

In 1914, Britain ruled over one quarter of the world's surface area and 434 million people. This was known as the British Empire. When war broke out, Britain was desperate for men to fight. Unlike France, Russia and Germany, who had massive armies, Britain had only a small standing army (regular army of paid soldiers) of 150,000 men. Volunteers from the Empire were therefore welcomed. Over eight and half million men volunteered.

India

There was a lot of enthusiasm to join up in India. Unlike Britain itself, India already had a well-trained and experienced army. Over one million Indians fought, and over 600,000 helped in other ways e.g. porters, labourers and railway builders. Over 100,000 Indians were reported dead, wounded or missing. Indian personnel won 12,445 British medals for bravery.



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Indians played a key role in **France and Belgium** in 1914. The first Indian to be awarded the Victoria Cross (a medal for bravery) was Sepoy Khudadad Khan, who was the only survivor of a machine gun team which came under heavy attack on 31 October 1914. He went on fighting against all odds at what became known as the first Battle of Ypres.

In 1915 Indian troops took part in the battles of Neuve Chapelle, Ypres and Loos. After 1915 the Indian divisions were taken away from the Western Front, but Indian Cavalry (horseback) units fought at the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917).

Elsewhere Indian troops fought at **Gallipoli** (Turkey) in 1915, in **Palestine** and in **Mesopotamia** in the Middle East. They fought against the Turks, who joined the war on Germany's side. After a long and difficult campaign the Turks surrendered in 1918.

The West Indies

Many men from the West Indies were proud to fight for the Empire, and volunteered immediately. At first they were sent to **Sierra Leone** and the **Cameroons** in Africa. In 1915 the 'British West India Regiment' was formed. It had 15,600 men from Jamaica, Barbados, British Guiana and Trinidad. They served in **France, Palestine, Egypt and Italy**. They suffered 1,325 casualties and 81 men received medals. The West Indies also gave donations of money and goods to help the British war effort.

The British authorities did not seem keen to take black soldiers into their own British Army, but the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps did fight under white officers on the Western Front.

Africa

Fighting took place in Africa between the colonies of Britain, France and Belgium and the German colonies. Men from the British colonies in East Africa fought in the King's African Rifles, whilst those from the West African colonies joined the West African Frontier Force. Africa supplied goods and money as well as soldiers. The success of the campaigns depended on porters to transport supplies.

Most of the fighting took place in **West Africa**. Allied troops conquered German **Togoland** in 1914, and the **Cameroons** in 1916. **German South West Africa** was conquered in 1915. The fighting in **East Africa** lasted from 1914 until 1918, when the Germans surrendered. In East Africa the battles were fought mainly by black Africans, but Indian and European troops also fought in Africa. Despite the problems of supply, disease and climate, the efforts of Allied troops showed how men of many different nationalities could fight together to win. In total about a quarter of a million Africans fought. 62,000 were killed, wounded or died of disease.

Tasks:

- 1) Explain why Britain needed the help of the Empire in 1914.
- 2) In the boxes on the map write brief notes about the scale of each area's contribution to the war.
- 3) Draw arrows on the map to show where troops fought around the world. You can use different coloured arrows for Indian, West Indian, and African troops. Label each arrow so it is clear where the troops were fighting.
- 4) Explain why the men from the Empire were important in winning the war

Black people in Britain

By 1914 there were black communities in Britain – mainly in Cardiff, Liverpool and London. At first it was not clear whether they would be allowed to fight. A law of 1914 limited the number of ‘aliens’ serving together in any part of the army. In 1916 conscription was brought in. This law said all men aged 19 to 41 had to fight in the armed forces. It meant that black men would join up on the same terms as white men. However, the British War Office was afraid of encouraging black men to join the army. This meant that many failed the preliminary medical, or were sent to join the British West Indies Regiment or sent to the Canadian Army.

One remarkable story is of Walter Tull. He was a black man, and was born and brought up in Kent. His father was from Barbados. When his parents died he was sent to an orphanage in London. He was signed by Tottenham Hotspurs as Britain’s first black professional outfield footballer. In 1914 he enlisted in the 17th Football Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment and fought in France. In 1917 he became Britain’s first black army officer. He was recommended for the Military Cross after leading a group of men through heavy shell fire without anyone being hurt. He was killed in 1918. His fellow soldiers showed their respect by trying to recover his body from No Man’s Land during one of the worst battles of the campaign.

