

THE SOMME OFFENSIVE, JULY—NOVEMBER, 1916

The major powers of the Triple Entente, Britain, France, Russia and their ally, Italy, expected 1916 to be a triumphant year. They planned to attack the central powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, on three separate fronts. In preparation for this the British and French began late in 1915 to plan a joint attack against the Germans. The attack was to take place in the middle of 1916 on a section of the western front adjacent to the River Somme where their two lines met.

However, in February 1916 these plans were shattered when the Germans commenced their own offensive against the French forces holding the fortified town of Verdun. The German objective was to draw the French army into the Verdun sector and to slaughter it by a series of massive assaults. The French for their part were determined not to surrender the historic town and the motto of the army defending Verdun became, 'They shall not pass'. The Germans did not break through at Verdun. However, the French were bled into the ground, and the cream of their army was destroyed defending Verdun.

While the French were under this intense pressure from the Germans at Verdun, they appealed to the British for a major offensive elsewhere on the western front. The French hoped that a British attack would draw the German forces away from Verdun. In response to this appeal the British Commander-in-Chief, General Douglas Haig (later Field Marshal), prepared his inexperienced volunteer army for an offensive in the Somme sector in late June.

The Somme was chosen only because it was where the British and French lines met. It had originally been selected for the now cancelled joint offensive. The Somme had no major strategic value and was in fact a very dangerous place to mount an attack. The German positions were heavily fortified and easy to defend as they held the crests of the hills and thus overlooked the British lines. Despite this, the British began their preparations for a June offensive.

The plan

The plan for the British assault was straightforward. After an artillery barrage against the German lines, which was expected to destroy all of the enemy troops, the British infantry would move forward and take the German trenches. This assault would, it was thought, create a gap in the German front line which would allow the cavalry to pass through into the open country behind the Germans. Haig kept 700 000 horses in France during the war just for such a breakthrough by cavalry. Haig hoped that this massive offensive would force the Germans to abandon their assault on Verdun as well as allow him to re-commence the war of manoeuvre which had halted after the Battle of the Marne in September, 1914.

The major British assault on the Somme was to be conducted by the Fourth Army. The Fourth Army was commanded by General Sir Henry Rawlinson and was composed of 12 infantry divisions with 7 in reserve. Rawlinson's army was to move forward on a 29-kilometre front and seize the German positions. Simultaneously, a diversionary attack by the British Third Army would be made north of Rawlinson's position against the German-held town of Gommecourt, whilst the French Sixth Army (5 divisions, 7 in reserve, 2000 field guns) south of Rawlinson would attack to cover the British southern flank. Behind the lines stood the British Reserve Army of 3 cavalry and 3 infantry divisions ready to exploit a breakthrough.

Rawlinson's Fourth Army was composed of 519 324 men. Most of these troops were recent volunteers with little training and no experience. To make up for this, Rawlinson planned to use artillery to destroy the Germans in their trenches before his infantry advanced.

The bombardment which began on 24 June was awesome. There was a heavy field gun, a howitzer or a mortar every 15 metres of the British front. There were 1437 guns in all, which fired 1 508 652 shells in 7 days. Zero hour was originally set for 29 June. However, heavy rain caused this to be delayed until 7.30 am on 1 July, 1916. The assault, in broad daylight two hours after dawn, ensured the Germans a good view of the advancing troops and perfect conditions for their machine gunners.

July 1: the assault

July 1, 1916, was the bloodiest day in the history of the British army. All the plans made by Haig and Rawlinson went wrong.

The British expected that after the massive artillery barrage no German soldiers would be alive to resist the advancing infantry. Thus the infantry was instructed to walk in waves across the open countryside to the German lines 300 to 600 metres away. Each soldier was loaded down with 30 kilograms of ammunition and kit which he had to carry across ground torn up by the artillery.

When the artillery barrage was lifted at 7.30 am most of the Germans had survived the assault. They had sat it out in the deep dugouts they had previously prepared in the solid chalk ground through which their lines ran. Some of these dugouts were 12 metres deep and held 200 men.

The German positions were made up of a fortified area 8 kilometres deep defended by the German Second Army of 6 divisions with a further 5 in reserve. As the artillery ceased firing, the Germans climbed out of their underground shelters and manned machine guns in preparation for the British infantry advance. German

machine gun crews were specially selected and trained. They were reliable soldiers and deadly shots. There were 1000 machine gun crews in the German front line waiting for the British advance. When Rawlinson's infantry walked out into no man's land the German machine gunners mowed them down.

