

Was sir douglas haig
a good or bad
leader?



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The issue of Douglas Haig's role as a general on the Western Front, during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, has been thoroughly questioned by many historians to date. Through different views and opinions, Haig's skills have been both heavily celebrated and criticised. Therefore he has been viewed as both 'Butcher of the Somme' and the 'Architect of Victory', much evidence supporting both arguments. However the majority of people seem to favour the idea of Haig being a merciless leader, which is completely understandable. For instance, the Battle of the Somme hugely affected almost every person in Britain, many losing family members. For them, it would have been easy to blame the British losses solely on General Haig, and many did just that. However many people saw him as a highly gifted soldier and leader, and there was a good side to Haig, for example, he did manage to eventually wear down the German army, and played a part in the result of World War 1. Therefore this controversial issue will perhaps be continually debated.

The Battle of the Somme was a largely Scottish battle, with three Scottish divisions participating. This also applied to Douglas Haig, who was born in Edinburgh and was commander in chief. He was blamed for the enormous slaughter of the Battle of the Somme, during which there were around 60,000 British casualties on just the first day, a third of which were killed. This alone is evidence enough for a lot of people of Haig's failures as a general. However, many of the flaws in Haig's leading of the Battle of the Somme stemmed from the fact that he was commanding a group of sixty divisions, when the usual number was just six. This shows the extreme circumstances under which Douglas Haig was commanding at the Battle of the Somme.

The Battle of the Somme was a significant event in history; this is mainly due to the absurd amount of deaths, even though they were 'no larger than were to be expected', however some people find fault in the fact that Haig kept the army fighting even when he became aware of the continuous height of casualty figures. Just like any general, Haig strove for success, however he had a major fault: he was extremely optimistic, and constantly believed that the German army was close to surrendering, therefore believing that a win was also close. This positive personality is shown by a quote which Douglas Haig himself said at the beginning of the war, 'The situation is never so good or so bad as first reports indicate'. However, even though he felt that his army was fully capable of defeating the Germans, he wasn't correct, in fact, Haig's army didn't have the huge amount of soldiers, which the German army were able to take advantage of this clearly shows that his targets were impossible to achieve, he was just too ambitious. Haig was also heavily criticised for the ridiculous length of the battle, this was simply because it could have been ended much sooner than it was, and this would have even prevented Britain in constantly finding fault in Haig's leadership skills. The main reason that Haig even allowed the battle to continue because he wished to straighten his trenches, as this would have had a great effect on his army's attacks. However Haig was also criticised for allowing the British army to fight in the appalling weather at the time of the Somme, although technically he cannot take the entire blame for this decision as the idea actually came from the French army officer.

Haig was certainly one to override his army commanders, although this is understandable, as if he found their advice questionable then he had to trust

himself to make the correct decision alone. However at the beginning of the battle of the Somme, Haig was overruled himself, by the governments of Britain and France, they asked Haig to attack the German army at that point in time, but Haig didn't agree this was because he felt that his armies weren't ready; however his argument wasn't effective, therefore he was ignored. Haig understood that he would have to plan an attack quickly, because if he took too much time to do so then the alliance which stopped the French from attacking the British could be put in jeopardy, and that was a risk that Haig couldn't afford to take.

At the start of the battle, the British army looked to have no chance in defeating the German army, in fact, Official History wrote that the Somme was the first time that the '...British line been held with so few men and so few guns...'. The British army were also overwhelmed by the power of the Germans and after just one day of fighting there were an enormous number of casualties, most of them due to 'bite and hold attacks'. In the beginning, Haig was severely short of forces and, trying to find a solution, ended up having to leave Gough's twelve divisions alone to defend 42 miles of the front, this resulted in some having very few soldiers. Haig could have managed the Somme better, however by the end of the battle, the British were achieving success against the Germans and eventually the Germans did surrender, in fact the German General Ludendorff mentions in his autobiography, My war memories, 'As a result of the Somme we were completely exhausted on the Western Front'.

When considering Haig's skill as an army commander it has to be remembered that the situation at the Battle of the Somme was extremely

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unique, Haig was handling ten times the amount of forces, most of whom were learning the tactics of war as they went along. After the battle ended Haig was compared to other generals who sent hundreds of soldiers to their deaths, he was viewed as uncaring and constantly making horrible decisions. Although Haig's opinion of the turnout of the war was never made clear, it was suggested that he agreed with the result, as in 1919, Haig defended the fact that the Germans were offered a settlement at the end of the war.

The relationship between Douglas Haig and David Lloyd George was a cause of major conflict and had an overpowering effect on Haig's reputation. Lloyd George was clear in the fact that he had no trust or liking for Haig, especially during the Somme, when he didn't understand why Haig was allowed the high casualty rates to continue, especially since this didn't give any advantage to the British. He saw Haig simply as a man with no intelligence, and no understanding, although he also never replaced him, or even stood up to him. However, it was no secret that a war was waged between Haig and Lloyd George. An example of the tension between these characters was on the 1st September, when Haig received a telegram from Henry Wilson, marked 'personal', this carried a warning, that Haig was to stop preventable casualties during the battle of the Somme. The clear reason for the telegram was for the protection of Lloyd George; however Haig took it that he could strike the Hindenburg line if he felt the need to do so. The tension between them grew when Lloyd George published his war memoirs, in which he unleashed an attack on Haig, both, simply as a man and as part of the army. This was one of the very little books that really cause chaos for an important

figures reputation, especially since when it became available, Haig had already passed and therefore he couldn't even protect his own reputation.

