

# Lions led by donkeys essay sample



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Although the bravery of the soldiers of the First World War has never been doubted the leadership of there generals has been constantly under attack up to present day. In particular the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. Some people hold the view that the British soldiers of the First World War were 'Lions lead by donkeys'. The accusations are that the generals controlled the army with poor leadership with no remorse to the high numbers of deaths and casualties. They weren't in contact with the front-line enough to understand conditions and so they sent wave after wave of soldiers 'over the top' to their deaths.

On 28th June, 1914, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife sparked a war, from this plans were made and strategies were thought up, however these didn't account for new weapons. There was a problem with this right at the start as Britain was the only country that didn't conscript soldiers. Generals didn't have many trained soldiers and at the beginning of the war, most of the soldiers were volunteers and were therefore unskilled. The Western Front stretches from the North Sea to the Swiss boarder. This spanned for approximately 400 miles.

The relief of the land was fairly flat with some low points near rivers. In 1916 the allies started to push the German army back as shown on Source A1. That suggests that the generals knew what they were doing. However in 1918 the allies were pushed further back then the original front-line in 1914. This tells us that the generals were incompetent. This source shows that the soldiers were defiantly lions as they courageously continued to fight through impossible circumstances. Despite the British having new technology and artillery, so too did the Germans.

The soldiers had to face huge, heavy weapons being fired at them. This was also experienced by the Germans off the same guns which were being fired from the British. This is shown in source A2. There were all types of new weapons which were being used from both sides. Machine guns had been introduced. These guns were capable of causing mutilating injuries. The soldiers had to deal with this night and day with very little in the way of protection such as body armour which would have been capable of stopping a bullet. Source A5 (i) shows us how the soldiers had to face agonising waits to go 'over the top'.

They were expected to carry with them all of their equipment and were to fight for their lives with bayonets. However they were bombarded with heavy machinegun fire as soon as their heads were out of the trenches. It would be highly unlikely for any soldier to make it to the German trenches under these circumstances. This again shows how brave these men really were in the war. The generals sent waves of soldiers over to face the same agonizing deaths as they were miles away from the frontline living in the 'cushy life's'.

This is more evidence to say that the generals were incompetent and were unable to fight a war with these new technical advances. Sir Douglas Haig was a very experienced soldier and had been commander-in-Chief for three years. He had fought in the Sudan and then the Boer war in 1899-1902. However these wars were very one sided as the enemy were poorly equipped. He was appointed commander-in-chief of the British forces on the Western Front in 1915 and was then promoted to the rank of Field Marshal on 3rd January 1917.

However Haig could have got this position sourly because he was married to one of the Queens, ladies in waiting. At the end of the war he was made an Earl and awarded i?? 100, 000 by parliament. Whilst Haig was in charge of the British army approximately half a million soldiers died. However it has to be kept in mind that Haig got Britain through the war to a victory. At first Haig was seen (by some) to be an excellent choice to take over Sir French's position because of the need for new tactics, this is shown in source B2, a letter to Sir Haig off King George V.

This shows that they must have a reason to have such faith in his ability. However a very frequent complaint off soldiers was that commanders didn't have a clue what to do. George V wouldn't know much about Haig's military skills as he had never witnessed his command. In the letter George V mentions seeing Lady Haig who was one of the Queens ladies in waiting. This closeness between the couples may influence George V's favourable opinion of Haig. This source also suggests that Haig may have been appointed not on merit of his skills but because of the Kings fondness of him.

This would reinforce the opinion that the generals were donkeys as the soldiers were being led by men who were not fully qualified. In source B3 Haig comes over extremely heartless and didn't seem to care about how many soldiers were injured or killed as long as the war was won by Britain. This shows that he is set in his ways and will sacrifices any amount of soldiers to save his country illustrating that Haig was extremely narrow minded and once again contradicting the reason for him to have been placed in control of the army.