Approximately 120 000 men went over the top on the morning of 1 July. Of these men nearly 60 000 were killed or wounded on the first day of the battle, most of them in the first hour as the attack was repulsed. The scale of the slaughter amongst the British can be illustrated by the fate of the 1st Newfoundland Regiment. Of the 752 men who attacked at zero hour, 684 were casualties on the first day.

Whilst the British attack was a complete failure, the French managed to make some gains south of Rawlinson's position. Their success was due to the fact that the French artillery was heavier and more concentrated than the British and that they had used more sensible tactics in their infantry advance.



(Top) — French troops sheltering on a battlefield. (Bottom) — Dead and wounded in a railway cutting, Western Front 1917.

The Somme, July–November 1916

On 14 July the British attacked again, this time at night. This attack was more successful than that of 1 July and some of the German front-line trenches were overrun. A cavalry advance was made on the following day but again the German machine guns halted a breakthrough.

The Germans rushed reinforcements to the Somme, building up their strength to 30 divisions (thus weakening their attack on Verdun). No British breakthrough could ever be achieved against this force and the battle of the Somme degenerated into a bloody battle of attrition — each side trying to wear down the other by more and more killing. Thus during August and September the attacks continued and British casualties averaged 5000 per day. The British Fourth Army had to be fed a constant stream of new men from England to keep up its strength.

On 15 September Haig used tanks in warfare for the first time. Thirty-six tanks were used to renew an offensive effort during the Battle of Flers on the Somme front. However, though they achieved limited successes, mainly by terrifying the Germans who were in their path, the tanks proved a disappointment. They were too slow (5 kilometres an hour) and too mechanically unreliable to achieve the dramatic results hoped for. The battle wound down as the Germans rushed in reinforcements to bolster their defences.

Haig renewed the attacks in late September, again in October and twice more in November. However, rain eventually turned the battlefield into a sea of mud and the Somme offensive died out on 18 November. British casualties totalled 420 000. The French suffered 194 000 casualties and the Germans 450 000.

For all of their effort, the British had won a strip of territory 32 kilometres long and 10 kilometres deep. No breakthrough had been achieved.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

