

Causation

8

1.1 Why the rush to join up in 1914?

Lesson objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- explain why men rushed to **join up** in 1914
- understand that there were many reasons why men joined up
- understand that causes interact.

When historians talk about 'causation', they are talking about why things happened. There is very seldom just one cause for any event. When you think about why people do something the number of causes and how they affect each other are rarely the same for each person. Historians sometimes talk about 'causal webs' when they talking about causation. These look rather like spiders' webs with all the causes joined by lines to show how they affect each other. You are going to study causation by looking at why so many men in Britain joined the army when Britain went to war with Germany in 1914 at the start of the First World War.

Joining up in 1914

The First World War had been brewing for years. It involved many different countries, for different reasons. On both sides, young men responded to the call to join the army in huge numbers. Photographs show smiling, waving volunteers going to join up.

In August 1914, Britain had about 250,000 soldiers – about half of whom were serving abroad. Germany had about 700,000 soldiers. Lord Kitchener, the Minister for War, began a campaign to get men between 19 and 30 years of age to join up. The campaign used posters, advertisements in newspapers, and recruiting stations up and down the country. The government did not need to introduce **conscription** until 1916.

Kitchener hoped to get about 100,000 volunteers, but men volunteered at a rate of about 30,000 a day throughout August. Many were rejected as being too old, too young or not fit enough. Even so, many recruiting stations had to send hundreds of people away at the end of each day. Some rejected volunteers went from one recruiting station to another, hoping to find one that would take them.

By mid-September Kitchener had 500,000 men – far more than the army could train or equip all at once. Some had to wait months for training. Why were so many men so keen to join up, when they would be going away to face the dangers of war?

Source A: George Coppard was sixteen and a half when he joined up on 27 August 1914. He wrote about the war in his book, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, in 1969.

News placards screamed out at every street corner and military bands blared out their military music in the main streets of Croydon. This was too much for me to resist and, as if drawn by a magnet, I knew I had to enlist straight away.

Source B: A young man from Canterbury, who joined the army as soon as Kitchener appealed, was interviewed about it later, in 1997.

Everyone was rushing to join – to join Kitchener's army, to have the honour of being one of the first hundred thousand.

Why did so many men in Britain rush to join up in 1914?

People joined up for many different reasons, or combinations of them. The most usual are shown on the next page. The image is the first recruitment poster of the war. The face is Lord Kitchener's.

Fighting for a 'just' cause

Many people felt Germany was in the wrong and had to be stopped. This feeling increased when Germany not only invaded **neutral** Belgium, but also treated civilians brutally. For example, the German army burned and looted the town of Louvain, shooting many people, including women and children, after it had surrendered.

Patriotism

The idea of 'serving your country' was central to the recruiting drive; at first, it was almost the only thing emphasised.

Ignorance

Very few of those who rushed to join up had any idea what fighting a war would be like. The general feeling was that Germany would be easily defeated; that the war would be over 'by Christmas'. Many men not taken as volunteers in the first few months were certain they had 'missed out' because of this belief.



Source C: A recruiting poster from the start of the war.

Influence of government propaganda

By 1915 the recruiting drive had changed emphasis from 'serving your country' to 'you're letting people down not joining up'. The idea of the brave soldier 'doing his bit' while others did nothing – leaving them in greater danger – was pushed home in various ways.

Public pressure

There was huge public pressure on young men to join up. People in the street asked them why they hadn't done so. The press urged men to join up and women to persuade them to do so. Some young women put notices like this in local newspapers: *If you aren't in uniform in two weeks time, I'll never speak to you again.* In September 1914, a group of 30 women in Kent gave white feathers (symbols of cowardice) to young men who weren't in uniform. The movement was soon at work country-wide.

Did you know?**Going too far?**

Women of the White Feather Movement often gave feathers to the wrong people: soldiers on leave out of uniform; men who had fought but were unfit to go back; people in government jobs who could not join up. The government debated making giving out white feathers a crime, but settled for armbands and badges to show a person had a good reason not to be in the army.

Glossary

conscription: making people join the army

join up: join the military services of a country

a just cause: a reason for doing something that is morally right

neutral: a neutral country is one that has stated it will not get involved in the wars of other countries, on any side