



Background

Lions led by donkeys?

A common view of the relationship between senior officers and their men in the Great War is summed up by the phrase: 'lions led by donkeys'. In this view, the senior officers are assumed to be from privileged backgrounds. They were incompetent and unimaginative. They sent men out to be killed while they stayed back in the safety of comfortable dugouts or lived in luxury miles behind the lines. When shellshocked soldiers went missing or failed to advance against fierce defences, they were court-martialled and shot by firing squad.

This view is neither completely fair nor completely accurate. It developed during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Some very influential people began to publish novels and poems that criticised the war. Good examples are books by the British writer, Robert Graves ('Goodbye to All That'), and the German, Erich Remarque ('All Quiet on the Western Front'). These books described the horrors of the war very accurately. The horrors were their focus and they were not intended as history books. Yet this version of the Great War became the accepted one. This was reinforced by films, plays such as 'Oh What A Lovely War!' and the TV series 'Blackadder Goes Forth'. The war was seen as pointless and the generals as useless.

Another viewpoint

There is no doubt that the Great War was horrific. There were huge casualties. The commanders made serious mistakes that cost many lives. However, there are other points to consider.

The commanders certainly made mistakes between 1915-17, but the victories of 1918 demonstrated that they learnt from those mistakes. They began with a small army and recruited civilians. In three years from 1914-17, the British Army expanded from 350,000 to 3.5 million men. By 1918, they had a large and effective fighting force.

The British Army did consider the welfare of its troops. They went to great lengths to feed, clothe and provide accommodation for the men. They also took care to provide effective sanitation; the British Army had the lowest casualty rates from disease of any of the armies. They had rotas so that soldiers spent the minimum time in the harsh conditions of the front line trenches. When they were in the front line, soldiers spent a maximum of 2-3 days in the direct firing line. Historians think that the chances of a soldier being wounded were about 50:50.

Soldiers spent about 60% of their time away from the front line. Here they spent time in farmhouses or cottages in villages that had been taken over by the army. They usually had access to good food, hot water, clean uniforms, alcohol and cigarettes. Many recruits to the army put on weight as a result of good food and pay. There were no large mutinies in the British Army and this was probably more the result of good treatment than fear of the firing squad. The mutinies in the French Army in 1917 were more about poor food and accommodation than about the tactics or casualties.

Some 346 British soldiers were executed by firing squads for dereliction of duty. This subject is still controversial today. Many of the families of those executed still campaign for a pardon because they believe their relatives were suffering from shellshock. This cannot now be proved



for certain. What we do know is that 5 million men served in the British Army during the war. Of these, military courts sentenced 2300 to death, but 85% of these men were pardoned. General Haig did not sanction an execution against any soldier without a full medical report.

The battle situations were terrible. It was not only ordinary soldiers who suffered. Very large numbers of British officers were killed. Over 200 generals were killed, wounded or taken prisoner; this could only have happened in the front line. Between 1914-18, around 12% of the ordinary soldiers were killed. The figure for officers was around 17%. Though the high casualties were shocking at the time, no politicians or groups of people recommended pulling out of the war.

The majority of the people of Britain and the soldiers did not question whether the war they were fighting was worth it. They believed that German victory would threaten Britain's future prosperity and security. They did not enjoy fighting the war, but they felt it was something that had to be done.

Links

Lions Led By Donkeys?

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/world_war_i/197586.stm

This is an article by Professor Peter Simkin, challenging the idea that Great War generals were incompetent.

Lions Led By Donkeys?

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

This is a similar article to the one above and is by Dr Gary Sheffield, another leading WW1 historian.

Who's Who – Commanders

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/bio/commanders.htm>

This useful list of Great War commanders contains details of the lives and careers of all the major commanders of all sides. Have a look at: Sir William Birdwood, Sir Douglas Haig, Sir Ian Hamilton, Admiral Sir John Fisher, Sir Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle and Sir Aylmer Hunter Weston.