Britain at War

What is war?

War is a period of intentional actions, including armed fighting, between two or more countries or groups to force the enemy to adhere to their will.

First World War 1914–1918

Timeline of events

August 1914	Britain declares war on Germany
October 1914	First Battle of Ypres
Jan–Feb 1915	Ottoman Empire attacks Suez Canal
February 1915	Gallipoli Campaign begins
May 1915	Italy joins the Allied Powers
Feb–Dec 1916	Battle of Verdun
June–Sept 1916	Brusilov Offensive
July–Nov 1916	Battle of the Somme
April 1917	United States joins the Allied Powers
November 1918	Germany surrenders, and the war ends

Causes of the war

There were several long-term causes of the First World War.

- Countries had previously made alliances because war seemed likely. Britain had signed a treaty to protect Belgium and was allied with France and Russia. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy were allies.
- Germany had an imperialist desire to conquer other countries.
- Countries including Germany, France, Russia and Britain practised militarism, growing their armies and developing weaponry.
- Nationalism was widespread in Europe, and the leading powers each believed their country was superior.

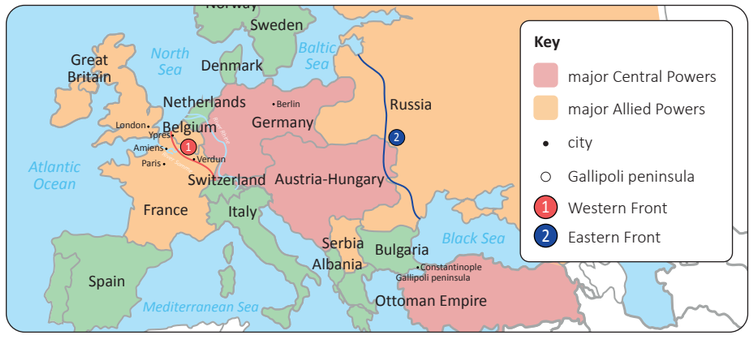
The short-term trigger was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian Nationalist on 28th June 1914. This resulted in Austria-Hungary declaring war on Serbia.

Volunteers

Britain needed millions of men to join the army. The government launched a recruitment campaign that enlisted over 2.7 million men during the war. Britain's colonies also sent 2.5 million men to fight. Men joined the army for various reasons, such as wanting to defend their country or succumbing to peer pressure.

Warring nations

At the start of the war, the warring nations divided into two opposing groups. The Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) were on one side. The Allied Powers (Great Britain, France and Russia) were on the other. The Central Powers were geographically surrounded by the Allied Powers and had to fight on several fronts.



Start of the First World War

In August 1914, German troops invaded Belgium. Allied forces pushed the German army back to north-west France, where both sides dug defensive trenches. This Western Front stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland. The German military also fought Russian forces on the Eastern Front, dividing their troops. With a stalemate in Europe, the Allies attacked the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli in April 1915 to try to take the capital, Constantinople. The Allies were defeated and suffered heavy casualties.

Trench warfare

On the battlefield, soldiers faced firepower from machine guns and artillery. Both sides dug networks of trenches to escape shells and bullets. Trenches were cold and muddy and often infested with rats. Diseases spread quickly, and food was poor. Trench warfare took a considerable toll on soldiers' physical and mental health.

Weapons and technology

During the First World War, new weapons and technology were developed.

- Machine guns and heavy artillery bombarded the enemy.
- Armoured tanks countered the firepower of the front line.
- Poisonous gas was used to kill and injure enemy soldiers.
- Planes were mounted with machine guns and used for bombing.
- Warships fought at sea, and radio communication was used.

Life on the home front

Life changed for people in Britain. Food was scarce. Rationing was introduced towards the end of the war, leading to long queues at shops, hoarding, protests and strikes. People were worried about their safety as Zeppelins, and later German Gotha planes, carried out air raids over cities. Women took on roles traditionally done by men, such as working in factories or on the land.

End of the First World War

The First World War ended on 11th November 1918, when Germany surrendered. Several factors brought about the Allied Powers' victory, including the United States declaring war on Germany after German submarines sank American ships. In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles held Germany responsible for the war and ordered Germany to pay vast amounts in reparations. The devastation this caused to Germany played a part in the outbreak of the Second World War.

