THE MAIN BATTLES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

THE FIRST WORLD WAR
EDUCATION PROJECT
1914–1918
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The First World War was a worldwide conflict that began in Europe and spread to the four corners of the world. There were two main fronts to the fighting in Europe, the Eastern Front and the Western Front. Most Welshmen fought on the Western Front.

Outside Europe there were many battles in Africa and the Middle East.
Around **13.5 million** people were killed, injured, held captive or lost on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918.

This includes **7.9 million soldiers** that fought for the Allies and around **5.6 million** that fought for the Central Powers.

Around **13 million** people were killed, injured, held captive or lost on the Eastern Front between 1914 and 1918.

This includes **10 million soldiers** that fought for the Allies and around **3 million** that fought for the Central Powers.
10% of the population of Wales (273,000) went to fight during the war.

40,000 men from Wales died during the war.

1 out of every 7 soldier from Wales died during the war.
Much of the fighting that took place during The First World War happened in the trenches. This is a picture of Welsh soldiers in a reserve trench. The photograph was taken at the Battles of the Somme, 1916. ©IWM Q 4415
No man’s land
This is the land between the trenches of the two armies. Once the soldiers went over the front line they were in no man’s land.

Artillery
Artillery guns could fire shells that would explode and make a lot of damage. They were placed far from the front line because they could shoot from long range.

Machine guns
Machine guns were located at the heart of the trenches. These guns could shoot hundreds of bullets in seconds.

Trenches
The trenches were a series of open tunnels that were meant to enable soldiers to travel safely from one place to another. The trenches could be miles long. Many trenches had underground rooms where soldiers could shelter from shells or bombs that were fired at their trench.

Barbed wire
Barbed wire was used to defend the trenches from soldiers attacking the trench over no man’s land.

Sandbags
Sandbags were used throughout the trenches. The idea was that a bullet that hit a sandbag would be prevented from going any further.
Germany had been preparing for war for years and had devised a plan known as the Schlieffen Plan to attack France and Russia. For this plan to be successful they had to attack France quickly through Belgium and hope that Russia did not have time to mobilize its army.

Germany hoped to outflank the French army by attacking through Belgium.

Germany’s aim was to capture Paris. The easiest plan in their opinion was to go around the city so that they could attack from the west and the east at the same time.
Timeline of Main Battles

- **1914**
  - The Battle of Mons, 23 August 1914
  - The Battle of Tannenberg, 23 August - 30 August 1914
  - 1st Battle of Ypres, 19 October - 22 November 1914

- **1915**
  - 1st Battle of the Marne, 5 September - 12 September 1914
  - The Battle of Gallipoli, 25 April 1915 - 6 January 1916

- **1916**
  - 2nd Battle of Ypres, 22 April - 25 May 1915
  - The Battle of Verdun, 21 February - 20 December 1916
  - The Battle of Jutland, 31 May - 1 June 1916
  - The Battle of the Somme, 1 July - 16 November 1916

- **1917**
  - The Battle of Passchendaele, 31 July - 6 November 1917

- **1918**
  - The Battle of Amiens, 8 August - 12 August 1918
The Battle of Mons

23 August 1914

This is the first battle in which Welsh soldiers fought.

The German army looked strong at the beginning of the war and the Schlieffen plan seemed to be working well. The Germans travelled through Belgium without much difficulty despite the Belgian army’s efforts to prevent them.

A small British army came to meet the large German army at Mons, Belgium. The Germans were surprised the effectiveness of this small British army. Despite this fact Britain did not have enough men to prevent the German army.

The British army decided to fall back and concentrate on defending Paris with a larger army.

At least 80,000 soldiers from Welsh battalions fought in the battle of Mons, and Welsh soldiers were also involved fighting in other battalions.

A Welshman’s experience

Name: Huw T Edwards (1892 - 1970)

Town: Rowen, Conwy

Experience:
Until we heard the large guns firing for the first time the soldiers were all happy, thinking that this was a sort of holiday. But...after we realized that we were about to meet the enemy soon the singing stopped, and there was silence.
With the Schlieffen plan working well and the German army dominating the Western Front, Russia decided to attack from the east partly to ease the burden that was on the French and British Armies.