Haig believed that along with Parliament that Britain must believe that the soldiers are doing well and that there is a strong chances that they are going to win the war. The way in which he does this is by sending out a report saying how high the men's spirits are and how confident the commanders are. Haig may believe this to be true yet he hadn't been to the front-line and so didn't know the horrible conditions the soldiers were living in, living amongst rats, mud, lice, noise from constant shelling, gun fire, all types of weather and the worst to see there buddies being killed all around them.

If the British society knew about these terrible conditions there would have been a surge of people demanding that the government surrender to the Germans so that their family and friends didn't have to continue to live in there torturous environment! This tells us that the generals knew that is was a war in which they were fighting both the Germans and the British public for the reason that once the public knew about it they would demand the surrender of Britain, therefore loosing the war.

This shows that the generals were fighting to win the war and were going about it in the only way they believed fit. Source B5 is one of many news reports from British newspapers which were published mainly to maintain moral on the home front. This is more than likely to be propaganda as it was sent to the news of the world from the British headquarters The thinking behind it was that keeping good news flowing from the frontline would encourage the nation to put as much work into the war effort as possible.

However although there was always good news coming from the frontline it wasn't always the truth, in fact if the public knew what was actually

happening such as extremely high death rates, soldiers living amongst rats, lice and thick mud causing trench foot and other illnesses there then there would have been an up raw and a demand for Britain to surrender and withdraw the troops! In the report there it is saying about an attack lunched in the north of River Somme which was supported by the French. The attack was a ' success' and the French were making satisfactory progress.

This attack was to reduce pressure off Verdun. The idea of the attack was to spread the German troops too thinly between Verdun and Somme. This attack was successful in reducing pressure from the French however not much land was gained despite the immensely high numbers of casualties. In reality the Battle of the Somme was a tragedy; out of 100, 000 soldiers who went ' over the top' on the first day of the conflict alone 20, 000 didn't return and a further 40, 000 returned wounded! One estimate was that there were 57, 470 deaths. Within the first hour alone on the first day of the Somme 21, 000 soldiers were killed!

This suggests that source B5 does not give a true understanding of what was happening in reality. It gives the impression that the generals are doing an excellent job as the soldiers are defeating the Germans. However as we have already discovered the article was incorrect and there were many lives lost in the Battle of the Somme and a very small amount of land was retreated from there deaths, so even though the Somme did reduce the pressure in Verdun the generals sent thousands to their death to do this. I don't believe that this is the correct way to go about this and so the generals are not as efficient as it may first appear here.

Poems are great insights to what the soldiers were facing during the war as they are written from how they are feeling at this time, this means they are extremely helpful to find out more about how the men felt about the war and being apart of it. Source C1 is two poems and is excellent evidence in proving that the soldiers were working in impossible conditions. The two poems were written by Siegfried Sassoon. He served as a Captain in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers on the Western Front. He was nicknamed ' Mad Jack', taking this into account we realise that he was extremely bias.

These two poems show how he despises the generals for bad planning. This tells us that if Sassoon didn't agree with the way that the way in which the war was being planned then there would be more soldiers that thought the same. There was a lot of bitterness and recentness towards the generals especially towards Haig. One of these soldiers that have this bitterness towards Haig is Fred Pearson. He believed that Haig was the biggest murderer out of the lot of the generals! Pearson hated the fact that someone who had never been any closer than 50 kilometres behind the trenches and had no idea what life was like down there!

The soldiers were brave and were putting there lives in jeopardy whilst Haig is so far behind the Front-line ordering soldiers to there deaths. Pearson wasn't the only soldier who was angry with the way Haig was ordering more and more men ' over the top', Private P. Smith of the first born. His words were ' It was pure bloody murder. Haig should be hung, drawn and quartered for what he did on the Somme. The cream of British manhood was shattered in less than six hours'. This is a very angry way of expressing the opinion

that Haig was knowingly sending the best of Britain young men to early deaths.

