

# Lions led by donkeys essay sample



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The well-known statement from World War I the allied troops were like “Lions led by donkeys” is related to the bravery and fearlessness that the soldiers fought with whilst being instructed to do not so clever things.

Field Marshall Douglas Haig is a popular choice to fill the role of “donkey”. Opinion has varied since WWI and his reputation as a callous general has been questioned by some and acknowledged by others. The Somme was a battle many used to downsize Haig as the casualties and tactics used were horrific. In this essay I will look at the level of truth that can be found in the phrase “Lions led by donkeys” and look specifically at the role Haig had.

I will look at different sources and interpretations written by historians in reference to Haig and allied generals and soldiers and politicians, to gauge how accurate the statement is.

I think that from the evidence I find I will find a change as years go on and the overall view will be that the statement is both true and false. Some of the time poor tactics were used and others the tactics were good.

## Biography

Douglas Haig is probably the most famous (or infamous) British general of World War One.

He was born in Edinburgh in 1861. He later attended Brasenose College in Oxford but didn't complete his degree due to illness. In 1884 he went to Sandhurst, the Royal Military College and the following year commissioned into the 7th Hussars. He was known as an efficient officer who looked after his men.

However, he had a cold and harsh personality whilst he was notoriously inarticulate. He served in the Sudan where he was found to be very courageous. During the Boer War he occupied the rank of Chief of Staff to the cavalry commander. This held his strong likening to the use of cavalry in the war. He was appointed Major General at the age of 42 due to his service in the Sudan and South Africa. He was socially connected and his marriage to one of Queen Victoria's maids of honour.

In the First World War, Haig served as commander of I Corps and First Army in France. He later found himself replacing Sir John French as Commander in Chief of the B. E. F. in 1915. He is better known as the general who planned the Somme Offensive of 1916. He was promoted to Field Marshall on 3rd January 1917. At the end of the war he was made an Earl and awarded £100 000 by Parliament.

#### In Criticism of Haig

It is widely concluded by many historians that Haig was a poor commander who failed to accomplish his goals and targets set by his superiors. Many, such as historian Alan Clark, feel he reached his high position through luck and good fortune. He claims that " He failed the Staff College examination." Which shows that Haig somehow managed to avoid formalities such as passing. In his second application " the formality of an entrance examination were waived".

General Sir Archibald Murray believed him to be " a man of mediocre ability". Sir James Edmonds takes in further in saying that Haig's intellectual abilities were " below the average stupidity". He is portrayed by both of these

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authoritative figures as a man who is not only a bad tactical advisor and planner but also lacking in pure mental ability.

Others thought it was the problem of commanding such a large army that left Haig clueless. Tim Travers says, “ they were overwhelmed by the size of the army”.

### In Defence of Haig

I will begin by explaining that there are some historians who defend Haig and one of the strongest is the historian John Terraine, the author of “ Haig: The Educated Soldier”. He and others argue that Britain fought the war as well as can be expected under the circumstances. He believes the war of attrition was unavoidable and that caused the things to happen in Battles such as the Somme.

Another historian, named Gary Sheffield, who sees Haig in a more positive light, also praised Haig. He explains how Haig was “ judged purely on results, of coping with profound changes in warfare, of evolving an effective weapon system, of actually winning the war, the BEF emerges as an innovative and highly adaptable force.” This shows they did well considering circumstances.

Haig was still successful. He recognised that victories would not be achieved easily. He wore down the German army gradually and delivered a final blow in 1918. The Germans themselves suffered heavy casualties so it was not only Haig who let many of his men die. Haig achieved that fatal blow towards the end of the war. The blow that won a war could not have been achieved had not the improved tactics of Haig’s BEF been applied.

Did Haig deserve his reputation as a callous general?

Haig is believed by some to be an uncaring or callous general. Even Winston Churchill compared him to a surgeon in the pre-anaesthetic era. He was “entirely removed in his professional capacity from the agony of the patient... He would operate without excitement... if the patient expired under the knife, he would not reproach himself.”

One person commenting on the First World War said, “It was pure bloody murder. Douglas Haig should have been hung, drawn and quartered for what he did on the Somme. The cream of British manhood was shattered in less than six hours.”

Responding to this idea of Haig as a callous general Gary Sheffield points out, “Haig was profoundly affected by the loss of Brigadier “Johnnie” Gough V. C. his chief of staff, mortally wounded when visiting the front line. Haig’s apparent callousness was in reality part of the mental make up of every successful commander”.

Conclusion

I presented the evidence for and against the validity of the statement “lions led by donkeys” in reference to the leadership of Douglas Haig. In conclusion I have found that this statement is both true and false.

Historians such as Sir John French have criticised Haig for gaining his promotions and respect through luck and fortune. They focus on the fact that Haig did not deserve his position and military progress was due to circumstances Haig found himself in. For instance “Haig, himself, having a  
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superior officer in his debt was but one of a variety of fortuitous happenings that had so far compensated for a military talent which, although systematic, was not outstanding or original” says Alan Clark. The Somme battle was another source of ammo to attack Haig as his leadership along with other Generals led to a massacre of thousands of British troops in such a short time. The tactics Haig and his generals employed were ignorant if not stupid to the ability of the German enemy. This battle find truth in the statement as the British soldiers were not being ordered to attack the enemy safely or cleverly in any way.

Although Haig’s acclaimed lack of military talent he fought in two wars previous to the First World War where he found himself fighting a completely different style of fighting. The change from fighting a highly inferior army and the tactics he watched his superiors use and succeed in using were all he had to go by when faced by an equal if not superior army of the Germans. He felt reluctant to embrace new tactics and abandon tactics he had seen work. Despite his lack in knowledge of fighting the type of war he was thrust into, he managed to adapt and learn from mistakes over the years. By the end of the war this statement had no validity as he had seen many successes with the British Expeditionary Force.

So I have shown you that there is both truth and untruth in the statement “Lions led by donkeys” in interpreting the leadership of Douglas Haig on the Western Front.