



**Stewards Academy History Year 8 work booklet**  
**Battle of the Somme and Haig revision**



**There are five lessons in this booklet. Students should be completing a lesson each week; on the day they would have their history lesson.**

**The purpose of this booklet is to revise the Battle of the Somme and General Douglas Haig.**

**Some tasks are shorter than others, but all tasks are very important and must be completed by the student. If you are finding any of the tasks too difficult to complete, please get a parent or guardian to e-mail your History teacher.**

**Name:**

**Tutor group:**



## Lesson One – Lions led by Donkeys



Above: Field Marshal Douglas Haig was a senior commander of the British army. This unit will show you that Haig was, and remains, a controversial figure in British history. Some historians hold Haig accountable for the huge loss of life at the Battle of the Somme. On the other hand, some historians argue that Haig was doing the best he could under circumstances that the British army had never experienced before.

**Task one – You are going to produce and complete a spider diagram for the following question:**

What features does a good military commander need to have?

**Introduction: What does the term ‘Lions led by Donkeys mean’?**

The term ‘Lions led by Donkeys’ was first used by historians in the 1960s to refer to the supposed needless sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of British soldiers (the ‘Lions’) under the ineffective leadership of the senior military commanders (the ‘Donkeys’).

Since the end of the First World War, contemporaries (those who lived during a historical event) and historians have debated whether many ‘Lions’ were needlessly sacrificed by inept and ineffective military leaders (the Donkeys). The British army officer, T.E Lawrence, for example argued that, ‘...the men were often gallant fighters, but their generals often gave away in stupidity what they had gained in ignorance.’ Lawrence believed that Britain’s military leadership were completely ignorant of the realities that soldiers faced on the battlefields. Often hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away from the battlefields, military leaders did not have to directly view or experience the horrendous consequences of warfare. This is an important point to fully understand when studying the First World War because this was not like any conflict that the world had seen previously. The Industrial Revolution had allowed for the development of new and powerful weaponry. The Maxim (machine) gun, for example, invented only 30 years prior to the outbreak of the First World War, allowed soldiers to kill hundreds of advancing enemies with little skill. Improvements in scientific understanding facilitated the development of chemical weapons. April 1915 saw the first use of chlorine gas, with victims suffering painful blistering of the face, eyes and lungs. Powerful explosives could also quickly and easily be produced in factories on a mass scale. As recently as 1854, the traditional cavalry charge (attacking with swords on the backs of horses) had been a normal military strategy. This strategy had been used for hundreds of years previously. It is almost impossible to overstate how much technological warfare had changed in a short space of time. It was, in part, because of the developments that the death toll of the First World War would be so high – in total 18 million people would lose their lives.

There is historical evidence to suggest that Britain’s military leaders did not comprehend how industrialisation had changed the nature of warfare. When the war began in August 1914, some British soldiers were not even equipped with metal helmets to protect them from bullets and falling shrapnel. In fact, even as late as the Battle of the Somme (July 1916), Douglas Haig ordered a cavalry unit to charge against German machine guns.

**Source A**

*Hundreds of dead were hung out (on the barbed wire) like wreckage. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground... It was clear that there was no gaps in the wire at the time of attack. How did the planners imagine that British soldiers would get through the wire? Who told them that the cannons would pound the wire to pieces? Any British soldier could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it back down, often in a worse tangle than before.*

***From an interview with Private George Coppard, a survivor of the Battle of the Somme.***

**How does Source A tell us that the people in charge during World War One were not being effective commanders?**

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## Lesson Two – The Battle of the Somme

