

How far was general  
haig responsible for  
the failings of the  
british war effort o...



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The British war effort on the western front, 1916 – 1917 are widely viewed as an awful failure. The efforts and tactics of General Douglas Haig have been the subject of many arguments over the past eighty years. Some regard him as the figure who led Britain to victory, whereas others see him as the “Butcher of the Somme” who led thousands upon thousands of men to their death. Whether he is solely responsible or not remains undecided. However, by analysing his mistakes and failures, it may be possible to form a strong conclusion and decide whether or not Haig can be entirely blamed.

General Haig was born to a wealthy family in 1861. He was educated at Clifton and Brasenose College, Oxford and entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst straight afterwards. He fought in the cavalry in battles such as the Boer war. This, it would seem, provided him with the experience to lead troops into battle; but was it the relevant experience that the job required? His old fashioned style of training was not compatible with the development of technological weapons and his out of date tactics did not consider the technology used by the opposition or the onslaught of the arms race.

The arms race had seen a major development in weaponry and warfare and no one completely understood them. Those who understood least of all, perhaps, were those, whose experience lied in long past battles, in which the technology was extremely underdeveloped. It is clear that Haig disregarded newly developed weaponry. He was heard to say “... The machine gun is a much overrated weapon... ” (Source 1 – butcher sheet. ) This shows us Haig’s contempt, for not only the machine gun, but also new weapons

altogether. The guns were being used by the Germans as the British troops walked over the top.

Even though this had occurred several times, Haig continued to use this form of attack. Haig had been warned by his second in command, General Rawlinson, but he ignored his advice not to continue. Haig was wholly responsible for this failure, however no one reprimanded him. Haig's first failure was his battle plan. This failure involved sending men over the top. He made the men walk over the frontline, across no mans land despite the recent development of weapons which included machine guns. This possibly arose from his disregard for the machine gun, and modern weaponry overall, as aforementioned.

Similarly to his first failure the second one highlighted major flaws in Haig's battle plan and tactics. It also highlighted the fact that Haig failed to learn from his previous mistakes and his reluctance to adapt and change to suit the general needs of the war. The plan included a week long bombardment of the German trenches, followed by men carrying heavy packs, walking over the top. This plan had several flaws. The first of these flaws stemmed from Haig's ignorance. The Germans had held their position since 1914, and had managed to reinforce their trenches with concrete, making it effectively impossible to penetrate.

Haig's reconnaissance had warned him of this, yet he failed to take this into consideration when bombarding them. This meant that the Germans could dig themselves in, dramatically reducing the impact of the attack. This

mistake was an obvious and awful failure of Haig's. Still, no one reprimanded  
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him. Therefore, it cannot be blamed completely on him. No one understood the weaponry or warfare, and therefore, it was inevitable that Haig would make mistakes. Furthermore, Haig failed to recognise this mistake when sending the men over the top.

He assumed that the men would be able to walk over the top carrying heavy packs; however this was a dreadful miscalculation. The Germans had reinforced no – mans – land with barbed wire almost thirty metres, again destroying any chance of penetration. In addition to this, the aerial barrage had recently tangled the wire further, finalising the impossibility of breaking through. Furthermore, The Germans were on high ground which meant that they had a wide view of everything – including the bombardment and the men walking over the top. The German men were therefore more than capable of combating almost any attack.

This was another mistake that cost an unnecessary amount of death due to Haig's inability to comprehend the German's ability. It is likely that Haig's failure to recognise the opposition's ability arose from his imperialistic views. However, it appears that no one recognised this failure and so the blame can not be entirely laid on Haig, although it was mainly his fault. This was another of his obvious and devastating failures. However, Haig had just hours to devise this plan. The only help he had came from Rawlinson with whom he often disagreed.

He also had extremely limited knowledge of the modern technology and the on come of trench warfare that the Germans were using, and therefore did not realise the extent to which it was effective. This could be seen as a <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-was-general-haig-responsible-for-the-failings-of-the-british-war-effort-on-the-western-front-1916-1917-essay-sample/>

failure, once again due to ignorance, or an error due to age. Despite the death toll, Haig did in fact manage to achieve his aim of wearing the Germans down, i. e. attrition. The persistent tactics that he used did eventually take its toll on the opposition. We can also not lay the blame on Haig for the poor ammunition that the men had to use.

Most of the weapons, for example the shell, that they used, were made by women who were inexperienced and had limited training of making these weapons. Therefore Haig is only partly responsible for this failure. Trench warfare was a new type of fighting. As no one knew how to fight like this, the old tactics were relied on. This was much the same as the situation with the new weaponry. No one knew how to use these new weapons and a lack of understanding lead to contempt of the weapons. As no one knew how to use them, there was no one to teach the skills.

This meant that advances in technology were put aside and the old way of fighting was used against the highly trained Germans. This, also, is not Haig's fault, although he did fail to adapt his tactics after many failed battles. Haig, therefore, only played a small part in this failure. Haig was appointed Field Marshall at the age of 54. This means that his training was extremely out dated (particularly due to the arms race), and this was likely to affect the tactics that he used. His experience was in wars such as the Boer war. These were won easily due to the oppositions lack of organisation and lack of what was then, modern weaponry.

