THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?
A sourcework investigation

Two interpretations of the Somme Offensive:
(a) “You country needs ME like a hole in the head...which is exactly what most of you are going to get”
(b) The BEF bloodies the Kaiser’s nose!

Background
- By December 1914, the German and Allied forces on the Western Front had both dug into the ground like moles to protect themselves against the ferocious firepower produced by industrial warfare.
- The Germans fought from a defensive position. They were happy to keep the land they had gained, and so dug in deep.
- The Allies fought an offensive war. They wanted to drive the Germans out, so their trenches tended to be less deep and less secure.
- By 1916, the Allies were desperate for a breakthrough, and rumours that the “Big Push” was about to be launched raised hopes as never before (see source, above right).

Does Haig deserve his title of “Butcher of the Somme”?
- The ultimate symbol of the tragedy of World War One was the Somme offensive, which began on July 1, 1916.
- On that day allied soldiers, on a front 15 miles long, climbed slowly and deliberately from their trenches and plodded towards the enemy lines.
- Nineteen thousand men died on the first day alone. A further 34,000 were injured. The battle continued until November - by which time British casualties had reached 400,000 - with no obvious gains.
- The film was the subject of a documentary by Geoff Malins, whose film of the Battle is a silent classic. If you have clips of it available, it is worth watching these to consider what impression they aim to create and why.
- This, many claimed, was the ultimate expression of the futility of war, of pig-headed aristocrats leading overly-respectful working-class men. Yet new evidence is now challenging this scornful view of the first world war.

- Some historians are now arguing that
  (a) Haig was a good general;
  (b) The Battle of the Somme was conducted well;
  (b) The Somme Battle achieved its objectives.
**1. THE PLAN**

**Source A**
As to whether it were wise or foolish to give battle on the Somme, there can surely be only one opinion. To have refused to fight then and there would have meant the abandonment of Verdun to its fate and the breakdown of co-operation with the French.

*From the biography of Haig, officially authorised by Haig’s family, by Duff Cooper, Haig (1936)*

**2. THE TACTICS**

**Source B**
For a week about 300 guns poured shells on to the Germans. The noise seemed to throb in our veins even during the quiet of the night. Then, again, in the morning, the guns opened up. For a mile, our trenches belched out dense columns of green and orange smoke. It rose, curling and twisting, blotting everything from view. It seemed impossible that men could stand up to this terrible onslaught.

*A British soldier’s account of the preliminary bombardment, (1916)*

**Source C**
A large proportion of the heavy guns available were of obsolescent pattern and poor range, while much of the ammunition was defective. Thus shells could not penetrate the dug-outs in which the German machine gunners were sheltering - and waiting.

*History of the First World War, (1972)*

**THE ATTITUDE OF THE SOLDIERS**

**Source D**
The men are in splendid spirits. Several have said that they have never been so instructed and informed of the nature of operations before them. The wire has never been so well cut, nor the artillery preparations so thorough.

*Diary of Sir Douglas Haig. written 30 June 1916*

**Source E**
I could not have wished for a finer death, and you, my dear Mother and Dad, will know that I died doing my duty to my God, My Country and my King.

*Letter from a soldier to his parents, (July 1916)*

**3. THE REALITY**

**Source F**
Very successful attack this morning... All went like clockwork... The battle is going very well for us and already the Germans are surrendering freely. The enemy is so short of men that he is collecting them from all parts of the line. Our troops are in wonderful spirits and confidence.

*Written by Haig on 1st July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme.*

**Source G**
Hundreds of dead...were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in a net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying: they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall...it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of their attack. Concentrated machine-gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the wire, had done it's terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing their wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it...How did the planners imagine that Tommies would get through the German wire? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.

*From With a Machine Gun to Cambrai, George Coppard.*

**4. THE OUTCOME**

**Source H**
We had heavy losses in men and material. As a result of the Somme we were completely exhausted on the Western Front... defeat seemed inevitable.

*Autobiography of the German General Ludendorff, My War Memories, 1914-1918, written in 1919.*

**Source I**
A considerable portion of the German soldiers are now practically beaten men, ready to surrender if they could, thoroughly tired of the war and expecting nothing but defeat. It is true that the amount of ground we have gained is not great. That's nothing. We have proved our ability to force the enemy out of strong defensive positions and to defeat him. The German casualties have been greater than ours.

*Part of a report written in December 1916, sent by Haig to the British Cabinet about the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme.*
**INVESTIGATION: Was the Battle of the Somme a success or a failure?**

Use any sources available to you to complete this table.

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EXTENSION TASK

Many writers - including those writing just after the war - have criticised Haig for his tactics, for the great loss of men and, above all, for his defeat at the Battle of the Somme. Others, mainly military men and recent historians, have defended him, saying that he did as well as could be expected, and that only a man of great determination and character could have seen the matter through.

- Highlight in one colour any sources which can be used to defend General Haig (e.g. it was a good plan, the tactics worked well, the soldiers were optimistic, that it had positive results)
- Highlight in another colour any statements which can be used to criticise the battle (e.g. it was a bad plan, the tactics were bad, the soldiers were pessimistic, that it had negative results).
- When you are finished, complete the table on the previous page.

Questions

1. **What are the most obvious disagreements between these sources?**
   a.
   b.
   c.

2. **Does this mean that some of these sources must be lying?** Explain your answer carefully.

3. **The Generals**: In no more than 20 words, summarise your impression of Sir Douglas Haig.

4. **The Tommies**: Do the soldiers who fought in this battle deserve to be pitied, or admired? Explain your answer.

“The nation must be taught to bear losses. No amount of skill on the part of the higher commanders, no training, however good, on the part of the officers and men, no superiority of arms and ammunition, however great, will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men’s lives. The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists”

*Written by Haig in June 1916, before the Battle of the Somme.*