Second World War 1939–1945

Timeline of events

September 1939	Germany invades Poland, and Poland surrenders
April 1940	Germany invades neutral Norway
May 1940	Germany takes control of Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands
May–June 1940	Germany invades France and Operation Dynamo rescues Allied soldiers from Dunkirk
June 1940	France surrenders to Germany
July–Oct 1940	Battle of Britain
December 1941	Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, and the United States enters the war
July 1943	Allied forces invade Italy, and Italy later surrenders
June 1944	D-Day
May 1945	Germany surrenders (VE Day)
Aug–Sept 1945	The United States drops atomic bombs on Japan, Japan surrenders, and the war ends

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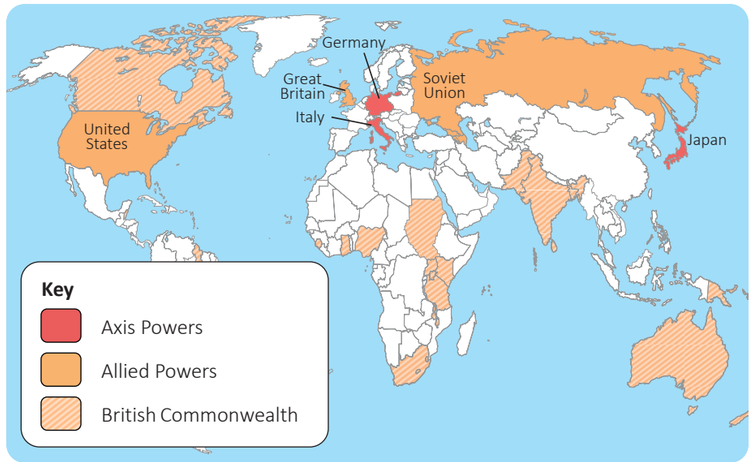
Causes of the war

The Treaty of Versailles had devastated Germany. By the 1930s, unemployment and poverty in Germany were widespread. Adolf Hitler became Germany's leader in 1934 and claimed his Nazi Party would restore German pride and save the economy. He then invaded the surrounding countries. Britain and France tried appeasement rather than challenging this expansion. On 1st September 1939, German forces invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Warring nations

The major nations involved in the Second World War were the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) and the Allied Powers (Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States). Germany was led by the fascist dictator Adolf Hitler, who wanted to expand German territory and create a pure German race. At the start of the war, Britain's prime minister was Neville Chamberlain. Winston Churchill replaced him in May 1940.



Preparation for war

Britain had learned lessons from the First World War. Barrage balloons were placed over London to stop low-flying bombers. Gas masks were issued to the civilian population, and bomb shelters were built. Blackouts were compulsory, and children were evacuated from cities. Conscription was introduced to increase numbers in the army. Food rationing began, and ration cards were issued.

Weapons and technology

The Second World War was the most technologically advanced war in history, with many new weapons and technological innovations.

- Radar used radio waves to detect enemy positions.
- Codebreakers developed machines to intercept and decode enemy messages.
- The bouncing bomb was used to destroy German dams.
- German engineers made rocket missiles that damaged British cities.
- A new lightweight fighter plane, the Supermarine Spitfire, was developed.
- The United States used the atomic bomb on Japan.

Battle of Britain

The Battle of Britain took place in the skies above Britain from July to October 1940. Adolf Hitler was planning a land attack on Britain but first had to control the skies to prevent British air attacks. The superior British planes and their organised air-defence system overcame the German Luftwaffe. This was a turning point in the war as Adolf Hitler could not continue with his land invasion plan.

Civilian life

Civilians in Britain had to cope with frightening air raids and bombings in cities. Finding their way during the blackout was difficult and dangerous. Children were separated from their families in the evacuation, and many women joined the Women's Land Army or worked in factories. Rationing became normal, and people found ingenious ways to make food and clothing last longer.

End of the Second World War

The Second World War ended on 2nd September 1945, when Japan formally surrendered. Many factors brought about the end of the war. The Allied Powers' D-Day invasion on 6th June 1944 resulted in Allied troops liberating Paris and Brussels. The Battle of the Bulge failed to break the Allied line. Adolf Hitler realised Germany had lost the war and committed suicide on 30th April 1945. The war against Japan ended after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Post-war world

After the Second World War, the Allied Powers split Germany into West and East Germany. International agreements were signed to ban chemical weapons, torture and genocide. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was approved, which still forms the basis of international human rights law. The welfare state and National Health Service were created in Britain. Many of the war's technological innovations were redeveloped for civilians.

Remembrance

Remembrance is the act of remembering and honouring the people who died as a result of the conflict. The poppy is a symbol of remembrance after poppies grew in the Western Front battlefields. Memorials, monuments and war cemeteries all serve to remind us of the sacrifice made by millions of people.

Glossary

alliance	A group of countries who have agreed to work together because of shared aims.
appeasement	Giving the opposing side something they have demanded to prevent further disagreement.
colony	A nation controlled by another country.
conscription	Forcing people by law to join the armed services.
genocide	The deliberate killing of large numbers of people from a particular nation or ethnic group, with the aim of destroying that nation or group.
imperialism	The desire to conquer and colonise other countries.
militarism	The belief that it is necessary to build up and use strong armed forces to gain power, money and land.
reparation	Payment made by a defeated country after a war to pay for damages it caused to another country.
stalemate	A situation in which neither side can get an advantage, and no action can be taken.

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