anniversary of a significant event, from the Latin centum meaning a hundred.

conscription – A law which states that if you are able to fight, you must fight.

munitions – Weapons such as bombs, missiles, bullets and shells.

No Man's Land – The name given to the area between two opposing trench lines.

reconnaissance – The military observation of an area to locate an enemy.

stalemate – A situation in which further progress seems impossible.

truce – An agreement to stop fighting for a period of time.

Questions

1. In which year did the Great War end? Tick one.

   ○ 1914
   ○ 1916
   ○ 1918
   ○ 2018

2. It is estimated that a total of over seventeen million civilians and military personnel died. What does the word civilian mean? Tick one.

   ○ A soldier
   ○ An illness
   ○ A conflict
   ○ A person not in the military

3. Give two examples of how the First World War was different from previous wars.

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4. **Tanks were... primitive compared to their modern equivalents.** Explain what is meant by the word primitive in this sentence.

   _____

5. Find a word which describes how tired both sides were by December 1914.

   _____

6. Describe what happened on Christmas Day 1914.

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7. Explain why the Christmas Truce is a story of hope and humanity.

   _____

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8. Explain why the government needed to use propaganda in the form of posters to recruit women to do 'men's work'.

   _____

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9. In your own words, explain why the contributions that women made to the war effort were so significant.

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10. **Lest we forget.** Why do you think this phrase is so important today?

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