

# The impact of volunteering and conscription on Britain during the first world war...

[Government](#), [Army](#)



The impact of volunteering and conscription on Britain during the First World War Volunteering and conscription both played very big roles in the lives of the British population during the war, and for a long time after it was over.

The war itself had a huge impact on both society and the economy of Britain, so it is not surprising that volunteering and conscription both had a profound impact on the British people. The war broke out on the 3rd of August 1914,

and Britain only had a small professional army. It needed a much larger one to fight such a large scale war. It was obvious that it needed to expand quickly, so the government immediately began a massive recruitment drive

with posters, leaflets, recruitment offices in every town and stirring speeches by government ministers. The recruitment campaign was highly successful, gaining half a million recruits in the first month. By 1916 over 2 million

British men had been recruited. Why were so many so keen to join? The year 1914 witnessed a heady rush of patriotic optimism nationwide, fuelled further by tales of German atrocities. Many people also believed that, even if

the war would not be over by Christmas, that it would nonetheless be relatively short. Consequently, army service promised opportunities,

excitement and travel denied to most Britons of the time. This large surge of volunteers meant that many jobs were being abandoned, and soon there

was a shortage of civilian men that could work. The first real battle the volunteers fought at was the Battle of the Somme, on the 1st of July 1916.

For many it would also be their last. The first day of the Somme was

disastrous. The preceding artillery barrage had failed to destroy the heavily fortified German trenches and, in many cases, had not even cut their barbed

wire defenses. Military commanders, concerned with maintaining discipline

in their new volunteer army, instructed them to walk in formation towards German lines when the attack began. In the event, the British army walked into a slaughterhouse. The battle on 1 July marked the army's greatest single loss in its history, with 60,000 casualties, of which 20,000 were dead. The Pals Battalions suffered accordingly, of the 720 Accrington Pals who participated, 584 were killed, wounded or missing in the attack. The Leeds Pals lost around 750 of the 900 participants and both the Grimsby Chums and the Sheffield City Battalion lost around half of their men. After early optimism, news of the scale of the losses broke slowly, often only once letters from surviving officers and comrades reached the families of the dead. Casualty lists only began to reach the general public and, in many towns and cities, confused rumours bred panic and anger in the affected communities. In the Accrington Observer and Times, initial accounts of success quickly gave way to pages filled with names and photographs of those killed, missing and wounded. Percy Holmes, the brother of a Pal, recalled: 'I remember when the news came through to Accrington that the Pals had been wiped out. I don't think there was a street in Accrington and district that didn't have their blinds drawn, and the bell at Christ Church tolled all the day.' Few homes remained untouched: an epidemic of grief swamped the country. Although by early 1916 around two million men had enlisted voluntarily, enthusiasm diminished as casualties increased, and conscription was introduced in March. As a result, the Military Service Act was introduced and it specified that single men between the ages of 18 and 41 were liable to be called-up for military service unless they were widowed with children or ministers of religion. Conscription started on 2nd March

1916. The act was extended to married men on 25th May 1916. The law went through several changes before the war's end with the age limit eventually being raised to 51. It has been argued that enforced enlistment was more to do with employment circumstances, familial circumstances, physical fitness, skills and aptitudes and, to a much lesser extent religious and political grounds. This was vetted very closely by the Tribunals who had to assess a man's fitness for military service and weigh that against his usefulness to the domestic economy. As one historian has pointed out: " a farm lad, aged 19, might have escaped call-up in one part of the country whereas a 40-year old brickie from another part may have been drafted." Conscription caused real hardships for the British people. For example, in November 1917 a widow asked Croydon Military Tribunal to let her keep her eleventh son, to look after her. The other ten were all serving in the British armed forces. Her request was denied. Another man from Barking asked for his ninth son to be exempted as his eight other sons were already in the British Army. The man's son was only given three months exemption. About 16, 000 men refused to fight and these were called conscientious objectors. Most of these men were pacifists, who believed that even during wartime it was wrong to kill another human being. About 7, 000 pacifists agreed to perform non-combat service. This usually involved working as stretcher-bearers in the front-line, an occupation that had a very high casualty-rate. Over 1, 500 men refused all compulsory service. These men were called absolutists and were usually drafted into military units and if they refused to obey the order of an officer, they were court-martialled. Forty-one absolutists were transferred to France. These men were

considered to be on active service and could now be sentenced to death for refusing orders. Others were sentenced to Field Punishment Number One. Those found guilty before being transferred to France were sent to English prisons. Conditions were made very hard for the conscientious objectors and during the war sixty-nine of them died in prison. World War 1 was a pivotal time for women. This is because it gave women an opportunity to prove themselves in a male-dominated society, doing more than cleaning the house and tending to the children. With so many men going to war, there was a large gap in employment and, in response, women came in to replace the men. Some of the most important done by women was in the ammunition factories. With the young men away fighting, this vital work was done by women. It was very dangerous. Working with explosive chemicals meant that one explosion in a factory could trigger off many other ones. Also the protective clothing of today did not really exist then. The munition girls worked with sulphur. There was no protection from this dangerous chemical and the women who worked with sulphur found that their exposed skin turned yellow as the chemical impregnated itself into any exposed skin. Therefore, your face and hands could take on a yellow tinge. These women were given the nick-name " canaries" - though it was not a term of abuse, more a nick-name of endearment as people recognised the massive importance of their job. Ironically when the war ended in November 1918, and the soldiers returned from Europe, these ladies were dismissed from their job and replaced by those men who had been serving soldiers. The evidence suggests that this did not cause resentment among the women as the soldiers had fought for their country. But all the work done by women

during the war was to lead to something the Suffragettes had wanted but failed to get. In 1918, women over the age of 30 were given the right to vote and in 1928, this was changed so that all women had equal political rights with men. | | |