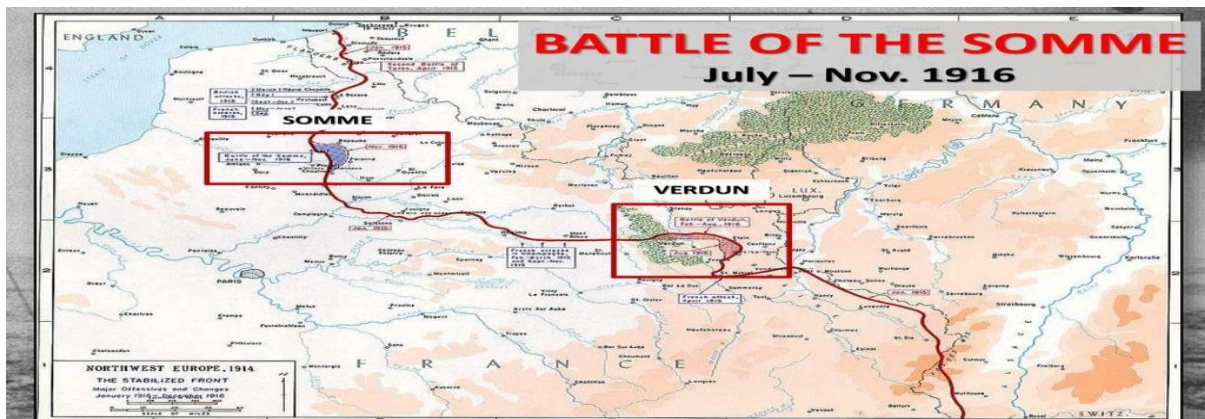
Recent historiography (academic interpretations on history) has challenged the view of British leadership being ineffective. Robert Tombs, for example, argues that, 'The Lions led by Donkeys' image is, at best, a half-truth.' Do British military leaders deserve to be portrayed as 'Donkeys' in history?

The answer to that question is up to you. We are going to study Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force. Haig's command of the Battle of the Somme (July – November 1916) is very controversial within British history.

### **The lead up to the Battle of the Somme**

Both sides had expected the First World War to be over in the matter of a few weeks, at worst a few months, few military commanders expected the prospect of a stalemate – but this is exactly what occurred. A stalemate is a 'deadlock' whereby neither side can advance against the other. As a result, both sides built and developed sophisticated trench systems. Military commanders on both sides believed that the enemy could be worn out through a process of attrition – this involves the gradual wearing down of the opposing forces. Trench systems were mostly used on the Western Front (France and Belgium), although there was some limited use of them on the Eastern Front too.

In December 1915, British and French military commanders jointly decided that a massive attack on German forces was necessary on the Western Front. A large-scale attack was viewed as necessary in breaking the stalemate because while the stalemate continued, there could be no real prospect of a victory for any side. The attack was planned for the Summer of 1916.



**Task Three - The Battle of Verdun began in late February 1916. The Germans attacked the French fortress of Verdun. Whilst Verdun was not of any real strategic importance, its historical significance meant that the French were prepared to defend it.**

**How could this affect plans for a joint French and British attack at the Somme?**

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## The plan for the Somme

The plan for the Battle of the Somme was uncomplicated. Douglas Haig, commander of the British forces at the Somme, believed that an intense bombardment of German forces would destroy their ability to oppose an infantry advancement. The British would, therefore, intensely pummel the German trenches with shells and explosives and then march over No-Man's land (the area between enemy trenches) unopposed. Britain did, indeed, have numerous large-scale guns capable of firing many thousands of shells onto the German trenches but not everybody agreed with Haig that this strategy would work. Henry Rawlison argued that several, smaller attacks would be a more effective wear of pushing the Germans back – a large scale attack was too risky. Haig was able to convince Rawlison, as well as other military officials, that a large-scale attack would work. According to Haig, 'The wire has never been so well cut, nor military preparations so thorough.' The attack began on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916. In total, 1.7 million shells were fired towards the German trenches and No-Man's Land.



## The reality of the Somme

Haig's heavily bombardment did not work. One intention of the shelling was to destroy the barbed wire that surrounded German trenches. The shells did not destroy the barbed wire but they did create small gaps which British and French soldiers could advance through. The consequences of this were disastrous for the invading soldiers because the shelling had not destroyed the German trenches. The Germans had built a deep trench system and simply waited for the shelling to stop. As the British and French advanced, they were mown down by German machine guns. The gaps in barbed wire created bottlenecks that could easily be gunned down by German machine guns. This is shown by Source B below:

## Source C

*'We were attacking the last German trench. We were all knocked out. Their machine guns were waiting for us. We did not get through. None of us. The whole battalion was wiped out. There was a big shell hole full of dead men and dying and blinded. Tall men got shot through the jaw, shorter men through the eyes. I was walking along, and a bullet blew all my teeth out'*

**Sergeant James Payne, 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Manchester Regiment**







**Lesson Three – Was Douglas Haig a ‘Donkey’? The case for:**

**Task Five – Consider Source D, below. You are going to have to think about why this source supports the interpretation that Haig should be viewed as ‘Donkey’. Use your learning so far to explain your answer. Be prepared to share your ideas:**