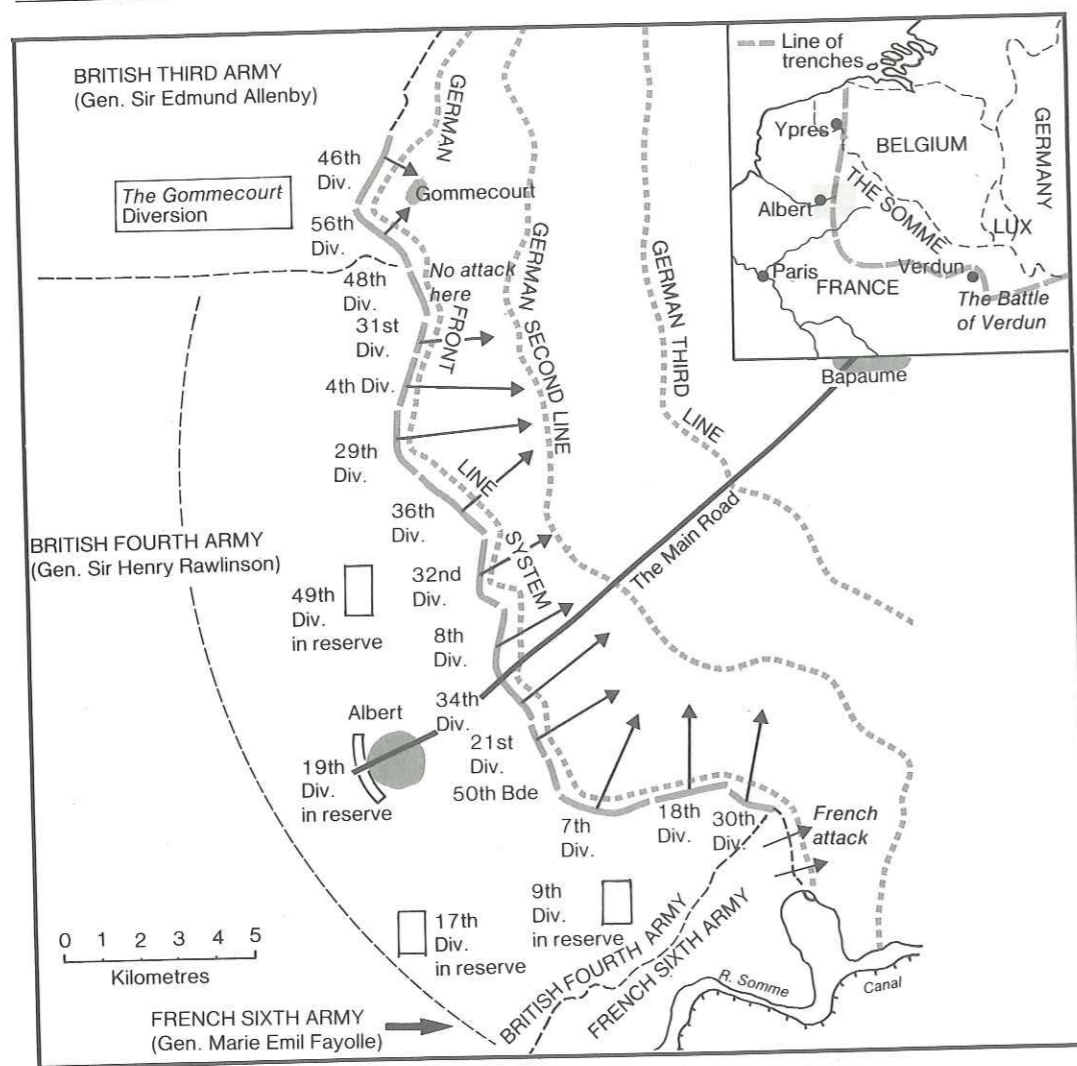
- 1 Against which fortified French town did the Germans launch an offensive in February 1916?
- 2 Who was the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in 1916?
- 3 Why was the Somme chosen as the site of the British offensive?
- 4 What made the Somme a very dangerous place to mount an attack?
- 5 What did General Haig hope that a massive offensive on the Somme would achieve?
- 6 How many men were in General Rawlinson's Fourth Army?
- 7 How many shells did the British artillery fire in the seven days before the attack at the Somme?
- 8 On what date did the British launch their Somme offensive?
- 9 Where had the Germans set out the British artillery barrage?
- 10 How many British soldiers went over the top on the morning of the opening battle?

- 11 How many British soldiers were killed or wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme?
- 12 Why were the French more successful than the British in their assault?
- 13 On what date were tanks used in battle for the first time?
- 14 What was the total number of British casualties at the Somme? What was the total number of French casualties and the total number of German casualties?
- 15 How much territory did the British win at the Somme?



Mud and desolation on the Western Front

MAP QUESTIONS



Map 10 The infantry plan of attack, July 1, 1916

- Name the generals in command of:
 - the British Third Army.
 - the British Fourth Army.
 - the French Sixth Army.
- How many lines of defence did the Germans have at the Somme?
- What type of operation did the British conduct at Gommecourt?
- The main British attack was launched along a road linking which two French towns?
- List the four British reserve divisions indicated on this map.

INVESTIGATING HISTORY

Documents One and Two: 'The battle opened a little after sunrise'

Eyewitness accounts of the first day of the Battle of the Somme give some sense of the horror of the first assault on the German trenches on the morning of 1 July. Two such accounts follow. The first was written by the British novelist Gerald Brenan who wrote of what he saw in 'A Survivor's Story' in the book *The Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918*, published in 1968.

Document Two is taken from an account written by a German officer who was in the German trenches when the British attacked.

Read the documents and answer the questions which follow.

... The battle opened a little after sunrise on July 1, 1916, with a bombardment that shook the air with its roar and sent up the earth on the German trenches in gigantic fountains. It seemed as if no human being could live through that. Then our men climbed by short ladders onto the parapet and began to move forward, shoulder to shoulder, one line behind the other, across the rough ground. They went slowly because each of them carried a weight of 66 pounds. A moment later the German barrage fell on our trenches, and their machine guns began to rattle furiously. Clouds of blue and gray smoke from the bursting shells, mingling with a light ground mist, hid the general view, but through the gaps I could see the little antlike figures, some of them keeping on, others falling, creeping,

writhing, lying still. Each of them carried on his back a tin triangle to assist in his identification by our artillery, and the early morning sun shone on these triangles and made them glitter. But as the hours passed, I could not see that any of them had reached the German support line, and later I knew why: The Boche machine gunners had come out of their deep dugouts and were mowing them down.

