

The battle of the somme 1916



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Battle of the Somme was launched 1st July 1916 and has become infamous for its supposed futility.

It was originally planned as a French offensive but the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), General Sir Douglas Haig, soon took it on, he planned and orchestrated the battle but his tactics are still controversial almost 90 years on. The main aim was to relieve the French at Verdun. The German-launched offensive began 21st February 1916. The Germans had planned to capture the historic and sentimental town of Verdun and the surrounding forts, which restricted their defence. The battle continued until June with the Germans making a few, slow territorial gains. When the Battle of the Somme was launched, at the beginning of July, the Germans could no longer afford to fight two high-profile battles so they withdrew from Verdun.

The attack was centred on the River Somme; the British and French troops were to attack stretches both North and South of the River. The battle began with a weeklong bombardment of the German front line before the British and French troops attacked, surprising the Germans. Unconcealed troop and armament movements ensured this was not a surprise. The Germans built reinforced dugouts and when the bombardment began they moved into them. The 1st July saw the official start of the battle, 11 British divisions walked steadily to the German front line. The Germans simply came out of their dug-outs, mounted their machine guns and the infamous slaughter began.

The ensuing day was the most deadly day in the whole history of the British Army; it saw around 60, 000 casualties including 20, 000 dead. The British

decided to focus their next offensive on the South banks of the river.

Following some significant territorial gains on the 14th July, which could not be withheld, the next two months became a stalemate. Two months after the assault had begun the original offensive was renewed, but to no avail.

The next few months, upto the end of the battle in mid-November saw torrential rain, which turned the site into a quagmire. Then, on the 13th November after an estimated 1, 245, 000 deaths the battle ended. Source A, an extract from a despatch by Haig, is reliable to the historian. It states three of Haig's aims of the battle the main being to relive pressure on the French at Verdun. It was to be published but the date at which it was written brings into light its reliability and purpose. The source is biased as it omits key objectives – such as gaining land, looking at source I we can tell this did happen.

Haig was known for his “ break-through” tactics, which opposed his assistant's attrition methods; Haig's true plans are made clear in this source. With the benefit of hindsight I can now say that the battle did achieve these aims, but as this source was written after the war I can surmise that the aims changed following the battle, to avoid objective failure. This source contradicts the statement, the battle was not doomed from the start but it did become an infamous disaster. On paper the battle has clear-cut and achievable aims but the way the Generals orchestrated it, ensured they were not achieved. Source B, an extract from a communication from Haig to Lloyd George (who was at the time Minister of Armaments before he became Prime Minister in December 1918), is a reliable primary source. The source tackles the issue of armaments and brings into light the leadership of Sir Douglas

Haig; this source indicates that he planned to bomb the Germans into submission.

I believe that when he demanded more ammunition it showed his weakness as a General. By requesting these armaments shows that he seems to have accepted that all had not gone to plan. This source has been written in a rushed and eager fashion with carelessness with both men and arms. We can see his heavy-handed approach – not the attitude of a great General. This source seems to be outlining his failures as both a commander of men and of the battle. This is a note of desperation but it brings to my attention the unwillingness of Haig to change his tactics and not to use an alternative plan of attack.

I believe that this source supports the statement, the battle was doomed and this source outlines the failures of General Haig. Source C, like source A was written following the battle and is again a letter of justification. I suspect this was a private letter intended for the British cabinet alone not for publication, it is therefore reliable, Haig is admitting his failures, he admits that the battle did not gain much territory but he is then quick to point-out what the battle did achieve, it proved the ability of his men and leadership. I believe I need to mention Haig's personality in this source, as it is something that needs to be dealt with. Haig was a Calvinist and this led him to believe that God approved all of his actions. This is why I believe that he seems so unconcerned about the loss of life, which is apparent source in B; the battle is one of attrition for him, wearing down the German forces.

This source also talks about forcing the Germans out of strong defensive positions; I do not see this to be true. The weeklong bombardment of the German trenches did not destroy the German barbed wire and trenches; when the Allies advanced on the Germans many were killed and those who advanced key positions would have faced more resistance. The only real success this source outlines is in the number of casualties the German's suffered; I believe this is linked to the attrition tactics adopted by both sides. Haig appears as a defiant and headstrong character who is egotistical and refuses to accept that he is wrong. In my eyes this source neither supports nor contradicts the source, it does not deal with the Somme as a disaster but nor does it deal as the battle being a success.

Source D enables me to look at the relationship between Lloyd-George and Haig, according to many they disliked each other, Lloyd-George saw Haig as a threat to his superiority as he had many friends in positions of influence, (e. g. the House of Lords. However this source does not seem to show this dislike, Lloyd George is praising Haig but I question his motives, at this point in his political career he was looking to replace Asquith as the next Prime Minister and this brings into light the real motives behind this letter.

