



What was the cost of the Battle of the Somme?

The Battle of the Somme ended in November 1916 and in those 5 months the British line had advanced about halfway to the town of Bapaume. Across a front of approximately 20 miles the furthest the line had moved forward was 6 miles. Some places like Serre which had been targets for some of the Pals Battalions on the first day, remained in German hands. Map 1 below shows exactly how far the British and Allied forces moved forward during the Battle – *look at the difference between the British front line on the 1st July and the 19th November*.

Map 1



The loss of men during the Battle was huge. The British and Commonwealth casualties (killed, wounded and missing) amounted to 419,654 men and the total German losses are estimated to be between 437,000 and 680,000. Often the French losses are overlooked, these amounted to 204,253. The Battle of Verdun fought in the same year resulted in the French and Germans suffering over 300,000 casualties each.



There was also an enormous personal cost – many villages, towns and cities in Britain were affected by the losses at the Battle of the Somme, especially communities that had raised Pals Battalions of volunteer soldiers.

The cost of the Somme might be measured in other ways. In 1914 Britain's National Debt amounted to £700 million, in July 1916 this had risen to £2,500 million. By the end of the War it had risen to £7,500 million. Put another way 75% of the cost of the War was incurred after July 1916.

Given the scale of the losses and the huge cost how might you measure the impact of the Battle of the Somme?

The Battle of the Somme did not result in victory for the Allies over the Germans. The First World War dragged on for a further two years and losses continued to mount. To many visitors to the Battlefields it must appear that the Generals learnt nothing from the Somme, that they had no way to end the stalemate and that soldiers continued to die for no good reason. This stalemate has been described as a war of attrition, the gradual wearing down of the enemy to the point where one side would not have the resources or the men to continue the fight.

Our understanding of the War has changed over time and historians and others have argued about the effectiveness of the Generals and the British and Commonwealth forces.

Task 1

Using the information above – do you think the Battle of the Somme was worth fighting?

Was anyone to blame for the losses and the cost?



How was the outcome of the Battle of the Somme viewed at the time?

Source 1: What was the view of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief of the British Armies in France and Flanders?

http://www.1914-1918.net/haigs_somme_despatch.htm

a. The aim of the Battle of the Somme

General Headquarters,
23rd December, 1916.

My Lord,

I have the honour to submit the following report on the operations of the Forces under my Command since the 19th May, the date of my last Despatch.

The object of that offensive was threefold:

- (i.) To relieve the pressure on Verdun,
- (ii.) To assist our Allies in the other theatres of war by stopping any further transfer of German troops from the Western front.
- (iii.) To wear down the strength of the forces opposed to us.

b. Tactics

Our lines were pushed forward wherever possible by means of local attacks and by bombing and sapping, and the enemy was driven out of various forward positions. By these means many gains were made which, though small in themselves, represented very considerable advances. In this way our line was brought to the crest of the ridge above Pozieres.

c. Achieving the objectives

The three main objects with which we had commenced our offensive in July had already been achieved at the date when this account closes. Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down. Any one of these three results is in itself sufficient to justify the Somme battle. The attainment of all three of them affords ample compensation for the splendid efforts of our troops and for the sacrifices made by ourselves and our Allies. They have brought us a long step forward towards the final victory of the Allied cause.



d. In Conclusion: a victory?

The enemy's power has not yet been broken, nor is it yet possible to form an estimate of the time the War may last before the objects for which the Allies are fighting have been attained. But the Somme battle has placed beyond doubt the ability of the Allies to gain those objects. The German Army is the mainstay of the Central Powers, and a full half of that Army, despite all the advantages of the defensive, supported by the strongest fortifications, suffered defeat on the Somme this year.

Source 2: What did the soldiers who fought in the Battle think?

P288: The War the Infantry Knew: Captain J.C. Dunn

January 1st 1917.

The Somme Despatch is enlightening as an expression of the views of GHQ, which differ from those of the infantry – notably on the fighting quality and moral of the enemy's formations. The German is not what he was, but his falling off seems, on contact, to be no greater than ours. Without our superiority in guns where would we be? The French seem to be far ahead of us in recent attack technique and formation, and the co-ordination of rifle-grenade and automatic rifle fire.

Source 3: What was the German experience of the Somme? This account describes a day long bombardment of German positions on the Somme in September 1916.