At the beginning of the fighting the Russian army won significant ground due to the fact that they outnumbered the German soldiers by 2 to 1. Despite their superiority in numbers some of the decisions made by the Russian generals jeopardized their efforts.

The Germans intercepted a secret Russian message that said that the Russian army did not intend to push any further. With this in mind the Germans counter-attacked against a small part in the Russian army. The **Russian army scattered and fled, and the Germans took 92,000 Russians soldiers as prisoners.**

After defeating this small part of the Russian army the Germans turned their attention to the remainder of that army, and managed to win this important battle at the beginning of the war. The Russian army lost 250,000 men at Tannenberg.
The First Battle of the Marne
5 Sept. - 12 September 1914

This was one of the first and most important battles of the First World War. Some historians believe that the Schlieffen plan may well have worked if Germany had won this battle.

But this was not to be. The British and French armies met the German army on the banks of the river Marne near Paris. Preventing the Germans from reaching Paris was the most important task for the French and British armies.

The German army had good momentum until they reached the river Marne. There was strong opposition from the allies. Both France and Britain counter-attacked effectively and prevented Germany from going any further.

The Battle of the Marne began the long and arduous struggle. It was the battle that turned the war far from being a ‘quick war’ to being a war that lasted for 4 long years.

Troops from South Wales played an important part in this battle.

A Welshman’s contribution

Name: W C Fuller (1884-1974)

Town: Laugharne, Carmarthenshire

Contribution: WC Fuller went to rescue his captain Mark Haggard after he and other soldiers were wounded by machine gun fire. He dragged his captain back to safety. He won the Victoria Cross for his bravery.
The 1st Battle of Ypres

19 October - 22 November 1914

The control of the city of Ypres was important to both sides because of its location next to the North Sea.

A ‘race to the sea’ developed between the Allied and German troops with the fighting moving towards the North Sea until it reached Ypres in Belgium.

Britain, France and Belgium had reinforced the defences around the city of Ypres before the Germans arrived.

There was heavy fighting from 19 October to 22 November that ceased in mid-November due to the bad winter weather.

Heavy rain had turned the roads into mud baths and it was extremely difficult to move at any speed.

A young German soldier named Adolf Hitler fought at this battle.

A Welshman’s contribution

Name: J E Jones

Town: Criccieth, Gwynedd

Contribution:
Before the war Lieutenant JE Jones worked in the gold mines of South Africa. When war broke out he joined the army. In the battle of Ypres his experience of digging tunnels was important. JE Jones and his fellow tunnelers played an important role by digging under no man’s land towards the enemy.
The 2nd battle of Ypres began with a surprise attack by the Germans.

The battle is remembered because this is where poison gas was used effectively for the first time. The Germans had previously tried to use poison gas against the Russian army at the battle Bolinov, but the gas had frozen due to the extreme cold.

During the 2nd battle of Ypres the Allied troops were shocked while waiting for the enemy to attack. Instead of seeing soldiers running across no man’s land they saw a yellow-green poisonous gas rolling into their trenches.

The Germans were surprised by how effective the toxic gas had been as it had killed thousands of soldiers. After this battle poisonous gas played an important role on the battlefields of the First World War.

Many men from Newport, Gwent were killed in this battle. Of the 587 who went from the area only 129 returned home.

A Welshman’s experience

Name: Edward Evans

Town: Rhosllanerchrugog, Wrexham

Experience:
"We are in the trenches again, under heavy shooting and shelling, but fear not, because the men really think that with the help of God we will come through it all, and return safely to you and the children"
By early 1915 the war on the western front had become long and arduous. Britain decided to invade the Ottoman Empire to try to influence the war elsewhere in Europe. The aim of the attack was to defeat Turkey and create a clear route towards Russia.

On April 25 Allied troops landed at Gallipoli where they were met by a fierce Turkish army. Men from all parts of the British Empire and the world were involved in the battle, as were troops from France and the French Empire.

The army of the Ottoman Empire had more men and weapons, as well as the advantage of attacking from high ground. After months of heavy losses the Allies decided to withdraw their men from the battle of Gallipoli.

This is one of the greatest failures of the First World War for the Allies. With very difficult living conditions and very hot weather thousands of men lost their lives through illness and disease.

Soldiers from the South Wales Borderers fought on the beaches and in the mountains of Gallipoli.

