

## 1.1

# Trench war



**A** Poster, 1915.

**B** Extract from 'Victorian Son: An Autobiography, 1897–1922' by Stuart Cloete.

"Burial was impossible. In ordinary warfare the bodies went down with the limbers that brought up the rations. But then there were seldom more than three or four in a day. Now there were hundreds, thousands, not merely ours but Germans as well. And where we fought several times over the same

ground bodies became incorporated in the material of the trenches themselves. In one place we had to dig through corpses of Frenchmen who had been killed and buried in 1915. These bodies were putrid, of the consistency of Camembert cheese. I once fell and put my hand right through the belly of a man. It was days before I got the smell out of my nails. I remember wondering if I could get blood poisoning and thinking it would be ironic to have survived so much and then be killed by a long-dead Frenchman."

**C** From 'Eye-Deep In Hell', by John Ellis, published in 1979.

"One British private said that his 'overriding memory of all his time on the western front was the smell'. Another in his diary, spoke of 'a penetrating and filthy stench . . . a combination of mildew, rotting vegetation and the stink which rises from the decomposing bodies of men and animals. This smell seems a permanent feature of the firing line.' The odour was almost unbearable in the great charnel houses of the front, Ypres, the Somme, Verdun. When the Germans captured Côte 304 at Verdun in May 1916 one of the first demands of the conquering troops was for a double ration of tobacco to mask the overwhelming stink of the corpses. A Frenchman who fought in this sector wrote 'We all had on us the stench of dead bodies. The bread we ate, the stagnant water we drank, everything we touched had a rotten smell, owing to the fact that the earth around us was literally stuffed with corpses'."

## Document questions

- 1 According to Document **A**, what was life like in the trenches for the soldiers? Support your answer by describing the poster.
- 2 According to Document **C**, why did the soldiers want cigarettes? How is this different from the idea given in the poster?
- 3 Why do you think it was so difficult to bury the bodies of the soldiers? (Document **B**)
- 4 Look at Documents **B** and **C**. Write sentences to explain two things on which Documents **B** and **C** agree. Each of the two explanations has to be supported by quotations, one from Document **B** and one from Document **C**.
- 5 Look again at Documents **B** and **C**. Which one is the primary source and which one is the secondary source? Explain your answer.
- 6 Why do you think Document **A** is so different from the two other documents? Give reasons for your answer and remember to include what the document is and why it was produced.

## Follow-on questions

- 7 Write a letter home from the trenches. The letter is from a soldier who has seen Document **A** and then goes to the trenches and discovers what conditions are really like.

