



General Sir Douglas Haig. He successfully commanded the British troops at Mons and Ypres in 1914. By the end of 1915 he was commanding all the British forces in France.

- 1 With hindsight, historians know of many of the planning errors made by Haig before the attack on the Somme.
 - a) Make a list of the planning errors you think he made.
 - b) Try to decide how many of these errors can only be seen with the benefit of hindsight.

ACTIVITY

Discuss this question as a class:

Is it morally acceptable to make the killing of enemy soldiers an objective for a military operation?

SOURCE 55

Remembering the dissatisfaction displayed by ministers at the end of 1915 because the operations had not come up to their expectations, the General Staff took the precaution to make quite clear beforehand the nature of the success which the Somme campaign might yield. The necessity of relieving pressure on the French Army at Verdun remains, and is more urgent than ever. This is, therefore, the first objective to be obtained by the combined British and French offensive. The second objective is to inflict as heavy losses as possible upon the German armies.

Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, commenting on British plans at the Somme after the end of the war.

The battle was originally planned as an attack by the French army with British support. The British commander, General Haig, actually favoured an attack further north and west in Flanders. The German attack at Verdun altered these plans. By the summer of 1916 it was agreed that Haig would lead a mainly British offensive in the area around the River Somme. The objectives were to gain territory and to draw German troops away from Verdun. Another aim was to kill as many German soldiers as possible as part of the 'war of attrition'.

The tactics

Haig and his deputy, General Rawlinson, worked out the details.

- There would be a huge artillery bombardment, and mines would devastate German positions.
- The enemy's barbed wire would be cut and the German trenches and dug-outs smashed.
- The attacking British troops would be able to walk across no man's land rather than run.
- They would carry heavy packs and trench repair equipment so that they could rebuild and defend the German trenches and so stop the Germans retaking their lost territory.
- British cavalry forces were also kept in readiness to charge into gaps in the German line.

SOURCE 54



A captured German dug-out, 1917.

Were these the right tactics?

Haig certainly knew about the German dug-outs and the masses of barbed wire in front of them. However, Haig overestimated the ability of the artillery to destroy the German defences.

- The defenders were on high ground with a good view of any attacking forces.
- The German defences had been in place since 1914 and the German soldiers had not been idle. Their dug-outs were deep underground and fortified with concrete.
- The Germans had stretched wire like a band more than 30 metres wide all along the front. It was almost impossible to penetrate.
- Many of the shells supplied to the Allied gunners were of poor quality. There was certainly a vast bombardment, but many shells were not powerful enough to destroy the defences or simply failed to go off.