

A. Matty

WH10

Battle of the Somme Primary Sources

**Source A – Portrait of Haig**

1. Study Source A. What impression does this source give you of Field Marshall Haig?

**Source B.** *General Rees, commander of 94th Infantry Brigade at the Somme, described how his men went into battle on 1st July, 1916.*

“They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade, and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out. I saw the lines which advanced in such admirable order melting away under the fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back. I have never seen, I would never have imagined, such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination. The reports I have had from the very few survivors of this marvelous advance bear out what I saw with my own eyes, that hardly a man of ours got to the German front line.”

**Source C.** *A British soldier’s account of the preliminary bombardments, 1916*

“For a week, about 300 guns poured shells on to the Germans. The noise seemed to throb in our veins even during the quiet of the night. Then, again, in the morning, the guns opened up. For a mile, our trenches belched out dense columns of green and orange smoke. It rose, curling and twisting, blotting everything from view. It seemed impossible that men could stand up to this terrible onslaught.

**Source D.** *History of the First World War, 1972*

“A large proportion of the heavy guns available were of obsolete patter and poor range, while much of the ammunition was defective. Thus shells could not penetrate the dug-outs (trenches) in which the German machine gunners were sheltering – and waiting.”

1. **Study Source B, C, and D and explain whether you agree or disagree with this statement: “These sources show that the generals in the war must have been incompetent.”**

**Source E**. *George Coppard was a machine-gunner at the Battle of the Somme. In his book With A Machine Gun to Cambrai, he described what he saw on the 2nd July, 1916.*

“It eventually became clear that the German line followed points of eminence, always giving a commanding view of No Man's Land. Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. From the way the dead were equally spread out, whether on the wire or lying in front of it, it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack.

Concentrated machine gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the wire, had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing the wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked a black mass. The German faith in massed wire had paid off.

How did our planners imagine that Tommies, having survived all other hazards - and there were plenty in crossing No Man's Land - would get through the German wire? Had they studied the black density of it through their powerful binoculars? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.”

**Source F.** *Diary of Sir Douglas Haig, written June 30, 1916*

“The men are in splendid spirits. Several have said that they have never been so instructed and informed of the nature of operations before them. The wire has never been so well cut, nor the artillery preparations so thorough.”

**Source G.** *Letter from a soldier to his parents, July 1916*

“I could not have wished for a finer death, and you, my dear Mother and Father, will know that I died doing my duty to my God, My Country, and my King.”

1. **Study Sources and E, F, G and explain why you agree or disagree with this statement: “Haig must have been a poor leader to send men to fight in such conditions.”**

**Source H.** *21 March, 1919 Haig's Last Despatch, British Armies in France*

‘Battle having been joined, there follows the period of real struggle in which the main forces of the two belligerent armies are pitted against each other in close and costly combat. Each commander seeks to wear down the power of resistance of his opponent and to pin him to his position, while preserving or accumulating in his own hands a powerful reserve force which he can manoeuvre, and, when signs of the enemy becoming morally and physically weakened are observed, deliver the decisive attack. The greatest possible pressure against the enemy's whole front must be maintained, especially when the crisis of the battle approaches. Then every man, horse and gun is required to co-operate, so as to complete the enemy's overthrow and exploit success.

In every stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in numbers, in courage, in moral and in equipment, there is no way of avoiding payment of the price or of eliminating this phase of the struggle.

In former battles this stage of the conflict has rarely lasted more than a few days, and has often been completed in a few hours. When armies of millions are engaged, with the resources of great Empires behind them, it will inevitably be long. It will include violent crises of fighting which, when viewed separately and apart from the general perspective, will appear individually as great indecisive battles. To this stage belong the great engagements of 1916 and 1917 which wore down the strength of the German Armies.

**Source I.** *Autobiography of German General Ludendorff, My War Memories, 1914-1918.*

“We had heavy losses in men and material. As a result of the Somme we were completely exhausted on the Western Front…defeat seemed inevitable.”

**Source J.** *Part of a report written in December 1916, sent by Haig to the British Cabinet about the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme.*

“a considerable portion of the German soldiers are now practically beaten men, ready to surrender if they could, thoroughly tired of the war and expecting nothing but defeat. It is true that the amount of ground we have gained is not great. That’s nothing. We have proved our ability to force the enemy out of strong defensive positions and to defeat him. The German casualties have been greater than ours.”

1. **Study Source H, I, and J. From the information in the sources and using all of your background knowledge do you think Haig was justified\* in using the military strategies that resulted in such loss of life on the Western Front, or is he to blame for unnecessarily high casualties by fighting a battle of attrition?**

**Justified: Having, done for, or marked by a good or legitimate reason: "the doctors were justified in treating her".**