... Slowly the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, and the heat of that scorching day grew and grew; but I could detect no movement on the slope in front of me except that here and there a wounded man could be seen creeping toward a shell hole. It became clear that our attack had failed ...

They came on at a steady pace as if expecting to find nothing alive in our front trenches ... A few moments later, when the leading British line was within a hundred yards, the rattle of machine-gun and rifle broke out along the whole line of shell holes. Some fired kneeling so as to get a better target over the broken ground, whilst others, in the excitement of the moment, stood up regardless of their own safety, to

fire into the crowd of men in front of them ... Whole sections seemed to fall, and the rear formations, moving in close order, quickly scattered. The advance rapidly crumpled under this hail of shells and bullets. All along the line men could be seen throwing up their arms and collapsing, never to move again. Badly wounded rolled about in their agony, and others, less severely injured, crawled to the nearest shell hole

for shelter. The British soldier, however, has no lack of courage, and once his hand is set to the plough, he is not easily turned from his purpose. The extended lines, though badly shaken and with many gaps, now came on all the faster . . . The noise of battle became indescribable. The shouting of orders and the shrill cheers as the British charged forward could be heard above the violent and intense fusillade of machine-

guns and rifles and bursting bombs, and above the deep thunderings of the artillery and shell explosions. With all this were mingled the moans and groans of the wounded, the cries for help and the last screams of death. Again and again the extended lines of British infantry broke against the German defence like waves against a cliff, only to be beaten back.

Look at Document One.

- 1 How did the men move forward after they had climbed onto the parapet?
- 2 What did each man carry on his back to assist in his identification by the artillery?
- 3 What was the only movement that Brennan could see on the slope in front of him?

Look at Document Two.

- 4 Why did some German soldiers fire on the advancing British from a kneeling or standing position?
- 5 What could the Germans see 'all along the line' as they fired on the British?

Briefly

What factors contributed to the failure of the British assault on 1 July, 1916?

The wave system of attack

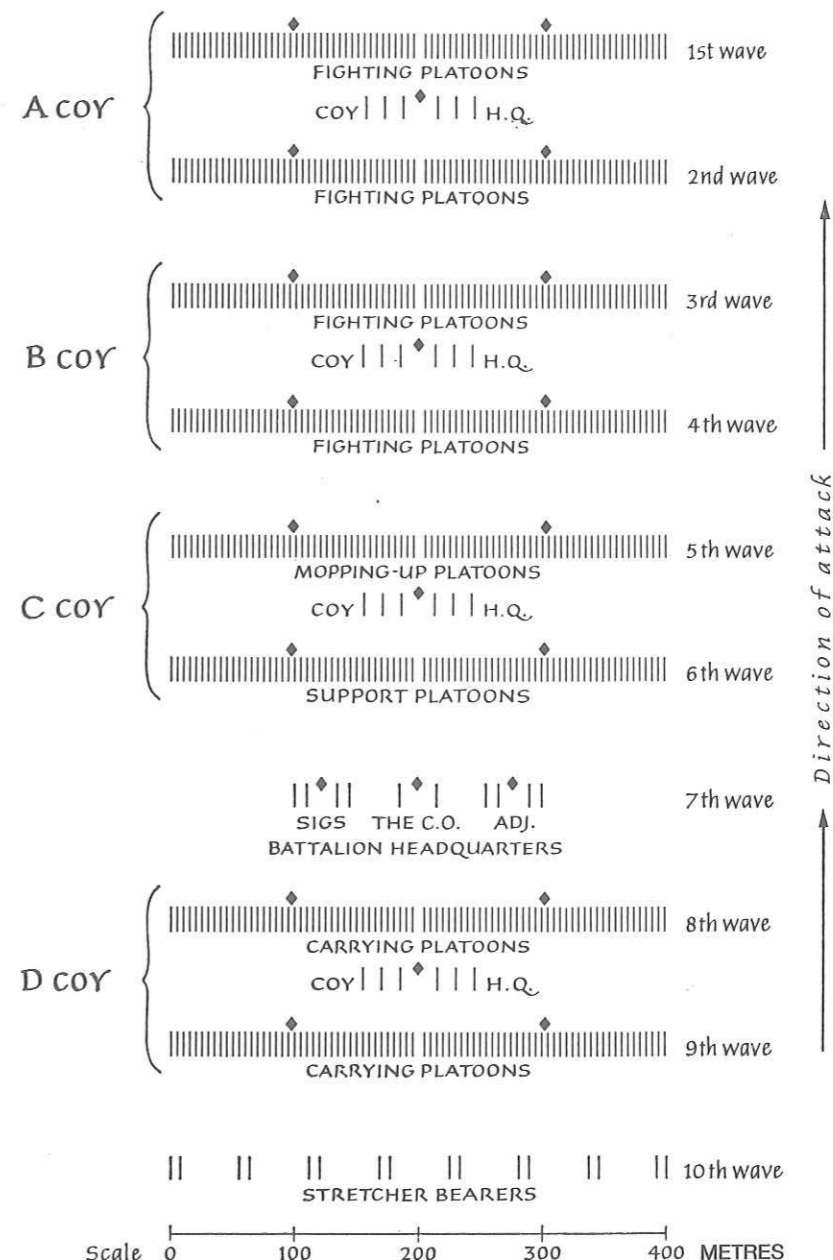
When the British mounted their attack on the Somme on 1 July, 1916, they used the wave system of attack. What follows is an illustration of the wave system of attack used by a battalion of the 21st Division of Rawlinson's Fourth Army.

