

## What role did the British Empire play in the war?

Britain went to war in 1914 with a small, professional army primarily designed to police its overseas empire. The entire force consisted of just over 250,000 Regulars. Together with 250,000 Territorials and 200,000 Reservists, this made a total of 700,000 trained soldiers. Compared to the mass conscript armies of Germany, France and Russia, this was tiny.

The Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, realised the conflict would be long and on an unprecedented scale, so Britain would have to create a new mass army.

Thousands of eager volunteers soon joined up, but these men were completely untrained. They spent their first months in the Army learning the basics of soldiering. Despite the influx of volunteers, the British still needed more men. Conscriptation was introduced in 1916 and this eventually expanded the Army to a force of over 4 million men by the end of the war in 1918.



However, even an army this large was not sufficient to meet all of Britain's commitments. Throughout the conflict it was supported by forces from across the British Empire, the nations of which pledged full support for Britain following its declaration of war against Germany in August 1914.



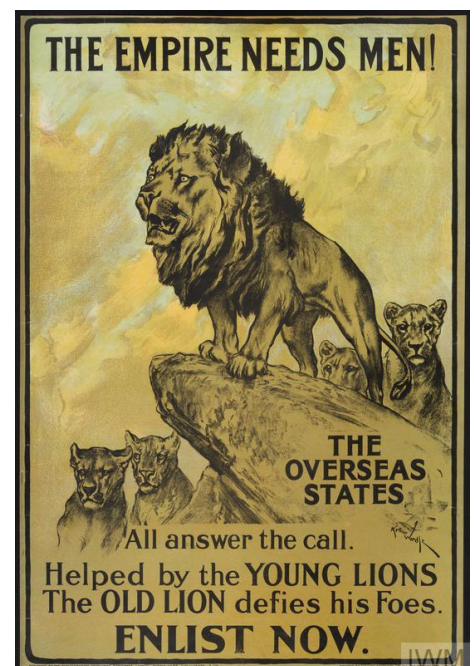
Britain's colonies sent over two and a half million men to fight for Britain during the war. India sent the most soldiers. At that time, India included both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Colonies as far away as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia (which is now Zimbabwe) also sent thousands of soldiers.

That meant that Britain had soldiers from five different continents: Europe, North America, Australasia, Asia and Africa.

From 'The Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920':

- Britain: 5,000,000
- India: 1,440,437
- Canada: 628,964
- Australia: 412,953
- South Africa: 136,070
- New Zealand: 128,825
- Other colonies: 134,837



## ***Racism in the trenches***

There was a time when George Blackman would have done anything for the mother country. In 1914, in a flush of youth and patriotism, he told the recruiting officer he was 18 - he was actually 17 - and joined the British West Indies Regiment.

"Lord Kitchener said with the black race, he could whip the world," Blackman recalls. "We sang songs: 'Run Kaiser William, run for your life, boy'." He closes his eyes as he sings, and keeps them closed for the rest of our interview. "We wanted to go. The island government told us the king said all Englishmen must go to join the war. The country called all of us."



The arrival of the 369th black infantry regiment in New York after the First World War.

While Kitchener's private attitude was that black soldiers should never be allowed at the front alongside white soldiers, the enormous losses - and the interference of George V - made it inevitable. Although Indian soldiers had been briefly in the trenches in 1914 and 1915, Caribbean troops did not arrive until 1915.

When they arrived, they often found that fighting was to be done by white soldiers only - black soldiers were assigned the dirty, dangerous jobs of loading ammunition, laying telephone wires and digging trenches. Conditions were appalling. Blackman rolls up his sleeve to show me his armpit: "It was cold. And everywhere there were white lice. We had to shave the hair there because the lice grow there. All our socks were full of white lice."

"They called us darkies," he says, recalling the casual racism of the time. "But when the battle starts, it didn't make a difference. We were all the same. When you're there, you don't care about anything. Every man there is under the rifle."

He remembers one attack with particular clarity. "The Tommies said: 'Darkie, let them have it.' I made the order: 'Bayonets, fix' and then 'B company, fire'. You know what it is to go and fight somebody hand to hand? You need plenty nerves. You push that bayonet in there and hit with the butt of the gun - if he is dead he is dead, if he live he live."

The West Indies Regiment experienced racism from the Germans as well as the British. "The Tommies, they brought up some German prisoners and these prisoners were spitting on their hands and wiping on their faces, to say we were painted black," says Blackman.

He didn't make friends. "Don't have no friend. A soldier don't got friends. Know why? You believe that you are dead now. Your friend is this: the gun. That is your friend."

*Extract of an interview by Simon Rogers first published in the Guardian on November 6 2002*