

Was Stalemate on the Western Front the Fault of the Generals? Andy Lawrence Insists That We Must Think for Ourselves to Unravel One of the Great Historical Conundrums.

by Andy Lawrence

VERDICT: YES. THE LIONS WERE INDEED LED BY DONKEYS--EVIDENCE OF MILITARY INCOMPETENCE.

1. Allowing personal grudges and ambition to influence military decisions. The British Army that went into the trenches was riven by intrigue, faction and personal rivalries. The tragedy for the ordinary Tommies was that the divisions within the High Command were to play themselves out on the front line. Examples are legion. At the battle of Loos Sir John French wanted personal control of reserves. He therefore did not allow Haig, commander on the spot, to have them until it was too late, and the attack consequently failed causing thousands of casualties. Sir John French also allowed personal grudges to colour his judgement of another subordinate. In 1914 Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, a prewar rival of French's, was summarily dismissed when he asked to perform a tactical withdrawal to a better position. Once Smith-Dorrien had been sacked, French ordered the troops to move back to the position that Smith-Dorrien had suggested. This was strategy based on personal grudge rather than sound military judgment, and it was the troops that were paying the price.
2. Growing belief in the value of the prolonged bombardment. The initial success of the British attack at Neuve Chapelle in 1915, where German defences were swept away in a storm of artillery fire, was instructive. The problem was that the British High Command learnt the wrong lesson. Instead of persisting with short, sharp, whirlwinds of fire with an overwhelming concentration of guns, they were encouraged to use heavier and longer bombardments that simply churned up the ground and eliminated the element of surprise. Completely underestimating the weight of bombardment needed to destroy the German front line, the Commanders embarked on huge but effectively useless bombardments at both the Somme (1.5m shells fired with little success) and Passchendaele (4.5m shells fired).
3. The inability to accept and pass on evidence that did not fit the plan. Much of the criticism aimed at First World War Generals centres on their inability to react flexibly to events as they unfolded. Haig knew that much of the barbed wire on the Somme was not cut; he admitted that himself. Yet he still continued with the attack. He also knew that the wire around Aubers Ridge was not cut in 1915, but the attack still went in and 1,000 men died as a result for no gain. If the Commander in Chief refused to react to information coming from below then his underlings were equally reticent in passing that information upwards. Rawlinson had big reservations about the attack on the Somme. Nevertheless he did not voice these doubts and forbade his officers from criticising the plan. The General, who had been saved from the sack earlier in the war by Haig, swallowed these well founded doubts and declared himself 'quite game to try although it does involve considerable risks', saying that he would do as he was told. Furthermore, he warned that 'All criticism by subordinates ... of orders received from superior authority will, in the end, recoil on the head of the critics.' This stifling acceptance of orders and directives, often in the face of logic, undoubtedly cost lives.
4. Willingness to keep battles going (and accept enormous casualties) well after it was clear that success was unlikely. Haig and his ilk had so much invested in their much vaunted offensives that they could not be allowed to fail. Stopping an attack after initial setbacks would not go down well in Westminster. Therefore it was politically expedient for attacks to continue in order to justify all the expenditure of munitions, time and optimism that had already been incurred. The only problem was that the expenditure of lives rose with every day that the commanding egos were being satisfied. Both the Somme and Passchendaele went on for months after it was clear that the attacks were getting nowhere. Haig's ordering of successive attacks on the Somme in October and November 1916, with the

ground reduced to a quagmire, achieved nothing but a degradation of morale and manpower. In 1917 subordinate Generals were telling Haig that it was pointless to continue the battle at Ypres as early as 16th August. The Commander in Chief, however, kept on hammering away for a further three months.

5. Persistent use of unachievable and over-optimistic objectives for attacks. Every attack would be the one that would win the war--even if experience told them that this was clearly not the case. Haig consistently said that German morale and manpower were on the verge of collapse and that just one last push would break the enemy and result in clear-cut victory. During the latter stages of the Somme, in early October 1916, he became convinced that another hammer blow would finally crush the German line. Charteris, Haig's intelligence chief, was always quick to tell his boss that the enemy was on its last legs and would not be able to take the strain of one further attack. The results were predictable. The plan for Passchendaele was to reach the Channel ports and the German U-Boat bases there. General Gough's plan called for a first day advance of 6,000 yards. This meant that even though the attack got nowhere Haig had to continue with it. During the planning of the Somme the local Commander, Rawlinson, had favoured attempting to bite chunks out of the German line with limited attacks. By 4 April, however, Rawlinson had heard that Haig had something altogether more grandiose in mind, writing that the Commander in Chief favoured wider objectives 'with the chance of breaking the German line'. Rawlinson's doubts were valid but his quite logical reservations were not pushed with any vigour.

