

Butcher of the somme history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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. 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 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

<https://assignbuster.com/butcher-of-the-somme-history-essay/>

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