However Lloyd George isn't the only politician that Haig had a significant relationship with, Haig and Winston Churchill also had a somewhat interesting relationship, in fact Haig helped out Churchill in the writing of his book, *The World Crisis*, by sending him parts of his personal diaries which he kept during the war. The reason that this is interesting is the fact that Churchill often criticised Haig, especially as a General during the war.

However, Churchill did admit that when reviewing the war he began to think 'a good deal better if Haig than I did at the time'. Unlike Lloyd George, Churchill felt that it would be impossible to find as good a general as Haig was to replace him. Haig didn't mind some criticism from Churchill in his book, but it was that criticism which strongly effected Haig's reputation. The conflict between these politicians and Haig meant that Haig had to fight the war against not only the Germans, but also those politicians.

It wasn't just Churchill's writing that affected Haig's reputation though; there were many different memoirs and accounts released after the war, by many different people, for example, David Lloyd George, Churchill and Gough.

However when these records were released Haig mentioned to Foch that he couldn't release a book on the war, as it was 'too soon to tell the truth'. If he had written them however, they would have not only been successful, but would have probably heightened his reputation. However Haig's *Final Dispatch*, published in 1919 actually had only a small effect on the opinions of the war. Yet, decades later, a revisionist historian, John Terraine revised these arguments and tried to re-build Haig's reputation. In fact, Terraine's '

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Douglas Haig: An Educated Soldier' strongly defended Haig's reputation, his main point being that it was Haig who eventually wore down the German army. However historian, John Laffin, has the opposite opinion, he feels as though Haig should be accused because of his 'wilful blunders and wicked butchery'. This shows clear argument between the two recent historians, both trying to challenge Haig's reputation. Terraine passed away in 2003, however before his death, he did manage to change the way that some people saw Douglas Haig, and he 'restored Haig to the position of serious commander'. Haig was criticised and celebrated by different historians, few ever looking at both sides of things.

Haig's reputation was heightened the most due to his input in helping and celebrating ex-servicemen. Haig devoted a large part of his life, after the war, to charity events and war-memorials. This shows that people were even slightly wrong about the fact that he didn't care about the young men fighting in the war. For example, in 1922, Haig travelled to Swansea and 4000 people turned out to see him lay a stone for the city memorial, and in 1925, the Haigs toured Canada; some 10,000 people came to see Haig lay a stone on a cenotaph in Toronto. Also, in Glasgow, in 1924, Haig revealed a monument. These days' people may be shocked to find out that in 1925 Haig opened the Newfoundland Memorial Park; this was where the 1st Newfoundland attack took place in 1916. The fact that Haig was sought after to carry out the ceremony by the government, shows that even though there is constant argument over Douglas Haig's reputation, at this time he must have been highly thought of. This is why Haig was overwhelmed with huge amounts of requests to reveal all sorts of different memorials. Haig's

speeches at these events were never completely neutral, the issues of sacrifice and the needs of ex-soldiers were constantly highlighted. This made his reputation improve to a lot of people, because they felt as if he was more caring.

In the early 1920s Haig began to type up his wartime diary, he wished for this to be published after his death. In 1928 a line of war diaries and memoirs began being published, some attacking Haig's reputation seriously, however Haig wasn't alive to see this, as on the 29th January 1928, Douglas Haig died of a heart attack. This death came as a shock to Britain, many people in disbelief. Haig's wife believed that the 'strain of wartime command had worn out his heart', and the media began to print headlines, 'field marshal a war victim', Haig was treated just like any soldier who had fought in the war, and he too was seen as a war casualty.

The real surprise after Haig's death was the extent to which the public mourned him; his death was treated much more graciously than any other British general. Therefore his coffin was escorted by the two future kings of England, showing that he was obviously an important member of the nation, even though some people viewed him as a callous butcher. This was reinforced because St Pauls, Wren's great cathedral was suggested as where Haig would be buried and if he had been then he'd have been buried with Wellington and Nelson, two heroes from WW1, however Haig had wanted to be buried at home, in Edinburgh, therefore his body was sent north. A crowd of people waited for him to arrive, to pay their respects. Eventually he was buried in the grounds of Dryburgh Abbey. However the event of his death

just brought more conflict to the argument of Haig's reputation. Again, Haig's reputation plummeted.

Therefore Haig's reputation is constantly debated, going from one extreme to the other, barely ever balancing, or being fair to the actions of Haig. However much argument is presented in favour of Haig, the evidence is overpowered by the casualty figures of the battle of the Somme, by Churchill's criticisms of Haig and by the tension in Haig's relationship with David Lloyd George, these are the facts people can't just forget and therefore the points which effect Haig's reputation. Haig's reputation was most significantly analysed through memoirs and accounts, for example of Churchill, Lloyd George, Gough and Terraine, although his reputation took a severe hit after his death also. It's clear that Haig will forever be viewed as heartless general, which is a fair judgement, considering the fact that he was the general in charge during the Battle of the Somme, and allowed the horrific casualty figures to present, and the fact that he let the battle go on for much longer than it should have, for personal or no gain, and that's why Douglas Haig will forever be condemned as ' Butcher of the Somme'.