

Jump TO Article



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Douglas Haig: architect of victory

by **Walter Reid**

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With the centenary of the Great War fast approaching, it is timely to re-visit some of the fierce debates relating to it that still engage both historians and popular culture. There are few more controversial figures to emerge from that war than Field Marshal the Right Honourable Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig of Bemersyde, KT, GCB, OM, GCVO, KCIE, ADC, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces on the Western Front from late 1915 to the end of the war.

Walter Reid, a Scot, is a professional historian and biographer. In *Douglas Haig: architect of victory*, he draws on newly-available primary sources and modern military scholarship to re-evaluate Haig's contribution to the war. What emerges is a well-researched, evidence-based assessment of Haig and his legacy. Reid's conclusions will surprise many.

Reid commences his biography with Haig's birth in Edinburgh in 1861 and then traces his childhood and subsequent education leading to Oxford and finally to Sandhurst where he discovered his *métier*. Haig saw regimental service in India before entering Staff College at Camberley in 1896, where he became associated with the modernisation party within the British Army. Active service followed in the Soudan (1896) and then South Africa (1899–1902) including regimental command (17th Lancers). He became very involved in the debate about the future of cavalry and opposed its conversion to mounted infantry.

Senior staff postings at the War Office followed (1906–09) during which he helped to form the Territorial Force and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), and to establish the Imperial General Staff. He married before being posted back to India as chief of staff to the Commander-in-Chief India. His pre-war service culminated with his appointment to command I Corps BEF, consisting of two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade. He introduced large field manoeuvres to the British Army along French and German lines.

On the outbreak of War in August 1914, Haig led I Corps BEF to northern France, and, early in 1915, he became commander of the BEF 1st Army. This period coincided with the virtual destruction of the original professional BEF during the retreat from Mons, and the battles of First Ypres, Neuve Chapelle and especially Loos. On 17 December 1915, he replaced Feld Marshal Sir John French as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF and built a new, much bigger force of 50 divisions based on Kitchener's New Army (citizen soldiers). In July–November 1916, he committed great masses of troops to an offensive in the Somme valley. While the Battle of the Somme gained little territory and cost 432,000 British casualties (a function of the tactical realities of the time),

it seriously weakened the German Field Army, trained the New Army divisions, piloted the use of tanks, and fine-tuned British tactics and techniques. Without it, the allied victory in 1918 would not have been possible.

In 1917, Haig attempted to defeat the Germans by a purely British offensive in Flanders. In the resulting Third Battle of Ypres (July–November 1917), the number of casualties again shocked the British public and he failed to reach his objective. But he further weakened the German Army, preparing the way for their defeat in 1918.

After helping to stop the last German offensive of the war (March–July 1918), Haig showed perhaps his best generalship in leading the victorious Allied 'One Hundred Days' assault, beginning on 8 August 1918 and culminating in the armistice on 11 November.

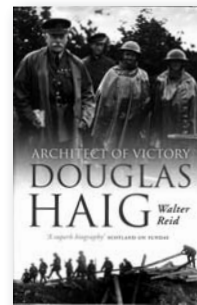
After the war, Haig organised the British Legion and travelled throughout the British Empire collecting money for needy former servicemen. He was created an earl in 1919 and died in January 1928 aged 66 years.

Today, Haig's popular image is an unenviable one. For the last fifty years he has invariably been seen as a callous butcher, fighting battles at the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917) without intelligence or imagination and unconcerned by his losses. Reid claims that this reputation is undeserved and at odds with the historical record. Rather, Haig masterminded a British-led victory over a continental opponent on a scale that has never been matched before or since. He controlled a vast British Army, which had grown from a mere six divisions to sixty over the course of the war – nearly three million men.

Reid asserts that, contrary to myth, Haig was not a cavalry-obsessed, blinkered conservative, as satirized in popular culture. Fascinated by technology, he pressed for the use of tanks, enthusiastically embraced air power, and encouraged the use of new techniques involving artillery and machine-guns. Above all, he presided over a change in infantry tactics from almost total reliance on the rifle towards all-arms, multi-weapons techniques that formed the basis of British army tactics until the 1970s.

Reid also provides a more rounded picture of the private man than has previously been available. A picture emerges of a comprehensible human being, not particularly likeable, but honourably ambitious, able and intelligent.

If you want a balanced, contemporary assessment of Haig, arguably the man more than any other responsible for delivering victory in 1918, then I commend Walter Reid's book to you.



David Leece