WORLD WAR ONE

WHY IT IS STILL REMEMBERED AS THE ‘GREAT WAR’
THE WAR AND THE BRITISH

- On Western front more soldiers killed than during World War II, memorials in almost every village
- Marked end of the so-called ‘Edwardian Summer’
- Social changes, e.g. work and vote for women
- Creation of its own genre in poetry, less so in novels
- Still commemorated on 11-11, ‘poppies’ sold to aid veterans of any British war
CAUSES

❖ Alliances France Russia and Great Britain vs Austria and Germany

❖ Alliances tested 3 times: Balkan wars against Turkish empire involve Austria and Russia

❖ Colonies create rivalry and competing navies: arms race Britain and Germany

❖ International economy but national policies

❖ Plans for mobilization leave no room for hesitation or negotiation, all hinges on (train) speed
SYMPTOMS

- German offers of support for Kruger during Boer War: Germany the new preferential enemy
- Germans provoke French in Morocco
- Spies and plots in novels become German instead of French or Russian
- Naval race drives British into the arms of the French-Russian alliance albeit with less outspoken commitment
- Young Turks modernize Turkey but also wish to strengthen its grip on the Balkan leading to 3 Balkan wars
THE BEGINNING

Franz Ferdinand assassinated, Austria makes demands on Serbia, Austrians get ‘blank check’ from Germany

Alliances go to work, Russia mobilizes so Germany mobilizes so France mobilizes

War started by weakest and most corrupt powers

Germany doubted that Britain would join

Britain enters when neutral Belgium is attacked
Count Von Schlieffen creates plan to attack France 1905

Knock out French quickly then turn on Russia

Based on train schedules, once started cannot stop

Worked for a month from August 3 but stops with battle of the Marne September 5-12 (30 miles from Paris)

Germans forced to retreat, start to dig in

Trenches extend from Swiss border to the Channel
THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN
ARMIES WITHOUT MOVEMENT

- Early days for the motor car and lorry
- Even earlier for aeroplanes, reconnaissance, light bombing
- Tanks invented in the course of the war
- Perfected since the Boer War: machine guns and barbed wire
- Trench stalemate: the attacking party always disadvantaged
- Huge bombardments to silence machine-guns
THE TRENCHES 1914
WHY THE OFFENSIVES

- Germans want to break through to the sea
- French and British try to break the deadlock
- Army leadership on both sides incredibly bad and out of touch with reality, try to force the issue simply with manpower
- Battle of Verdun rages 6 months, 700,000 dead, no gain for either side
- Battle of the Somme (1916) 60,000 British dead in 1st day...
BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The lines they are formed and the orders are given
While General Haig sends his prayers to the sky.
As we move onward our bayonets before us
We know that those prayers were no better than lies.
Rising and twisting the smoke curls above us
I see by the green glow there's gas in its domes.
We stumble and fall through the craters and shell holes,
Watching the bombs turning trenches to tombs.

We're over the rise now, the line is before us,
Enemy gun fire taking its toll
What hope have the bayonets and the rifles we carry
Against a machine gun here on the Somme.

Day's nearly done now the battlefield empties,
The living are hidden the dead lying still.
The wounded are calling for someone to save them
But no one can help them, no body will.

Trad. adapted by Phyl Lobi
REALITY OF TRENCH LIFE

✧ Cold and wet most of the year, you are living in mud

✧ Poor sanitation, stench and diseases

✧ Constant danger of an attack or direct hit, snipers

✧ Lack of sleep, good food. Feet literally start rotting

✧ Rats

✧ Lice (causing trench fever)

✧ The new weapon: poison gas
RATS

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?

Isaac Rosenberg
MUD AND RAIN

Mud and Rain
By Siegfried Sassoon

Mud and rain and wretchedness and blood.
Why should jolly soldier-boys complain?
God made these before the roofless Flood -
Mud and rain.

Mangling cramps and bullets through the brain,
Jesus never guessed them when He died.
Jesus had a purpose for His pain,
Ay, like abject beasts we shed our blood,
Often asking if we die in vain.
Gloom conceals us in a soaking sack --
Mud and rain.
LICE  (FROM LOUSE HUNTING, I. ROSENBERG)