**Source D**

*‘Zero hour the whistles were blown. Ladders were put up to mount out of the trench and lanes had been cut through 30 metres of British barbed wire. We were told, ‘there’s no need for this short rush and getting down on your stomach, go straight over as if you were on a parade. There is no fear of an enemy attack! They’ve been silenced by the British guns!’*

**Corporal James Tansley, 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiment**

- 1) Explain how Source D shows Haig to be a ‘Donkey’. Use the ‘Reality of the Somme’ information above, to help you.**

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A recent biography of Haig has described him as, ‘a man of excitable temperament, combined with an intellect that offered him a fairly limited penetration into the fog of the war. He was given to over optimism, grandiose expectations and refused to listen to unwelcome views.’ From this source, we can clearly see that Haig remains a controversial individual.

So far, we have seen that Haig overestimated Britain’s ability to use artillery to destroy German defences. The British were not, as Haig had promised, unopposed by the Germans when they began their offensive. Haig ordered the advancing infantry to walk towards the German trenches side by side. This order was made, even though previous battles such as Verdun had shown this technique to be ineffective. Furthermore, Haig also ordered large numbers of British soldiers to capture the small town of Bapume. This can be viewed as a foolish decision because Bapume was situated at the top of a hill. This gave the defending Germans a clear view of the attacking British infantry. This, when combined with the side by side advancement of the British, meant that the soldiers were easily wiped out by German machine guns. In some cases, Haig’s orders to march side by side led to whole battalions being killed.





**Lesson Four – Was Haig a ‘Donkey’? The case against:**

**Watch this video on Haig’s grandson discussing Haig’s actions -**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COjws2vJbg>

1) **What does Haig’s grandson say about Haig?**

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2) **Why might we not be about to discuss Haig’s grandsons’ views?**

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Not all historians argue that Haig deserves to be labelled a ‘Donkey’. Recent historiography has attempted to show that Haig was trying to command his armies whilst fighting a war that neither Britain nor the world had ever seen before. A crucial point to consider is that Britain’s army was not designed to be fighting a long term, continental war. As Niall Ferguson in Source D (below) shows, Haig consistently expressed his frustrations that the British army had not been equipped to deal with industrialised warfare:

**Source E**

*‘Unlike the German army, the British army was not designed for a continental war. In June 1919, Haig recalled that, ‘we went into this war lacking preparation for it... Throughout the whole process of the war we were making desperate efforts to catch up.’ For example, only one corps staff had been maintained during peacetime because there had never been any intention to have tiers of command between General Quarters and the British Expeditionary Forces. British generals were thus, forced to improvise from the very beginning’*

**Historian Niall Ferguson**

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Haig was wrong or lying that Britain was unprepared for the First World War. Germany, still a relatively new nation, had a long history of militarism. When Germany won the Franco-Prussian Wars against France in 1871, it owed much of its victory to its history of conscription. Conscription is when all males (and sometimes females) must complete military service. When war broke out in 1914, Germany immediately mobilised 3.5 million men. Britain, on the other hand, did not have a history of conscription and had a small but professional army instead. Conscription was eventually utilised by Britain in January 1916, but this meant that





Industrialization allowed for the development of new weapons and vehicles that sped up the process of warfare. This meant that military commanders often had to quickly attempt to adapt to new circumstances. In the original plans, the French were to provide extensive support to British troops during the Battle of the Somme. German offensives at Verdun in February 1916, however, meant that the French had to divert many thousands of troops away from the Somme. These circumstances were out of Haig's control but did not remove British responsibility from preventing further German advancements into France. Initial German victories seemed to confirm to Britain's military leadership, including Haig, that a German victory was possible. Considering this, it could be argued that a large-scale attack to push Germany back was a logical decision. Furthermore, it must be considered that the decision to attack at the Somme was NOT Haig's idea. Haig had planned to attack the Germans in Flanders (Belgium) but Joffre, a French general, had encouraged the British to attack at the Somme. Whether an attack at Flanders would have had different results to the Somme, is debatable.

A final point to consider is that we, as historians, have the benefit of hindsight. In 2020, we know that the Somme Offensive resulted in horrendous loss of life. We know that the artillery campaign was unsuccessful. Given that people cannot predict the future, the outcome of the Somme was not to be known until after it had occurred. The historian, H.P Willmott argues that Haig, 'showed little remorse' for the loss of life at the Somme. Haig's decision making was undoubtedly flawed but it is unfair to suggest that Haig gave his orders, knowing just how many men would be lost.

