

Haig: butcher of the somme?

People



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“ HAIG WAS A BUTCHER WHO THOUGHT NOTHING OF SENDING MEN TO THEIR DEATHS. ” DO YOU AGREE? Field Marshal Douglas Haig was a British senior officer during World War 1. He commanded the British Expeditionary Force from 1915 to the end of the War. This meant that he was in charge of the Battle of the Somme. His part in this battle has led to split views on him as an army officer. Some believe that his tactic was poor and he was mindlessly sending men to their deaths. However, some believe that the Somme was actually not a disaster and that Haig employed a good tactic.

I will explore both sides of the argument and then conclude with my overall view on whether Haig was a “ butcher” or not. ~0~ There are several reasons why Haig was or was not a “ butcher”. I’m going to start off with a reason why I think he was a “ butcher”. The reason was his location during the Battle of the Somme. He was situated in the luxuries of a chateau a whole fifty miles behind the line. This meant that, to be perfectly honest, Haig had next to no idea as to what was going on in the battle. This is backed up by Source D where the differences between a rehearsal and a real attack.

The Sergeant Major says that the “ absence of the general” is one. This clearly shows that Haig was nowhere to be seen when war broke - thus out showing his cowardice. My point about Haig having no idea about what was going on is proved by Source B where there is an extract written by Haig about the first day of the attack. It is clear that he was not there and is clueless as the report is simply wrong. The fact that he was clueless and thought that the battle was going well meant that he didn’t change his tactic. This was not really his fault you could say - he was ill informed.

However, what facts say is that he wouldn't have to be informed at all if he was nearer to the battle and so would have known that his tactic was not working. Haig's perseverance of his tactic is what he is most criticised for and this mistake was very preventable but for Haig's cowardice. Another reason that also supports Haig being a "butcher" is his military strategy. This was just poor. He employed a tactic in which the plan was to simply kill as many Germans as possible. However, as Source F describes, "it is not a strategy at all, it's slaughter". This, he knew would mean there would be losses, too.

He explains this in Source A where he says that: "the nation must be taught to bear losses". This may be him being a realist, however I reckon he is just using this statement to cover his back. So if there are many losses he cannot be blamed. However, even if there were always going to be sacrifices - I think that 20,000 British dead on the first morning with 600,000 Allies in total dead is more than anyone could have foreseen or accounted for. Furthermore, after the ridiculous losses on the first morning alone, you would have thought that anyone would have made some big changes - preferably tactics-wise.

However, no, his perseverance or negligence is clear to see as the Somme bears huge casualties and is seen by most as slaughter of the British troops. His plan of action was also pathetic as it involved many presumptions that were just wrong. He had presumed that the barrage would completely destroy the barbed wire so the troops would be able to just walk - as they did, shoulder to shoulder - across No Man's Land. However, all that happened to the barbed wire is that it was lifted up but then brought back

down by the force of the explosions. So, if anything, it was in even more of a tangle than before. Source C backs this up.

It states: " it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack. This slowed the men down, as they had to cut there way through it. This was not planned for. Haig had also counted on the German Trenches being obliterated. He had thought that, after the trip over No Man's Land, there would be very few opposing Germans. He thought that all of them would have been killed during the barrage and it wouldn't be able to be easier for the troops. This is what they were told. However, the Germans had made special trenches, which were reinforced with concrete. They were very deep too - about 20 metres down.

This meant that the Germans just hid in bunkers. Then, when they heard the bombing stop, they climbed out to there machine guns. Here, they just watched the British strolling towards the. They were sitting ducks. They Germans couldn't believe their luck as they mowed the British troops down. And then to think that Haig pursued this tactic and he gave reports like that in Source B where, after 20, 000 British troops have died in just one morning, he writes that it was " very successful" and " all went like clockwork". Butcher...? I think so. However, despite everything I have said so far some still don't think that Haig was a " butcher".

I'm going to give you one of the reasons why they could possibly think this. This reason is how he was not informed well. His plan did not involve any soldier experience based knowledge. This was the reason that his presumptions were incorrect. He would have known that the barbed wire was never going to be destroyed by the barrage. Therefore (you would presume <https://assignbuster.com/haig-butcher-of-the-somme/>

that) he wouldn't have involved this in his plan. Also, if he had known about the German trenches - how they were reinforced and had bunkers to hide in during the barrage - he wouldn't have involved that in his plan, either. Should he have asked or should he have been told?

Either would have been better than brainlessly sending men to their deaths. It is also clear that the soldiers did know that the barrage was not going to have the desired effects. This is made clear in Source C where Private George Coppard's interview is written down. He said: "any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before". So, he didn't really know how to tackle the plan he wanted to put into play. This was, debatably, not his fault. Therefore there is at least one reason why some believe that Haig was not a "butcher".

But, then again, some think that the Battle of the Somme was actually a success. They think that Haig, being the General, must have guided us to the victory. I think, unless it won us the war, (which it clearly didn't) that many deaths cannot be in any way good. ~0~ To conclude, I'm sure that you can guess my verdict. I believe that Haig was a "butcher". I think he started out with the wrong mind-set - not really caring about casualties. He thought that to win we just had to kill as many Germans as possible. This was the wrong way to go about it, I think. Secondly, His plan did not work.

More than that, it resulted in 20,000 deaths on just one morning. He was pretty much clueless and so made many presumptions that were incorrect. He maybe could have known more if he wasn't cowering away 50 miles away from the battle in the luxuries of a castle. And finally, after all of the deaths I told you about on the first day of the Battle. He still pursued with that tactic.

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One of my teachers used to tell me that the definition of stupidity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result. This is exactly what Haig did and it was on a massive scale. He was undoubtedly a “ butcher” in my opinion.