Tasks

- 1) In pairs, write a list of questions you would like to ask Walter Tull if he was still alive.
- 2) Why do you think is it important that we study and remember Walter Tull? Discuss with your partner.

Teaching notes

- This resource is designed to be taught in the context of a First World War unit and focuses on the role of troops from the British Empire.
- There is a simplified version for less able students (pages 5–6 of this resource pack).
- A simple PowerPoint presentation (for subscribers only) accompanies this resource. It allows you to project the photograph of the Indian soldiers and the map of the British Empire.

Lesson outline

A good way to start would be with the image of the Indian soldiers at the station in Hampshire about to leave for the front. Discuss ‘what can we learn about the First World War from this photograph?’

The main activity requires students to use the information on the worksheets to annotate a map of the British Empire 1914. When the students are doing the map work it would be helpful to project a copy of the map with the countries of the British Empire shown. This is available at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/26/The_British_Empire.png and in the PowerPoint presentation which accompanies this pack.

The second section of the resource covers black Britons’ contribution to the war and looks at Walter Tull. The student questions are designed to prompt a good class discussion on his historical significance.

Matching interactive (subscribers only)

There is also an accompanying interactive Matching activity which would work well as a quick plenary. Students must match up two halves of each sentence. The answers are provided here:

Britain needed men from the Empire to fight because	it only had a small regular army.
About one million Indians	volunteered to fight.
Khudadad Khan was awarded	the Victoria Cross for bravery.
It was difficult for black British men to	join the British army on equal terms to white men.
Walter Tull was	Britain’s first black army officer.
Fighting in Africa took place between	the German, British, French and Belgium colonies.
Conscription meant that all	men aged 19 to 41 had to join the armed forces.
Many Indian troops fought	the Turks, who had joined the war on Germany’s side.
The West Indies	gave volunteers, money and goods to the war effort.

Follow up work.

Students could independently research Walter Tull or Khudadad Khan. This could be done in the form of an obituary (we have a handy template for this: quick search [20704](#) on the site) or as a class display.

In 1914, Britain ruled over one quarter of the world's surface area. This was known as the British Empire. However, Britain itself had only a small regular army. This meant that when war broke out, volunteers from the Empire were invited to help. Over 8.5 million men volunteered.

India

Over one million Indians fought in the war. Over 100,000 Indians were reported dead, wounded or missing. Indians played a key role in **France and Belgium** in 1914. The first Indian to be awarded the Victoria Cross (a medal for bravery) was Sepoy Khudadad Khan, who was the only survivor of a machine gun team which came under attack on 31 October 1914.

Elsewhere Indian troops fought in **Turkey**, in **Palestine**, and in the **Middle East**. They fought against the Turks, who joined the war on Germany's side. After a long and difficult campaign the Turks surrendered in 1918.



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The West Indies

Many men from the West Indies were proud to fight for the Empire, and volunteered immediately. They fought in **Africa, France, Palestine, Egypt and Italy**. In 1915 the 'British West India Regiment' was formed. It had 15,600 men and 1,325 of them were killed or injured. 81 men received medals. The West Indies also gave money and goods to help the British war effort.

Africa

Fighting took place in **Africa** between the colonies of Britain, France and Belgium and the German colonies. In total about a quarter of a million Africans fought. 62,000 were killed, wounded or died of disease.

Black people in Britain

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One remarkable story is of Walter Tull. He was a black man, born and brought up in Kent, in the south of England. His father was from Barbados. He became a professional footballer for Tottenham Hotspurs and in 1917 he became Britain's first black army officer. He was recommended for the Military Cross after leading a group of men through heavy shell fire without anyone being hurt. He was killed in 1918.

Tasks:

- 1) Explain why Britain needed the help of the Empire in 1914.
- 2) In the boxes on the map fill in the blanks to explain the contribution of each area to the war.
- 3) Draw arrows on the map to show where troops fought around the world. You can use different coloured arrows for Indian, West Indian, and African troops. Label each arrow so it is clear where the troops were fighting.
- 4) In pairs, think of at least two questions you would like to ask Walter Tull if he was still alive.
- 5) Why do you think is it important that we study and remember Walter Tull? Discuss with your partner.

Men from the British Empire in the First World War



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The British Empire in 1914



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