Study the illustration and answer the questions.

- 1 How many waves of fighting platoons attacked with a battalion of the 21st Division?
- 2 In which wave did the stretcher bearers go forward?
- 3 What was the gap between each wave of attack?
- 4 How long did the fully deployed battalion take to pass a given point?
- 5 What happened to the carrying platoons after they had delivered their loads to the captured trenches?

The Wave System
A battalion of the 21st Division deployed for attack

There were many variations of this layout: some battalions attacked on a two-company front. The battalion strength in attack was 23 officers (♦) and about 700 men (|||||)



There were 5 metres between each man in a wave and 100 metres between each wave. When fully deployed the battalion covered 400 x 900 metres and took 9 minutes to pass a given point. When the carrying platoons had delivered their loads to the captured trenches, they became fighting platoons.

Briefly

Describe the wave system of attack used by the British army in 1916.

British Army organization, 1916

In 1916 there were four British armies on the Western Front, each army consisting of four divisions of approximately 20 000 men and commanded by a General. The Commander-in-Chief of the Armies was usually a Field Marshal, although Sir Douglas Haig who was Commander-in-Chief in July 1916 had not at that time been promoted to Field Marshal.

The following chart is a listing of ranks (not all ranks are included) illustrating how these armies were organized and which rank commanded at each level, as well as a profile of a British Army Division in 1916.

Study the organization chart and profile of a Division, and answer the questions which follow.

British Army Command Structure

Rank	In command of	Consisting of
Field Marshal	Commander-in-Chief of Armies	
General	Army	4 Infantry Corps
Lieutenant-General	Infantry Corps	3 Divisions
Major General	Division	3 Brigades
Brigadier General	Brigade	4 Battalions
Lieutenant-Colonel	Battalion	4 Rifle Companies (35 officers, 1000 men)
Captain (or Major)	Rifle Company	4 Platoons (5 officers, 240 men)
Lieutenant or 2nd Lieutenant	Platoon	4 sections (60 men)
Lance Corporal	Section	14 men

British Army Division, 1916

In 1916 a Division in the British Army consisted of the following:

- 19 372 men (including support troops)
- 5000 horses
- 61 motor vehicles (3 lorries)
- 10 000 rifles
- 204 machine guns
- 40 trench mortars
- 64 guns (artillery)

- 1 What rank of officer commanded a British division?
- 2 How many officers and men composed the four rifle companies which made up a battalion?
- 3 Name the unit which was commanded by a captain or a major. How many officers and men did the unit contain?
- 4 How many men were in a British division in 1916?
- 5 How many rifles and machine guns were issued to a British division in 1916?

