

Why is the battle of
the somme regarded
as such a great
military tragedy



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The first battle of the Somme was a planned, British offensive against German positions, led by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. The military objective for the conflict was to relieve pressure on the beleaguered French forces, caught up in a war of attrition with the Germans, which were close to breaking point at Verdun. In attacking German forces along the river Somme and divert their attention away from the French, Haig believed he could break the enemy by punching a hole through their line, using massive force and large numbers of troops. Haig's strategy was two fold, start by heavily bombarding German positions with artillery, then send in the infantry to clear out the enemy's positions and secure the territory.

He started the offensive on 23rd June 1916 with an eight day artillery barrage on the German lines. The intention was to 'soften up' the enemy's front line and kill as many Germans as possible. However Haig underestimated how well the enemy had dug in and the strength of the German defensive position, an oversight which had dire consequences once the initial barrage was over. The tragedy truly started to unfold in the second phase of Haig's offensive. Once the preliminary bombardment was over, he ordered his men to go 'over the top', leaving their dugout and advance toward the enemy line.

The Germans who had survived deep in their bunkers were ready for them and massacred the advancing forces with machine guns and rifle fire. In the first day alone 60,000 British troops lay dead because they followed orthodox but outdated orders from a general who had failed to realize that the rules and tactics of war were changing. The battle raged on until

November with British casualties eventually numbering 420,000. Public

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opinion for the war began to waver as people became war weary and the loss to the country took its toll. Britain eventually won the battle but the cost to the country was enormous, in some towns there were no young men left, all having died in pal's battalions. The tactics of warfare had begun to change during the Somme with a shift towards strong defensive positions not offensive might.

Haig's style of strategic leadership was a throwback to an earlier time and as a consequence many thousands of men needlessly lost their life. The battle of the Somme did achieve militarily what it set out to do. It took the pressure off the French forces embattled near Verdun, the longest and bloodiest battle of the whole war. Had the Germans won their war of attrition with the French at Verdun, then Somme would truly have become a terrible waste of human life.

For all the mistakes made and the horror that the Somme invoked, it was a battle we needed to win. Haig using foolhardy, outmoded tactics won the battle and ultimately influenced the outcome of the war as a whole. The tragedy of the Somme is the final death count, calculated at over one million dead and the amount of ground gained, just five kilometres. Source A has interpreted the battle of the Somme as highly important. It fails to state this exactly; however, using the contents of the source it is easy to derive the writer's interpretation of the importance of the battle of the Somme.

He opens this part of the report by using words such as 'considerable' and 'practically'. This shows how he believed that the battle was important. He also states that the Germans were 'ready to surrender'. If this were true it

would mean the imminent end to the war and victory to the Triple Entente. Finally in this section of the source he states ' the German casualties have been greater than ours'. This is correct but he fails to mention the 200, 000 French lives that were taken at the Somme as well as the 420, 000 British souls that were lost to the Germans.

This is a total of 620, 000 human lives lost fighting the Germans. Compared to the half a million Germans that fell, Haig is actually filtering the information within his report. Overall Haig's view of the Germans being ' practically beaten men' had some truth to it. The truth however was based on the war weariness that was being experienced by both sides.

Mainly because of the fact that people thought the war would have been won by Christmas 1914. Reading the provenance it is possible to find that it is ' part' of a report. This means there may be more information explaining in more detail the importance of the Somme. Secondly it is about the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme. As general and in overall command of the troops Haig will be attempting to justify his actions and the battle itself.

He will not be including any information pointing out the battle was avoidable, poorly fought or pointless. This would then leave him open to dispute and possible removal from his position. Finally the report had been sent in December 1916, the belief was the war could have been won by Christmas (December) 1914. As the war had continued 2 years longer than predicted the British Cabinet would have been anxious for good if not excellent results at this point. It seems he was filtering the report to make sure they heard what he wished them to hear, which is what they wanted to

hear. In conclusion Haig's interpretation of the importance of the war is to some point correct.

As the battle took place to move the battle south and to draw forces away from Verdun, it was in those respects a success and helped the Triple Entente win the war. It was also correct in stating that more German lives were lost than British, however, taking into account the large losses also sustained by the French this actually outweighed the German losses. Finally the war continued for a further two years after the Somme had taken place - if it had been so instrumental in the victory of the war, it would have ended sooner with fewer casualties.