

Knowledge Organiser:

Douglas Haig's role during the First World War

1. Introduction: Douglas Haig, born on June 19, 1861, in Edinburgh, Scotland, was a British military leader whose role during the First World War was marked by his command of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front. Haig's leadership style and decisions have sparked ongoing debate and analysis regarding his effectiveness and the human cost of his strategies.

2. Early Life and Background:

- Haig came from a military family and attended Brasenose College, Oxford, before joining the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.
- He served in various colonial conflicts, including the Sudan Campaign and the Second Boer War, which provided him with valuable military experience.

3. Role and Contributions:

- **Commander of the BEF:** Haig assumed command of the BEF in December 1915, succeeding Sir John French. He held this position until the end of the war.
- **Battle of the Somme (1916):**
 - Haig's most notable role came during the Battle of the Somme, a joint British-French offensive aimed at breaking the trench warfare deadlock.
 - The battle commenced on July 1, 1916, with a devastating bombardment followed by an infantry assault.
 - Haig's plan emphasized the use of heavy artillery to weaken German defences before the infantry advance.
 - The battle's first day remains one of the deadliest in British military history, with nearly 60,000 casualties.
 - Despite initial setbacks, the battle led to territorial gains and weakened German forces, contributing to the overall war effort.
- **Passchendaele (Third Battle of Ypres) 1917:**
 - Haig's leadership extended to the Third Battle of Ypres, commonly known as Passchendaele, which aimed to capture German submarine bases and relieve pressure on the French at Verdun.

- The battle was characterized by heavy rain that turned the battlefield into a quagmire, hampering movement and logistics.
- Haig's tactics included preliminary artillery bombardments and a series of incremental advances.
- The battle resulted in a high number of casualties on both sides and limited territorial gains, sparking criticism over its cost-effectiveness.

4. Criticism and Controversies:

- Haig's leadership decisions have been scrutinized for their perceived disregard for human life and reliance on attritional warfare.
- His reluctance to adapt to changing battlefield conditions, such as the impact of new technologies and tactics, has been criticized.
- Historians and scholars continue to debate the extent of Haig's responsibility for the high casualty rates under his command.

5. Legacy:

- Haig's legacy is complex and polarizing. He has been both praised for his contributions to the overall Allied victory and criticized for the heavy toll his strategies exacted on soldiers.
- The "Lions led by Donkeys" portrayal emerged, suggesting that soldiers were courageous but were led by incompetent or out-of-touch commanders.
- Haig's legacy is still being re-evaluated as historians consider broader factors that influenced the war's outcome.

6. Later Life:

- After the war, Haig was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal and retired from active military service.
- He dedicated his efforts to veterans' causes, including the establishment of the British Legion, a veterans' organization.
- Haig also played a role in the creation of the Imperial War Graves Commission (now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission), ensuring proper commemoration of fallen soldiers.