Document Three: 'The most wonderful things we saw were the German dugouts.'

One factor which contributed to the failure of the British assault on the Somme on 1 July 1916, was the extraordinary sophistication of the German defensive positions, unique to the German line at the Somme.

The following description of the Somme battlefield and of the captured German positions was given by the Reverend John Walker, an army hospital chaplain who worked at casualty clearing stations during the Battle of the Somme and toured the battlefield in August 1916. His account of what he saw at the Somme was published in an army newsletter on 24 August 1916.

Read the document and answer the questions which follow.

... tramped past our old front line, through the former no-man's land and oh what an absolute scene of destruction, miles and miles of country battered beyond all possible recognition. German trenches pounded to a mass of earth and barbed wire. Huge mine craters made a miniature lake and mountain district. Here where bricks and mortar are freely mixed with mud is Fricourt, there where gaunt boughless trees stand splintered is Mametz. So we wandered on, clambering over desolation, our nostrils assailed by smells which warned us of the unburied dead, and our ears by the ceaseless roar of artillery, for this desolation literally belched flame from every corner, a vast area packed with artillery, lines and lines of guns, 12-inch howitzers and 9.2 naval guns roaring continuously on all sides, like huge tethered monsters straining at their chains, they leapt into the air as they recoiled, grimy gunners grinned as they rolled up their huge shells...

The most wonderful things we saw were the German dugouts down long flights of

steps or inclined planes, forty feet down, they lived defying our artillery. All through the winter when we were losing hundreds he was comparatively secure. Those three rows of comically painted dummies did for Tommy Atkins to shoot at, but come down and see Fritz's abode, passages carefully boarded like a Swiss chalet inside, timbers neatly morticed — telephone wires along the walls, you can hardly hear the roar of the guns — oh what an ingenious foe we have — that cosy little room, neat bed, carpet on floor, papered wall, iron girders carefully boxed — woodwork all done in varnished paint to match the wallpaper and beautifully beaded in darker shades — ceiling white, the essence of comfort, he did not mean to turn out of this. Above in the upper storey so to speak were windows, the glass of which had wire netting in the glass to prevent it splintering. Outside auriculas, shrubs and roses in tubs — window boxes and flower pots — I cannot describe all the wonderful heating and ventilating contrivances.

- 1 What did the writer find at the towns of Fricourt and Mametz?
- 2 What smells assaulted the writer's nostrils on the Somme battlefield?
- 3 Why was it that the area the writer visited 'literally belched flame'?
- 4 Describe the German dugout the writer inspected.
- 5 What was outside the German dugout the writer visited?

Document Four: Winston Churchill criticises Haig's strategy

One critic of the way the operation on the Somme had been conducted was Winston Churchill. Churchill had been forced to resign as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1915 over the failure of the Dardanelles landings; he subsequently spent some time as a Colonel with the British Army on the Western Front before his return to Parliament in 1916.

In a memorandum to the British Cabinet on 1 August 1916, Churchill questioned the wisdom of Haig's frontal assaults against strongly held German positions. The document which follows is a part of Churchill's memorandum.

Read the document and answer the questions which follow.

In personnel the results of the operation (on the Somme) have been disastrous; in terrain they have been absolutely barren. And, although our brave troops on a portion of the front, mocking their losses and ready to make every sacrifice, are at the moment elated by the small advances made and the capture of prisoners and souvenirs, the ultimate moral effect will be disappointing. From every point of view, therefore, the British offensive *per se* has been a great failure ...

It remains to consider the effects of this tremendous and most valiant effort on the general situation in the West and other theatres. It is too early to say whether the British offensive has forced the enemy to suspend ... his costly attacks on Verdun.

... No doubt the French are pleased. Having suffered so much themselves in blood, they think it is only fair we should suffer too. Their own attack on our right

was a fairly profitable operation. This is the solitary advantage in the West. Nor can it be claimed that our offensive was necessary to the Russian successes in the East ... We could have held the Germans on our front just as well by threatening an offensive as by making one. By cutting the enemy's wire, by bombardments, raiding and general activity at many unexpected points begun earlier and kept up later, we could have made it impossible for him to withdraw any appreciable force. If the French were pressed at Verdun we could have taken over more line and thus liberated reinforcements.

