

THE BRITISH ARMY

Unlike the other major European powers which had large conscript armies that they could mobilise for war, Britain in 1914 had only a small professional army who were sent to Belgium, under the command of General French, as the **British Expeditionary Force**. The B.E.F. was small but it was very well trained and did well against much larger German forces. Kaiser William had ordered his generals to “walk over General French’s contemptible little army.” As a result the soldiers of the B.E.F. became known as the **Old Contemptibles**, a nickname they bore with pride.

The B.E.F. had suffered serious casualties by the end of 1914. For replacements there were the men of the **Territorial Army**, men who had been trained at weekends for home defence but who were now called into service in France and Belgium. However, it was clear that Britain would need a much larger army, so immediately after war broke out the government put **Lord Kitchener** in charge of raising a new army of volunteers. The recruiting posters showing Kitchener pointing at the onlooker with the caption “**Your country needs you**” proved very effective. Recruiting offices were swamped with eager recruits as a wave of patriotism spread across Britain. 500,000 men joined up in the first month of the war and by January 1916 “**Lord Kitchener’s Army**” had



Recruiting Poster

drawn in 3½ million volunteers. Often whole groups signed up together – men from the same town or factory or office or football team – and this gave rise to the **Pals Battalions**. They enjoyed a great sense of comradeship; but when the men who had signed up together died together in some big action, it was a terrible blow to the communities they had left behind.

With casualties in the fighting rising steadily, it became clear that this would not be enough. In autumn 1915 **Lord Derby** was put in charge of a scheme to ask all eligible men [those not in reserved occupations] to register their willingness to be called up when needed. But a lot of men, especially those with families, refused to make this commitment. In January 1916 the **Military Service Act** was passed allowing the conscription of all eligible men between the ages of 18 and 41. **Conscientious objectors** got no sympathy, unless they could prove they genuinely had deeply held beliefs which barred them from killing their fellow men. Many of them did agree to undertake non-combatative duties such as becoming stretcher bearers at the Front. Those who refused this compromise were sent to prison camps where they were harshly treated, for they were regarded as unpatriotic shirkers and cowards.