

It is the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. You have been asked to make a short radio feature to explain:

- what happened at the Battle of the Somme
- whether Haig made mistakes or whether he simply did a difficult job in a difficult situation.

Get into groups and make a feature about five minutes long.

### Activity

2. Choose one statement from Sources 15 and 17 that you agree with and one that you disagree with. Explain your choice.
3. Why do you think Haig did not choose any of the options above? Sources 16 and 17 may help.
4. Why do you think there is so much disagreement about Haig?

In fact many historians have suggested ways in which Haig could have changed his tactics at the Battle of the Somme:

- When he realised the full-frontal attacks were not breaking through, he could have stopped them. The Germans' advance had already been halted.
- Haig could have attacked without bombardments, which always warned the Germans that an attack was coming and took away the surprise.
- The British Navy could have been used to bomb the Germans from the west and Haig could have attacked the Germans' west flank close to the coast of Belgium.
- Instead of vast waves of infantry going over the top, flexible teams of machine gunners could have been used to attack the weak points in the German trench system without massive loss of life.

**SOURCE 17** Haig's own explanations for his tactics, all written just after the War in 1919

- In the course of the struggle, losses are bound to be heavy on both sides, for in this the price of victory is paid. There is no way of avoiding this . . . but our total losses in this war have been no larger than were to be expected.
- We attacked whenever possible, because a defensive policy involves the loss of the initiative.
- The object of all war is victory and a defensive attitude can never bring this about.

Haig was unimaginative and dull. Nothing can excuse the casualties of the Somme.

Haig's method of winning the war was clumsy, expensive in loss of life, and based on a misreading of the facts.

The Battle of the Somme was a great triumph for the genius of British leadership.

Our High Command had not advanced beyond the tactics of the Stone Age. They could not think of any other form of warfare, except to throw into battle large numbers of men month after month.

**SOURCE 16** From a book called *Field Marshal Haig*, written by the historian Philip Warner in 1991

If the criterion of a successful general is to win wars, Haig must be judged a success. The cost of victory was appalling, but Haig's military methods were in line with the ideas of the time, when attrition was the method all sides used to achieve victory.

The full horrors of the First World War make it difficult to reach a clear appraisal of Haig. Those who admit he did eventually push the most powerful army in the world off French soil criticise the cost of the way he did it without offering alternative methods.

It may seem to you that Haig was silly, ignorant or uncaring. The costly tactics used at the Somme were used again and again until the final breakthrough in 1918. But historians have to try to look at things from the perspective of people at the time. For example, Source 17 was written by Haig himself, to explain his tactics, while Source 16 was written by a modern historian.