For a shirt verminously busy
Yon soldier tore from his throat
With oaths
Godhead might shrink at, but
not the lice.
And soon the shirt was aflare
Over the candle he'd lit while
we lay.
Then we all sprang up and
stript
To hunt the vermin brood.
Soon like a demons' pantomime
The place was raging.
See the silhouettes agape,
See the gibbering shadows
Mixed with the battled arms on
the wall.
See gargantuan hooked fingers
Dug in supreme flesh
To smutch the supreme
littleness.
See the merry limbs in hot
Highland fling
Because some wizard vermin
Charmed from the quiet this
revel
When our ears were half lulled
By the dark music
Blown from Sleep's trumpet.
Two hundred yards away he saw his head;  
He raised his rifle, took quick aim and shot him.  
Two hundred yards away the man dropped dead;  
With bright exulting eye he turned and said,  
'By Jove, I got him!'  
And he was jubilant; had he not won  
The meed of praise his comrades haste to pay?  
He smiled; he could not see what he had done;  
The dead man lay two hundred yards away.  
He could not see the dead, reproachful eyes,  
The youthful face which Death had not defiled  
But had transfigured when he claimed his prize.  
Had he seen this perhaps he had not smiled.  
He could not see the woman as she wept  
To the news two hundred miles away,  
Or through his very dream she would have crept.  
And into all his thoughts by night and day.  
Two hundred yards away, and, bending o'er  
A body in a trench, rough men proclaim  
Sadly, that Fritz, the merry is no more.  
(Or shall we call him Jack? It's all the same.)
The trench was wet and slippery. The guide was giving hoarse directions all the time. 'Hole right.' 'Wire high.' 'Wire low.' 'Deep place here, sir.' 'Wire low.' I had never been told about the field telephone wires. They were fastened by staples to the side of the trench, and when it rained the staples were always falling out and the wire falling down and tripping people up. If it sagged too much one stretched it across the top of the trench to the other side to correct the sag, and then it would catch one's head.

Robert Graves, ‘Goodbye To All That’
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under I green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

From ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’ Siegfried Sassoon
Gas was a nightmare. Nobody believed in the efficacy of the respirators, though we were told that they were proof against any gas the enemy could send over. Pink army forms marked 'Urgent' were constantly arriving from headquarters to explain how to use these contrivances. They were all contradictory. First the respirators were to be kept soaking wet, then they were to be kept dry, then they were to be worn in a satchel, then, again, the satchel was not to be used.
NO WAY OUT

✧ From volunteer army to conscription
✧ Very little compassion with conscientious objectors
✧ ‘In for the duration’
✧ Wounded and shell-shocked sent back asap
✧ Executed for sleeping on duty let alone disobeying orders
✧ Propaganda pro-war very powerful
EXECUTIONS

Most of the three million British troops soon knew they faced almost certain death on the battlefield. Day after day they would witness the annihilation of their friends, never knowing if or when they would be next. On some occasions whole battalions were wiped out, leaving just a handful of confused, terrified men. But those who shirked their responsibility soon learned there was no way out of the horror - if they ran from German guns, they would be shot by British ones. To their far-off generals, the soldiers' executions served a dual purpose - to punish the deserters and to dispel similar ideas in their comrades. Courts martial were anxious to make an example and those on trial could expect little support from medical officers. One such doctor later recalled, 'I went to the trial determined to give him no help, for I detest his type - I really hoped he would be shot.'
The Bishop tells us: ‘When the boys come back
‘They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
‘In a just cause: they lead the last attack
‘On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
‘New right to breed an honourable race,
‘They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.’

‘We’re none of us the same!’ the boys reply.
‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
‘Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
‘And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
‘A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.’
And the Bishop said: ‘The ways of God are strange!’

Siegfried Sassoon
PROPAGANDA

✧ News coverage and letters censored from start to end

✧ Both sides bent on picturing enemy as cruel as possible

✧ Yet: losses published in newspapers, guns to be heard across the channel...

✧ Christmas Truce 1914 denied and repetition made impossible
HOW THE STALEMATE WAS BROKEN

- Naval blockade of Germany (and so Austria)
- Germany and Austria fighting on two fronts
- Britain aided by troops from Empire
- U-boat weapon to break blockade fails but helps to bring in Americans
- Zimmerman telegram German blunder
- Bringing Lenin to Russia German success but too late
US INVOLVEMENT

- Wilson pro-Britain and France
- American population divided, isolationist and many German-Americans
- Lusitania (1915) leads to pause in U-boat war
- Unrestricted U-boat warfare declared 1917
- US join in 1917 but need at least 6 months to get ‘over there’
OVER THERE

Johnnie, get your gun, get your gun, get your gun,
Johnnie show the Hun who's a son of a gun.
Hoist the flag and let her fly, Yankee Doodle do or
die.
Pack your little kit, show your grit, do your bit.
Yankee to the ranks, from the towns and the tanks.
Make your mother proud of you, and the old Red,
White and Blue.
Over there, over there, send the word, send the
word over there
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tumming ev'rywhere.
So prepare, say a pray'r, send the word, send the
word to beware.
We'll be over, we're coming over, and we won't
come back till it's over over there.
I AM THE GRASS

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
    I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
    What place is this?
    Where are we now?

    I am the grass.
    Let me work.