So long as an army possesses a strong offensive power, it rivets its adversary's attention. But when the kick is out of it, when the long-saved-up effort has been expended, the enemy's anxiety is relieved, and he recovers his freedom of movement. This is the danger into which we are now drifting.

- 1 In what way does Churchill describe the results of the operation on the Somme?
- 2 Why were the troops 'at the moment elated'?
- 3 Churchill wrote, 'No doubt the French are pleased'. Why did he think they would be?

- 4 In Churchill's opinion what could have been done to threaten an offensive rather than making one?
- 5 What does Churchill claim happens 'so long as an army possesses a strong offensive power'?

Briefly

Summarise the conduct and results of the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Document Five: General Haig defends his tactics

General Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France and principal architect of the offensive on the Somme, was unmoved by criticism of the tactics used and limited gains made.

In response to a letter from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Henry Wilson, dated 29 July, Haig made notes in defence of his conduct of the campaign. Part of Haig's notes on Wilson's letter are reproduced here. These observations were published in 1952 in *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, edited by R. Blake.

Study the document and answer the questions which follow.

Wednesday, 3 August 1916.

1. 'The Powers that be' are beginning to get a little uneasy in regard to the situation.
2. Whether a loss of say 300 000 men will lead to really great results, because, if not, we ought to be content with something less than what we are now doing ...

I replied ...

- (a) Pressure on Verdun relieved ...
- (b) Successes achieved by Russia last month would certainly have been prevented had enemy been free to transfer troops from here to the Eastern Theatre.
- (c) Proof given to world that Allies are capable of making and maintaining a vigorous offensive and of driving enemy's best troops from the strongest positions has shaken faith of Germans, of their friends, of doubting neutrals in the invincibility of Germany. Also impressed on the world, England's strength and determination, and the fighting power of the British race.

(d) We have inflicted very heavy losses on the enemy. In ONE month, 30 of his DIVISIONS have been used up, as against 35 at Verdun in 5 months. In another 6 weeks, the enemy should be hard put to it to find men.

(e) The maintenance of a steady offensive pressure will result eventually in his complete overthrow.

Principle on which we should act. MAINTAIN OUR OFFENSIVE. Our losses in July's fighting totalled about 120 000 more than they would have been had we not attacked. They cannot be regarded as sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive. It is my intention:

- (a) To maintain a steady pressure on Somme battle.
- (b) To push my attack strongly whenever and wherever the state of my preparations ... justify me in doing so, but not otherwise ...

Proceeding thus, I expect to be able to maintain the offensive well into the autumn. It would not be justifiable to calculate on the enemy's resistance being completely broken without another campaign next year.

- 1 What did Haig feel was the attitude of the British government toward the Somme offensive?
- 2 In Haig's opinion what had the Somme offensive achieved? Refer to points *a* and *b* of his reply to General Wilson.
- 3 What did Haig claim to have 'impressed on the world' in his reply to Wilson?
- 4 How many German divisions did Haig claim had been used up at the Somme in one month? How many had been used up at Verdun in five months?
- 5 How did Haig intend to continue to conduct the operation at the Somme?

Briefly

Do you think Haig's response to the criticism of his conduct of the Somme offensive was sound? Discuss with reference to the way the offensive was continued and its results.



The Photographer's View: A front line trench at the Somme

The photograph opposite was taken in a front line trench at the Somme in 1916. Study the photograph and answer the questions which follow.

- 1 What evidence is there in the photograph that this trench was the scene of recent fighting?
- 2 Why do you think that the British troops who held this trench feared further enemy attacks?
- 3 What aspects of this trench point to it being part of a long established trench system?

Briefly

If you were a soldier in the First World War how would you describe this trench in your diary or in a letter home?

The Photographer's View: Moving into the front line

This photograph shows British troops moving forward to the front line. Study the photograph and answer the questions which follow.



- 1 This area had been the site of heavy fighting. What indicates this?
- 2 Why are the British troops walking up to the front line on duckboards?
- 3 What evidence is there to suggest that these troops were moving into battle?