Perhaps it was election propaganda? Lloyd-George, as Minister of Armaments, would have only been shown certain stretches of the front line and this maybe why he has come to the conclusion apparent in this source, it is true that the battle did see territorial gains around this date and it maybe this that Lloyd-George is referring to. I believe this source contradicts the statement; it talks about the battle being a success of sorts and for this reason I can only conclude that it contradicts the source. Source E, supports <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-the-somme-1916/>

objective 3 in source A. Erich Ludendorff, an influential German General wrote it and it seems to reiterate the fact that the entente troops did inflict much damage on the Germans. It is possible that the General is justifying his defeat and so this brings into light the reliability of the source as does the reason for Ludendorff writing “ My War Memoirs,” over-all it maybe a biased book.

Ludendorff experienced the battle first hand so this is a primary source. This source seems to imply that Ludendorff had a defeatist attitude toward the battle which may have been created / enhanced following the war. I believe this source contradicts the statement; the battle was not doomed as this source outlines the success of the battle in inflicting damage on the Germans. Source F, written by historian A. J.

P. Taylor, is a secondary source and this brings into question its reliability. Taylor had the benefit of hindsight and perspective. The source seems to contradict source E, a primary source, Ludendorff clearly states that the entente forces ate away at the German lines but Taylor seems to imply that this did not happen. Taylor seems to have accepted that the battle did have successes but also failures and this is vital in an historian’s analysis of the source. Although A.

J. P. Taylor is known for his dislike of WWI Generals and this can be detected in the source, he seems to have no faith in the Generals. The source also talks about the enthusiasm and idealism that the troops had on the Somme.

The beginning of the war saw much enthusiasm for the effort but this was soon destroyed, as the reality of war hit them. I believe the Battle of the

Somme is an excellent example of the breakdown of idealism and enthusiasm that the Somme destroyed. A. J.

P. Taylor talks about this in this source and I feel this is important to mention when evaluating the statement. I believe this source supports the statement but it is unreliable due to Taylor's hindsight and perspective of WWI. Source G, an extract from "The Great War" by Marc Ferro, was published in 1969, a secondary source, which may not be reliable. I believe this source is biased, the battle is simply dismissed as useless and other opinions are not taken into account.

The battle was not like this; firstly the battle was fought to relieve the French at Verdun, where they faced failure, Ferro fails to mention this. Militarily the battle was a success; only in terms of number of deaths and planning was it a failure. Ferro is dismissive of the Generals due to his Marxist beliefs. This source was written in 1969 at the height of public opinion against WWI, by popular belief it was dismissed as futile and it is not until the last decade have we truly recognised the need for WWI. It dealt with the balance of power in Europe (something the British were keen to uphold) and has been overshadowed by WWII.

For these reasons I dismiss the reliability of this source, the author would have been under much social pressure. This source supports the statement but I cannot rely upon it because of its bias, author, and publishing date. Source H, a piece of Government propaganda, this still taken from a film entitled "The Battle of the Somme," is a fake. The film was staged behind the front line and was used as propaganda throughout the country and this

means that it is wholly unreliable. I question the Government's reasons for publishing this film, it could be said that it was needed to counteract the rumours that had been circulating around Britain. The Germans had now emerged from their dugouts their machine guns would have been ready to open fire as soon as the entente troops came out of their trenches.

So in reality this source is not true to life. We also know that the troops wore full packs when they advanced – the men in the pictures are not. The trenches that the men are climbing out of do not seem to be of front line quality, there are no visible sandbags or reinforcements reiterating the unreliability of the source. To conclude, I believe the photo itself does not show much but when we read deeper into what it has to say, the need for propaganda, it shows that the Battle of the Somme was a disaster from the start and it should never had been launched.

The source itself contradicts the statement but what the source implies supports it. Source I, a map showing the land gained by the entente forces at the Somme, is to be relied upon. The death tolls are correct, as are the territorial gains. Source A does not mention the obvious aim of gaining land but this source implies otherwise, about 10km of land was gained. It is possible that gaining territory was not a main aim and this why it was not included in source A.

This source supports the statement, the battle was a total disaster over 1 million men died for very little territorial gain. Source J, a British soldiers opinion of his order to advance at a walking pace, is full of emotion and opinion. It is important to realise that this is only one soldiers opinion and

although many others may have held this opinion it is not the only one. As a soldier he would have had a very narrow view on the battle, he would have been more worried about his fighting comrades than about relieving pressure at Verdun, this source is an example of this narrow-mindedness. The soldiers would not have seen the battle in terms of objectives unlike the Generals, he would have been pre-occupied by his battalion and his own life, for him the battle would have been a futile exercise. We are not given a date as to when this source was published but it may have been influenced by modern opinion against the war.

This source is of great contrast to the opinions expressed in sources E, C and D this source talks very negatively about the tactics employed by the Generals whereas the Generals seem confident and have a disregard for life. This source clearly supports the statement; the battle was an unprecedented disaster. In conclusion, the Somme was a terrible disaster in terms of loss of life and the damage to the reputation of the British army but it was also a success in the sense that it relieved the French at Verdun and it wore down the Germans mental and physical strength. The Battle of the Somme did gain some territory, (source I) but the greatest thing that the battle achieved was experience for the British army.

To conclude the sources given, which provide a very narrow view on the battle, both support and contradict the statement so the battle was a great success in its positive aspects but it was also an infamous failure in its negative aspects.