VERDICT: NO. THE GENERALS DID THE BEST THEY COULD.

1. A new kind of war never seen before. The situation that the Generals faced was unlike any that they had faced before. The advent of quick firing rifles, machine guns and artillery meant, along with the deployment of mass armies, that battlefields become stretched beyond all recognition. The sheer length of the front line, 475 miles long from the North Sea to the Alps, meant that the traditional method of defeating enemies, by outflanking them, simply did not exist. To break the foe the Generals had to go through the opposing line of defences--and that meant that casualties were inevitable. Working out a way of breaking through well defended trench lines would take time. In the meantime stalemate was the unavoidable consequence.

2. Communications and transport technology gave advantages to the defending commanders. Defending Generals were fighting on ground that they knew well, with telephone lines that were deeply buried and less likely to be cut. Therefore they would receive information and be able to make decisions far more quickly than their attacking counterparts. The results were that defending reserves could fill gaps made by attackers far faster than attacking forces could exploit a breakthrough. For instance, at Loos in 1915 the Germans were able to increase their reserves from 4,000 to 16,000 inside two days. Defending commanders were also closer to their road and rail networks and were therefore able to rush in reinforcements to plug gaps made by attacks. During the first week of the Somme the Germans were able to send 494 trainloads of troops to stiffen resistance to British attacks and so prolong the stalemate.

3. Attacking commanders were at a disadvantage. As attacking armies moved further away from their own lines they moved away from their own transport and communications. At the battles of Loos and Neuve Chappelle poor communications hampered the ability of Haig, and the overall British Commander Sir John French, to send in reserves where they were most needed. Telephone lines stretching across No Man's Land would be cut by shellfire, wireless communication was unreliable and susceptible to interception, and runners would be at best delayed or, at worst, killed. Therefore commanders had very little chance to modify plans once an attack had started, and they could not quickly intervene to rectify any mistakes that had been made. All this added to the difficulties that attacking Generals had and contributed to the stalemate.

4. Generals hampered by interfering politicians. The Generals had adversaries to tackle at home as well as the Germans. It was the politicians who had ultimate control of Britain's armies and strategy. Often, the Generals were hampered by decisions made back in London. The decision to fight a major battle on the Somme is a prime example. Haig had wanted to attack in Flanders, around Ypres, where the British army was closer to supplies and also to strategic targets just behind the German lines (coastal ports, coal mines). Instead, and for the sake of unity in the alliance with France, the politicians decided that the attack must come on the River Somme simply because that was where the British and French armies met in the trench line. This ground had little strategic value and was tactically unfavourable as well, with German defences well sited and dug deep into chalk ground (as they had been at Loos where the politicians had urged French into attacking because of Allied pressure). Therefore the blame for the slaughter at the Somme cannot be placed entirely at the feet of Douglas Haig precisely because it was

not his decision to attack on the Somme. It is hardly surprising that stalemate persisted if Haig and his Generals had constantly to fight battles with Whitehall as well as the Germans.

5. The BEF's new troops were not professionals. The BEF that was sent to France in 1914 was a very professional army. It was painfully small--even smaller than the Belgian or Serbian armies of the time. It was clear that the British Army would have to expand rapidly to help support her French allies; and in so rapidly enlarging the army the British paid the penalty in the quality of men, both soldiers and officers, who were available. This became very apparent during the Somme. Men of real enthusiasm but poor physical calibre had been rushed through training and were now facing a hardened German conscript army of infinitely more experience. The consequences were predictable. The 'New Army' divisions, for example the 46th, 31st (nicknamed the 'Thirty worst') and 29th, were cut to pieces emerging from their trenches at the end of the bombardment and walking into a hail of fire from undamaged German machine guns. The regular army divisions such as the 9th and 7th used their superior training and knowledge to good effect, going out into No Man's Land before the end of the bombardment in order to 'rush' the German trenches before the enemy could man their weapons. These divisions made relatively good progress during the first day of the battle. So it can be seen that the less than supreme quality of many reinforcements contributed to the failure of attacks and therefore to the stalemate.

WHAT IS YOUR VERDICT?

These, then, are the two sides of the argument that has been raging ever since the battles raged. There is evidence to support both points of view and I challenge the reader to decide which is the more compelling.

Further Reading

Vyvyen Brendon, *The First World War 1914-18* (Hodder, 2000)

Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (Pimlico, 1992)

Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (Allen Lane, 1998)

Richard Holmes, *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front* (HarperCollins, 2004)

David Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (Penguin, 2005)

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AJP Taylor, *The First World War* (Hamish Hamilton, 1963)

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