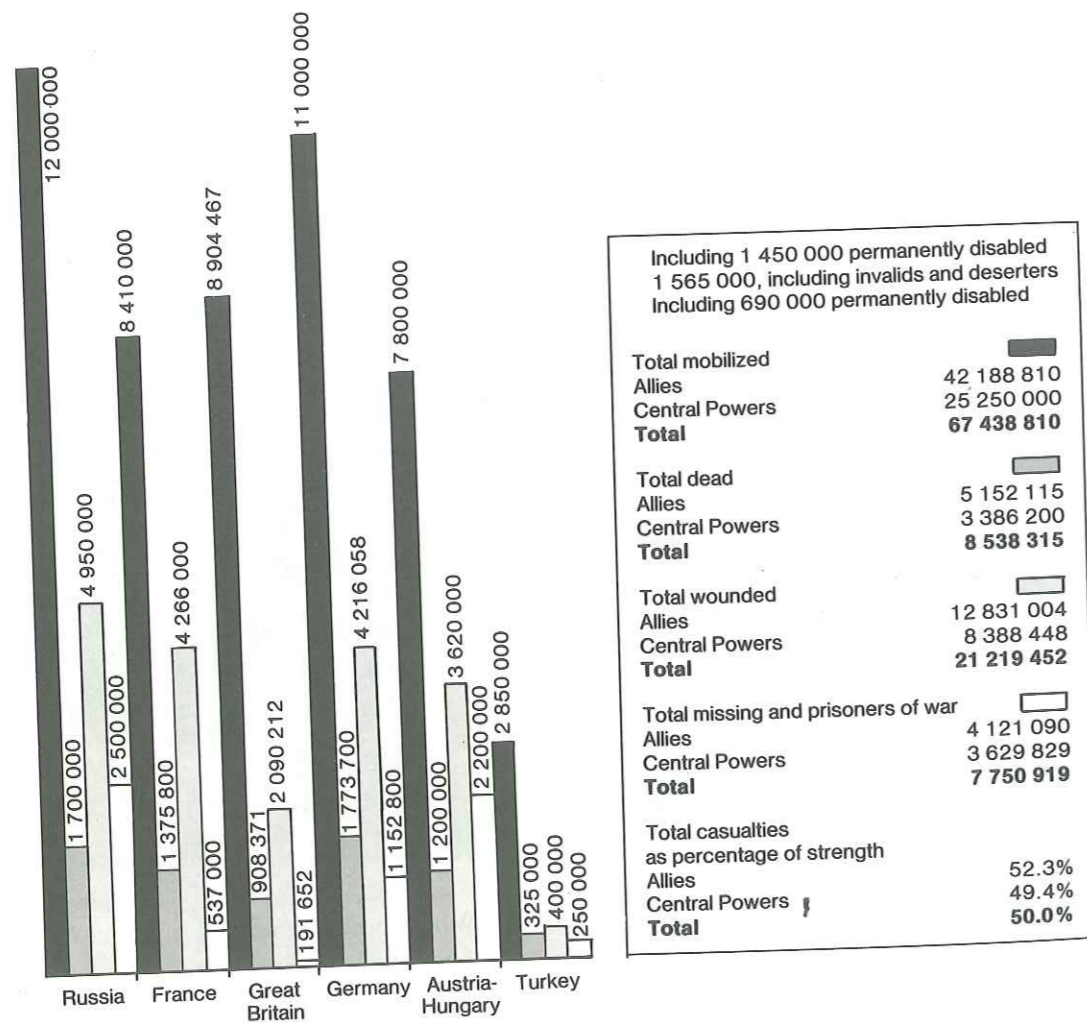
Briefly

Write a diary entry describing conditions in this sector of the Western Front.

Mobilisation and casualties, 1914–1918

The graph which follows illustrates the number of men mobilised during 1914–18 and the number of men killed, wounded, listed as missing or who became prisoners of war. The graph gives information on the major combatants while the table gives the total for all nations which participated in the war.

Study the graph and table and answer the questions which follow.



- 1 What was the total number of men mobilized during the First World War?
- 2 Which alliance bloc, the Allies or the Central Powers, mobilized most men?
- 3 What was the total number killed during the First World War?
- 4 Which two nations referred to in the graphs mobilized most men during the war?
- 5 How many men from each of the following nations were killed during the war?
 - a Britain
 - b France
 - c Germany
 - d Russia

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Revision Essay

Why did the British mount an attack on the Somme in 1916? Why did the Somme offensive fail?

Research Essay

Why was neither side able to breakthrough the opposing trench lines for most of the First World War? What effect did this have on the course of the war?



Battlefield dead awaiting burial