This suggests that Haig was not ready for the modern way of fighting. Also, most of Haig's experience was with the cavalry. However, this cannot be <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-was-general-haig-responsible-for-the-failings-of-the-british-war-effort-on-the-western-front-1916-1917-essay-sample/>

blamed on Haig, but the person who appointed him. Haig is not responsible for this failure. The main part of Haig's experience was with the cavalry. Haig's previous reliance on horses seemed to stretch through to the First World War. He continued to ignore the modern weaponry and he instigated several unsuccessful cavalry charges. This could be blamed on Haig, due to his ignorance of technology; however some of the blame must lie with the person who appointed him.

Whoever it was, did not take into consideration Haig's limited experience and, consequently he cannot be held solely responsible. Haig had to work with poorly trained men during World War One. This was a large difference compared to the highly trained BEF with whom he worked with previously. The people he had to work with during these later days had no understanding of war and were unskilled in fighting. This cannot be blamed on Haig. He is not responsible for this failure. However, if Haig had been more involved in the battles and more involved in general trench life, he may have been able to adapt to the men's incapability as a whole.

This is an unacceptable failure of Haig's. Haig has also been widely criticised for "taking the back seat", both during and in between battles. During all but two of these battles, while his men were fighting, Haig could be found miles away, living comfortably. In a later biography of Haig's life, Gerard De Groot wrote: "... While Haig slept in a cosy bed in a quiet country chateau and dined on the best food available, his men lived in muddy, noisy trenches sharing their bully beef and biscuits with big, bloated rats.

It apparently did not bother Haig that his war was so much more comfortable than that of the men he commanded... ” This also highlights the fact that Haig was unaware of the dreadful conditions that his men were living in and proves that he was absent most of the time. This led to his gaining of inaccurate reports and Haig’s optimistic and almost naive views of the war. This failure also lies with Haig’s ignorance. Contrary to Haig’s supposed illness that prevented him to come to the frontline, most believe that Haig merely didn’t want to be there. This quote supports this theory.

This may be seen as one of his worst failures and it is mostly believed that he was wholly responsible. Haig is also greatly criticised for using, what most people think, were unnecessary tactics that led to thousands of men dying, effectively, for no reason. “... Nor are we making for any point of military importance; it is all open country which can easily be defended by the use of trenches...” (Source 12, Winston Churchill – Butcher sheet). This appears to be a fairly obvious alternative, yet an “ experienced” man of war either failed to recognise this or was just too ignorant and arrogant to change “ plan”. “... ”

I want to tell you so that it may be on record, that I honestly believe that Goldie (a mate) and many others were murdered through those in authority... ” This shows us that the authority, which included Haig, was even then, somewhat questionable. However, again, Haig was only partially responsible for this failure. Haig’s efforts in the war were, in fact, so questionable that David Lloyd George (the Prime Minister at the time) even doubted them. This can be seen in his war memoirs: “... Haig promised not to press the attack if it became clear that he could not obtain his objectives

by continuing the offensive... This is undoubtedly condemning Haig's tactics. Haig's tactics were also condemned by others with some social status and military experience. This can be seen in the aforementioned quote: source 12 (Winston Churchill). This leads to the next point that, if Lloyd George so clearly doubted Haig's ability, why did he not strip him of his authority? In fact, it could be asked why Haig was given his rank in the first place. This begs the question whether the supposed "failure" was entirely Haig's fault. Haig's actions were actually discussed in both the House of Parliament and the House of Lords. Many M.

P. s, including Winston Churchill and Lord Lansdowne had expressed their doubts of Haig's ability, but no actions were taken to enforce his removal or place his troops under alternative instruction. This failure (although it arises from Haig's incompetence) lies with those in higher authority. However, Haig had warned them of the predicted effects of the war of attrition. This suggests that Haig was actually only doing as he had told them he would. Is it fair, therefore, to blame Haig completely for these failures? Is it possible to view Haig as a failure considering that Britain did win the war?

Some would argue that he was a failure due to the mass loss of life that occurred under his instruction. However, Haig had warned people of this: "... The nation must be taught to bear losses... The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists... " This would suggest that Haig was not a complete failure. It seems that the British people just didn't comprehend the extent of the loss of which they had been forewarned. He cannot be seen as responsible for this. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Haig was

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responsible for the failings of the British war effort on the western front 1916 - 1917.

However, it is impossible to lay the blame solely on Haig. His superiors failed to act despite the intolerable death toll and despite the loss of life, Haig was allowed to continue using his costly tactics. Also, it is impossible to identify Haig as a complete failure as he did eventually help Britain to win the war. However, his failings were unacceptable and he was unworthy of the gratifications he received when he returned from the war. He was, however, worthy of the title “ The Butcher of the Somme”.