NationalTheatre
Horse Power

The use of horse power during the First World War

01 August 1914	Germany declared war on Russia. The Russian Empire had more cavalry than any other power during the First World War.
03 August 1914	Germany declared war on France.
04 August 1914	Germany invaded Belgium in order to attack France and encircle and capture Paris. The advancing Germans included cavalry. Great Britain declared war on Germany as a result. Dominions of the British Empire, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa also declared war on Germany. The government of British India did the same.
15 August 1914	Russian armies, including cavalry invaded Germany and Austria-Hungary.
20 August 1914	Russian and Austro-Hungarian cavalry fought a battle against each other at Jaroslavice in Galicia on the Eastern Front.
24 August 1914	A British cavalry regiment, the 4th Dragoon Guards took part in the first British charge against German forces. Around 250 men and 300 horses died. At the start of the war the British War Secretary, Lord Kitchener ordered that ordinary horses in Britain should be forcibly purchased for the war effort. At the request of British school children, no horses or ponies under 15 hands (60 inches, 152 centimetres) were confiscated.
25-30 August 1914	During the battle of Tannenberg, the Germans destroyed a division of Russian Cossack cavalry. This was the last time the Russians used cavalry on the Eastern Front. (Cavalry on both sides from now on the Eastern Front tended to fight on foot).
September 1914	First Battle of the Marne – In this battle German cavalry lost during fighting against the French and British who halted the German advance on Paris. German cavalry did not fight again on the Western Front for the rest of the war. (Cavalry on both sides from now on the Western Front tended to fight on foot). A system of trenches was dug between Switzerland and the North Sea on the Belgian Coast. Despite the number of attacks launched against enemy

September 1914	trenches by both sides with huge casualties, neither was strong enough to break through the enemy line until 1918. Cavalry waiting to charge through gaps created in the enemy frontline, waited in vain. Behind the lines lighter or "light draught" horses were used to pull ambulances, field kitchens and supplies such as ammunition. Heavier or "Heavy draught" horses were used to pull field guns and timber. The British in particular were desperate to procure horses from all over the world e.g. North America.
1915	In the first months of 1915, German generals still sent their cavalry to explore Russian territory ahead of an advance.
22 April – 27 May 1915	During the Second Battle of the Marne on the Western Front, the Germans used poisoned gas for the first time. As a result both sides developed gas masks for both men and horses. It is claimed that 210 British horses died from poisoned gas on the Western Front.
1917	During 1917, German U-boats threatened the supply of horses from North America, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere to the Allies on the Western Front, as many ships were sunk. Thousands of horses were drowned as a result. The supply of horse feed was also threatened.
26 March 1917	The British advanced into Turkish – held Palestine from Egypt. At the first Battle of Gaza, the British were unsuccessful in seizing vital wells needed to water their 10,000 horses. These horses included those of the Desert Mounted Corp.

The Desert Mounted Corp was a largely British military unit including British cavalry, the Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division and the Australian Mounted Division. The Australians and New Zealanders usually dismounted to fight with rifles and bayonets. They rode a tough breed of horse called "Walers". |
6 April 1917	The United States of America declared war on Germany. Its army included cavalry which would fight on the Western Front in 1918.
July 1917	Great Britain had procured around 591,000 horses since 1917. In 1914, the estimated horse population of Great Britain was between 20 and 25,000.
July – November 1917	British forces tried to break through the German lines on the Western Front at Paschendaele. Their cavalry eagerly awaited the creation of a gap in the German front line through which they could charge. The gap was never created. It was said "to lose a horse was worse than losing a man because after all, men

were replaceable while horses weren't".

31 October 1917	The Palestinian town of Beersheba fell to an attack by the Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions. The Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade galloped 3km into machine gunfire, armed only with rifles and bayonets. They overran two Turkish trenches.
16 November 1917	Cavalry formed part of the British-led forces capturing the Palestinian town of Gaza.
20 November - 7 December 1917	During the battle of Cambrai British forces attempted to break through the German front line on the Western Front. Tanks and aircraft were used effectively together for the first time but as in other battles there was no gap created through which the waiting cavalry could charge. During the battle the (Mhow) Brigade for the 1st Indian Cavalry Division charged successfully against a position fortified by barbed wire and machine guns. However more and more British cavalry crewed tanks as time went on. During the battle a team of horses was used to recover two heavy British guns from the mud of no-mans land. The horses jumped over two trenches to complete this task.
30 March 1918	Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew died leading a charge of 100 Canadian cavalry against 300 Germans at Moreuil Wood on the Western Front. Three quarters of his men were killed or wounded. Flowerdew was awarded a Victorian Cross, the highest medal for military bravery in the British Empire.
August 1918	USA cavalry fought in combat on the Western Front for the first time.
11 September 1918	USA cavalry penetrated 5 miles behind German lines on the Western Front at night but were defeated, having to retreat to Allied territory.
19-20 September 1918	The British defeated Turkish forces at the Battle of Megiddo in Palestine. Cavalry played an important role. To deceive the enemy, lines of wooden frames, covered in canvas and blankets were set up as dummy horses to resemble the Desert Mounted Corp.
11 November 1918	An armistice halted fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Horse Power Facts

Between 1914 and 1918 the USA alone sent almost one million horses overseas while another 182,000 accompanied American forces. Only 200 were returned. 60,000 were killed outright during fighting.

Perhaps six million horses served in the First World War. A high proportion died from war-related causes.

In the Middle East 22,000 horses were sold off for local use (or abuse) at the end of the war. Some were shot. Only one original Australian horse called Sandy made it home.

Germany could not maintain its supply of horses through the war, even by confiscating thousands from occupied territory. This contributed to its defeat.

The First World War showed that charges by mounted cavalry were largely obsolete. However, horsepower was crucial on all fronts in continuing the war.