



THE BRITISH EMPIRE, 1914



Events that led the British Empire into WWI

At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain's economic success was declining. While surpluses were small each year, they were consistent—reflecting the Empire's world-wide trading network. Germany and the United States were becoming the biggest in terms of economic production since they had lots more natural resources than England. Furthermore, Germany was trying to develop its own world empire to overtake Britain. London was still the world's financial capital, but England's economy—and its influence—was not as powerful as it had been.

England was still a class-based society. People were either rich nobility or poor workers without ways to move between the classes. But the class system was beginning to show some chinks. There was political unrest growing. The socialist movement came to England during this time. Social services (like health care) began during this time. Women were using violent methods (like throwing bricks and trashing buildings) to get the vote. The popular and outgoing King Edward died in 1910 and was replaced by the strict, soldier-like King George.

King George was the first cousin of Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm. On the face of it, the cousins were friendly, but underneath the Kaiser was trying to build up an empire and gain world power. England worried about Germany's buildup of war ships. England understood the close relationship between Austria-Hungary and Germany and did not want to try to separate the two. But it did not want either country (or both) to think they could dominate Britain.

Effects of WWI on the British Empire

England's class-based society meant that, while working-class men served as soldiers, upper-class men were officers who stayed out of harm's way. The British Empire stretched around the world, so many of England's armies were made up of colonial regiments (from Canada, Australia, India, etc.). These were not counted as part of England's standing armies.

WWI Countries	Standing Armies & Reserves August 1914	Mobilized Forces 1914-18
Great Britain	975,000	8,905,000

Allied Powers	Population in Millions	Military Deaths	Civilian Deaths	Total Deaths	Military Wounded
Great Britain	45.4	885,138	109,000	994,138	1,663,435

Part of what made WWI so horrible for the soldiers was the use of the WMD called mustard gas. This poison gas would kill anyone who did not get his gas mask on fast enough whenever a gas bomb exploded nearby. Also, mustard gas is heavier than air, so it sank down into the fox holes and other places the soldiers were hiding from the artillery shells and bombs. Many soldiers were injured or killed by mustard gas during WWI. In total, more than 1.2 million people were injured by poison gas attacks; nearly 100,000 of them died.

Effects of Mustard Gas

Country	Non-Fatal	Deaths	Total
Great Britain	180,597	8,109	188,706
Total	1,205,655	91,198	1,296,853

In addition to being costly in terms of lives lost, WWI was also expensive in terms of the money spent by the governments to run the war. Britain's economy lost a lot during the First World War. In fact, Great Britain lost a quarter of its total wealth by fighting the war. Economic policies did not change to reflect the new situation after the war and so the country fell even further with lots of unemployment.

Allied Powers	Cost in Dollars in 1914-18
Great Britain	\$35,334,012,000
Total Allied Powers Costs	\$125,690,477,000

Questions to prepare for simulation to represent the British Empire perspective

1. How might the growth of German power and influence affect Britain? Why?
2. As a member of the winning group of countries, the Allied Powers, what role should Britain play in the upcoming peace process in 1919?
3. How should the costs that Britain experienced during the war affect their attitudes and goals for a peace treaty?
4. As a representative of the British government for the peace conference, what price would you suggest that Britain and the other countries pay to achieve an end to the war and bring peace to Europe?