

HOMWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

BACKGROUND

Scottish regiments played a very important part in the war. With only 8% of the population Scotland provided 13% of the British forces fighting in France. Scotland was also the birthplace of Douglas Haig who became Commander in Chief of British forces. Haig came from a rich whisky-distilling family from Berwickshire. Haig thought the Scots were the best troops in his army and often used them to lead in battle. Before taking overall command of British forces Haig had led the attack at Loos. He also put many Scottish units in the front line for the big battle on the River Somme in July 1916. When the British failed to break through the German lines at the Battle of the Somme many Scottish casualties were enormous. Loos and the Somme are only two examples of Scots in action. During the Great War Scot soldiers took part in almost every major battle. A lot of Scottish soldiers died at Ypres and the Battle of Passchendale in 1917. Almost every family in Scotland lost someone in the war.

LOOS

- A Scot, General Douglas Haig was in command of British forces. Of the soldiers who took part 30,000 were from Scottish regiments. Most were new recruits from Kitchener's New Army.
- Haig had serious doubts about the attack at Loos. He did not like the ground which was open and gave no cover from German machine guns. He also worried that stocks of ammunition and heavy artillery would not be enough and so he planned to use gas.
- The attack started with a four day artillery bombardment. Haig used gas to drive the Germans out of their trenches before the attack. The gas blew back and made it difficult to cross no man's land
- There was some success on the first day of the battle in breaking into the German positions. But the reserves had been held too far from the front and did not arrive in time to relieve Haig's exhausted troops. To make matters worse the artillery ran out of shells.
- There were no reinforcements and the battle eventually ended in failure. Out of 20,000 killed 7,000 were Scots – some battalions' casualties over 70%. Despite the failure Scots won a reputation as hard fighters - 5 Scots were awarded the VC.

THE SOMME

- On June 24 the artillery bombardment began. It lasted 8 days and used more heavy guns than had ever been used before. Haig believed this would destroy the barbed wire and that few Germans would remain alive in the trenches.
- On July 1, British infantry were ordered to attack. The soldiers were told that the German defences were destroyed and they should cross no man's land at walking pace. As they moved towards the German trenches British troops came under heavy machine gun fire. Those who reached the German defences found the barbed wire was not destroyed. On the first day of the Somme 58,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded.
- The artillery had failed to destroy the barbed wire or the concrete bunkers where the Germans sheltered. When the shelling stopped, they simply set up their machine guns and slaughtered the advancing British infantry. The 51st Highland Division alone lost 7,517 men on the first day
- Haig ordered the attacks to continue in the belief that the Germans were close to collapse. The battle did not end until November when heavy rain turned the battlefield into a sea of mud. Tanks were first used at the Somme but they were too few and too unreliable to make a difference.