P99: Storm of Steel Ernst Junger

No sooner had day broken when than low flying RAF plane whirled towards us, while we fled into our holes and huddled together the sharp eyed observed must have seen something because before long one heavy low arching shell after another came barging along with incredible force. We sat helplessly in our refuges, prepared at any moment to find ourselves buried. With only the third shell the fellow in the hole next to ours was buried by an enormous explosion.

At three in the afternoon my sentries came to me from the left and stated that they were unable to hold out where they were any longer as their holes had been shot away. I had to display my full authority to get them back to their stations.



Source 4: German trenches in Delville Wood September 1916. The impact of the heavy shelling described by Ernst Junger in Source 3.



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Task 2

How did Haig describe the outcome of the Battle?

Did the soldiers on the ground agree with him?

How has the outcome of the Battle of the Somme been viewed by historians since 1916?

Several books written by historians have influenced the way the Battle of the Somme has been viewed by the general public. To many the Battle of the Somme and much of the First World War is seen as bloody and futile, and that the blame for the enormous loss of life lies firmly with the Generals who are portrayed as callous, stubborn and incompetent.



Source 1: A.J.P. Taylor's view of the Battle of the Somme, written in 1963.

The First World War – A J P Taylor

Strategically the Battle of the Somme was an unredeemed defeat. It is supposed to have worn down the spirit of the German Army. So, no doubt it did though not to the point of crippling that army as a fighting machine. The German spirit was not the only one to suffer. The British Army were worn down also. The enthusiastic volunteers were enthusiastic no longer. They had lost faith in their cause, in their leaders, in everything except loyalty to their fighting comrades. The War ceased to have a purpose. It went on for its own sake, as a contest in endurance. The Somme set the picture by which future generations saw the First World War: brave helpless soldiers; blundering obstinate generals; nothing achieved. After the Somme men decided that the War would go on forever.

Source 2: Denis Winter view of Haig

P150: Denis Winter, Haig's Command: a Reassessment.

The army Haig sent into battle was therefore badly organised as most people came to suspect in the post war period. Poorly trained and ill-equipped, supported by staff work of low quality and commanded by generals inadequate to the task.

Task 3

What do the views of these two historians have in common?

Other historians take a more balanced view and argue that although the Battle of the Somme was very costly and did not lead to a breakthrough in the War it is wrong to conclude it was a waste of time. It did weaken the German Army and relieve pressure on other parts of the Western Front, and ultimately victory was achieved. They also argue that the British Generals did learn from the mistakes of the 1st July 1916, and that although the tactics were changed during the Battle, heavy casualties were unavoidable.



Source 3: Gary Sheffield sets his view of the Battle of the Somme

P187 -189: Gary Sheffield. Forgotten Victory: the First World War, Myths and Realities.

- The Somme was an unavoidable battle.
- Given the level of experience and training the British Army was not skilled enough to fight in another way.
- The commanders of the Armies: Rawlinson, Gough and Haig made mistakes which had bloody consequences.
- They did not learn lessons quickly enough.
- They did not apply the lessons quickly enough.
- In July and August the Germans were on the verge of abandoning their positions on the Somme.
- The 1st of July attack was a failure.
- The battle that developed was a success for the British Army.
- In February 1917 the Germans withdrew to a stronger defensive position: the Hindenburg Line.
- At the same time the German army was weakened and the British Army became more experienced and improved its tactics.

The Somme did contribute to eventual German defeat in 1918.

Source 4: Gary Sheffield sets out the cost of the Battle of the Somme to the German Army.

Gary Sheffield. Forgotten Victory: the First World War, Myths and Realities.

The Somme balance sheet for the Germans was almost wholly negative. Large numbers of German soldiers and officers were killed. The Germans could ill afford to lose these men. The British by contrast, lost mostly green soldiers while those who survived benefitted greatly, in strictly military terms, by becoming experienced. The Somme taught the British Army how to fight, while it degraded the quality of the German Army.

An official German report commented that the casualties had a far greater effect on Germany. Troops had to be left in the fighting zone 'until they expended the last atom of their strength', and German commanders were forced 'to throw divisions time after time into the same battle'. Captain von Hentig, of the Guard Reserve Division, described the Somme in a famous phrase as 'the muddy grave of the German army'.



Task 4

In what way is Gary Sheffield's view of the Battle of the Somme more balanced?

Go back to your original answers to the questions below in Task 1:

Using the information above – do you think the Battle of the Somme was worth fighting?

Was anyone to blame for the losses and the cost?

Have your views changed as a result of what you know now?