A Welshman’s contribution

**Name:** Cecil Phillips (1892-1949)

**Town:** Llanelli, Carmarthenshire

**Contribution:**

Cecil Phillips was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. He ran 70 yards into the middle of no man’s land during heavy shooting and fighting at Gallipoli in order to save a young officer that had been injured.
The Battle of Verdun was a huge battle between France and Germany.

The German Plan? The Germans had decided to use every available man in the battle of Verdun as defeating the French army in this battle would leave Britain on its own on the Western Front. This was meant to be the battle that would secure the Western Front for Germany.

What really happened? There was a massive attack on Verdun by the Germans on 21 February 1916. The French were not ready for this kind of attack. By 25 February more French troops have arrived and had begun to slow the German advance.

After months of fighting the Germans had gained ground but both sides had lost thousands of men. The Germans decided that they were not able to commit more men to this battle, and withdrew their troops.

The German plan had failed.
The Battle of Jutland was the largest battle of the First World War to take place at sea. It was a battle between the British navy and the German navy that took place on the North Sea near Denmark.

It is estimated that 250 ships and 100,000 men were involved in the battle. Britain had an advantage as it had 140 ships compared to the 110 ships of Germany.

Thousands of men were killed when torpedoes sank their ships, and the losses on both sides were substantial.

Both sides claimed that they had won this battle but the reality was that there was no clear victor.

This was the biggest sea battle of the First World War.
The Battle of the Somme

1 July - 16 November 1914

The Somme is a river that flows through France, and this is where one of the major battles of the war took place. One of the reasons for this battle was to reduce the pressure that was on the French army at the Battle of Verdun.

After 5 days of shelling and bombing the German trenches non-stop the British generals believed there would be a clear way across no man's land, and no barbed wire on reaching the German trenches. Troops were therefore sent over the top to attack the Germans. They were completely unaware that the Germans had been hiding underground and had managed to survive the heavy attack.

Thousands of British soldiers were shot attempting to cross no man's land when the German machine guns opened fire. By the end of the first day of this battle 60,000 British men had been killed or wounded. There was heavy rain during October 1916 that made conditions unbearable. Britain and France managed to gain five miles of land during this battle, but the cost of this was the death of more than a million soldiers.

Many soldiers from Wales fought in the Battle of Mametz Wood which was part of the Battle of the Somme.

A Welshman’s contribution

Name: Oswald Green (1881-1916)

Town: Aberystwyth, Cardiganshire

Contribution:
A shell had fallen and injured 14 men. Oswald Green rushed towards them to bind their wounds. While the men were being transported to hospital Oswald told them funny stories that made everybody laugh even though they were in pain.
This battle is sometimes known as the Third Battle of Ypres.

The Germans knew that it was important to reach the North Sea in order to prevent British from crossing the sea to join the fighting. During this battle the poet Hedd Wyn was killed on the first day of fighting.

The British attacked in similar fashion to the battle of the Somme by firing approximately 4.5 million shells in two weeks to clear the way for the soldiers. Also similar to the battle of the Somme was the fact that the Germans were able to shelter underground from the heavy bombing. British troops went over the top of the trenches and attacked the German lines, with some success until heavy rain turned no man’s land into a sea of mud. The mud was so bad that some men and horses drowned in it.

Britain won this battle but only managed to gain 5 miles of land.

The Loss of Talent

**Name:** Ellis H. Evans (1887-1917)

**Town:** Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd

**Tragic loss:**
Ellis Evans (Hedd Wyn) won the chair at the National Eisteddfod in 1917 despite the fact that he was killed on the first day of fighting at the battle of Passchendaele. The chair he won was known as the black chair. Wales lost one the most talented poets of this generation.
In spring 1918 Germany launched a massive effort to try to win the war before troops from the U.S.A. arrived.

The German army was very successful at first and managed to drive the Allies back to the River Marne.

The Allies finally succeeded in holding their ground, and fought back with the aid of 400 tanks and 800 aircraft.

During the battle of Amiens the Allies drove the Germans back quickly and managed to break through the German lines.

The Battle of Amiens was a turning point in the war and a huge blow to German morale. By September 1918 the two sides had begun to discuss the terms of a ceasefire.

The Chronicle newspaper, 9 August 1918

1918

Western Front

The Battle of Amiens

8 August - 12 August 1918