



Background

Introduction

People who have not studied history sometimes do not realise that there is very rarely one story of a past event that everyone agrees with. This is especially true of the Great War of 1914-18. The story of the war has been told, changed and re-told many times. It is still changing today.

Views at the end of the Great War

At the time the war ended, most people in Britain felt that it had been a great victory. Most people thought that it had been a war for justice. Britain fought to defend itself. Britain fought to defend its ally France. Britain fought to defend Belgium, which Germany had invaded. The reputation of the British Army was very high indeed. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig was a national hero. He was cheered at rallies and parades all over the country. When he died in 1928, he was given a state funeral and over 100,000 people came to pay their respects at his coffin.

Views in the 1930s

However, over time this positive view of the war and of the British commanders like Haig began to change. In 1933, David Lloyd George wrote his War Memoirs. Lloyd George had been a senior government minister in the period before the war and up to 1915. In 1916, he became Prime Minister. However, during the war he had many arguments with Haig and the other commanders about military tactics. His memoirs suggested that they were incompetent and uncaring. Some of his criticisms were probably justified, especially over the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the third Battle of Ypres in 1918. However, Lloyd George did not balance this view by accepting the scale of the problems Haig faced, the ways in which Haig and other commanders learnt lessons and their impressive victories in 1918. Lloyd George's memoirs were published in 1933. Haig was dead and unable to defend his reputation.

By this time, other critics were also starting to affect public views of the war. Poets and writers like Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Rupert Brooke had their work published. Their work suggested that the war had been pointless. It stressed the suffering of the war and argued that much was a result of the incompetence of the commanders. One writer called Graham Greenwell wrote an account of his experiences that stressed how he had enjoyed many aspects of war such as travel, meeting new people, excitement, a sense of achievement and the comradeship of other soldiers. Critics hated the book.

At this time, Britain had severe economic problems. Unemployment was high. Many men who had fought in the war were living off tiny allowances for themselves and their families. At the end of the war, they had been promised a 'Home Fit For Heroes'. Britain in the 1930s certainly was not that. In this atmosphere, many wondered why they had fought.

Views after World War 2

After World War 2, there were tremendous social changes taking place in Britain. There was a new generation of historians in British universities with new ideas. Many of them were hostile



to the upper class families that still dominated Britain's government and armed forces. These views affected the way some of them wrote about Haig and other commanders in the Great War. The mistakes of the commanders and the suffering of the soldiers were increasingly emphasised.

Writers in the media and films began to pick up on the views of these historians. The result was a series of documentaries, films, plays and books that showed the horrors and suffering of the war and ignored other aspects. The American film 'Paths of Glory' criticised French commanders but based the entire film around one incident. In Britain, a play called 'Oh! What A Lovely War!' used music and songs to produce a similar impression. The 1981 film 'Gallipoli' praised the bravery of ordinary soldiers but suggested that the British commanders were useless. Perhaps the most influential view of the war was created by the BBC comedy series 'Blackadder Goes Forth'. This view of the war became the view which most of the British public held.

Views today

The negative view of the war is still very strong today. However, there is material that tries to offer a balance of negative and positive opinions. There are many websites on the Great War written by researchers and historians and enthusiasts with detailed knowledge of the war. Historians such as Dr Gary Sheffield and Professor Niall Ferguson have written new textbooks. There are also recent documentaries on the war, such as the 2003 Channel 4 series 'The First World War', based on the views of the historian Professor Hew Strachan.

Links

First World War Literature

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWliterature.htm>

Part of the excellent Spartacus First World War Encyclopaedia, this contains a range of biographies of Great War writers.

Sup's Blackadder Goes Forth Page

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/8889/bladder4.htm>

This website is run by a fan of the series. You can, of course, watch the series itself on TV or video/DVD.

First World War

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/F/firstworldwar/index.html>

This website is attached to the Channel 4 TV series broadcast in 2003.

Siegfried Sassoon

<http://www.sassoonery.demon.co.uk/>

This gives a detailed biography of war poet Siegfried Sassoon.

Oh What A Lovely War

<http://www.phil.muni.cz/angl/gw/warww.html#Ask>

Here are lyrics to all of the songs from the play/film.



Lions Led By Donkeys?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/lions_donkeys_01.shtml

This article by Dr Gary Sheffield questions the traditional view of Great War commanders as incompetent 'donkeys'.