Haig was responsible for these young men's lives and although he knew this he continued to send these men to the same tragic deaths, he knew the casualties would be high as he said in his own words in source B3... he was prepared to send these men to the deaths like thousands of other previous men. All this evidence shows that the soldiers were proud of being able to help their country however they condemned Haig for his actions and leadership in the Somme. From the 4th-30th August 1914 to 30th November 1919 the Western Front had the highest deaths in battle at 684, 376; all the other fronts added up to 73, 783, which total up to 722, 159.

However these figures can only be used as approximations as they came out before the 'missing' soldiers were added. This is proof that the generals were 'dinkies' due to such high numbers of casualties. Haig may not have been surprised at these high numbers as he had said in source B3 that there will be high casualty rates and the nation should be taught to bear losses. Despite defeating the Germans and her allies, there was wide spread criticism about the generals in the 1920s and 1930s.

The debate materialized by conflicting opinions of soldiers, politicians and the descendents of the generals who were eager to clear their parent's name. Out of all of the accounts the most well known was when Douglas Haig's son wrote a book to show evidence to prove that his father's name was wrongfully stained. The politician and Prime Minister during the war David Lloyd George expressed his opinion of Haig in source D1. He acknowledges that



the task in front of the generals was an extremely hard task at an unprecedented scale; however he also makes some very personal criticism of Haig.

He suggests that Haig was not emotionally or intellectually up to the task and was chosen for his relationship to the king as is mentioned in sources B1 and B2. As this wasn't written during the war but was written after it advocates that this was his considered opinion of Haig rather than his frustration towards someone to be blamed for the high casualties. Although there compelling evidence saying that the generals were not up for the task there is also convincing evidence that they were doing there utmost to win the war under extreme and difficult conditions with the lack of resources needed.

Source D2 has been written by John Terraine, a historian who decided investigate the evidence to find the truth about Lloyd George. After assessing this evidence he discovered the generals were in fact trapped and had only one choice which mattered, ether the loss of life or looses the war. This is obviously a difficult choice to make on one scale however if it means freedom there is no choice to be made as it has already been made for them. Nevertheless although there are some historians that have the same beliefs as Terraine there are those who believe that the generals were stubborn and incompetent.

One such historian is A. J. P Taylor. Taylor is a specialist in the war and as Terraine was not emotionally involved in the war. This is backs up the ever-growing evidence against the generals and therefore is agreeing with the

interpretation that 'lions were led by donkeys'. Most people remember the First World War as brave soldiers going 'over the top' to be bombarded by machinegun fire. However, what many people don't know is that 78 British officers of the rank of Brigadier General and above were killed in active service and 146 were wounded.

This suggests that although there were high numbers of soldiers killed and/or injured there were a number of generals that had the same fate. This tells us that it wasn't just the soldiers that were brave and not all of the generals were willing to send soldiers to the same agonising deaths just because they didn't know what the conditions were like for living and fighting. Haig also has forgotten victories. Between August and November 1918 is known as 'Hundred Days'. A dozen major victories were won; the greatest series of victories in the British Army's entire history.

These triumphs were not sheer luck or coincidence; they were obviously achieved by the courage and endurance of the front-line and a part was played by the generals who ordered the moves. This is telling us that although the generals are known as 'useless and idiotic imbeciles' they did in fact have the knowledge needed to accomplish such victories. Source D5 (i) is a news article saying why we British must stop criticising the generals of the First World War. Although there were high deaths and casualties they did get the country through the war and came out with the result needed.

The British generals were no worse than any other country. The reason for this was that the technology had revolutionised warfare, making textbook battles tactics obsolete. That meant that every country involved in the war

now had to discover the new ways of fighting with as little numbers of casualties as possible. In conclusion to looking through all of this evidence I believe that although the soldiers were brave and were earned the right to be called 'Lions' I do not believe that the general have been fairly shown and as a conscience of this they have been labelled 'Donkeys'.

This is a very unfair interpretation of the generals and makes people believe that they didn't have the leadership values to take a country through a war and win. As this document shows, although there were thousands of soldiers that died there were also a small number of generals that did in active service. Without these men redeveloping there ideas of war the outcome could have been far grimmer of Britain. This showed there might.