



Why did stalemate occur on the Western Front?

Quotes

No Man's Land

"The order came to advance. There was no dramatic leap out of the trenches. The sandbags on the parapet were so slimy with rain and rotten with age that they fell apart when you tried to grip them. You had to crawl out through a slough of mud. Some of the older men, less athletic than the others, had to be heaved out bodily.

From then on, the whole thing became a drawn-out nightmare. There were no tree stumps or ruined buildings ahead to help you keep direction. The shelling had destroyed everything. As far as you could see, it was like an ocean of thick brown porridge. The wire entanglements had sunk into the mud, and frequently, when you went in up to the knees, your legs would come out with strands of barbed wire clinging to them, and your hands torn and bleeding through the struggle to drag them off...

All this area had been desperately fought over in the earlier battles of Ypres. Many of the dead had been buried where they fell and the shells were unearthing and tossing up the decayed bodies. You would see them flying through the air and disintegrating..."

Robert Sherriff, who fought at Ypres, writing in his autobiography 'No Leading lady' (1968)

Planning/Tactics/Leadership

"The higher staffs were out of touch with the regimental officers and with the troops. The former lived in comfort, which became greater as the distance of their headquarters behind the lines increased. There was no harm in this provided there was touch and sympathy between the staff and the troops. This was often lacking. The frightful casualties appalled me. The so-called "good fighting generals" of the war appeared to me to be those who had a complete disregard for human life.

There is a story of Sir Douglas Haig's Chief of Staff who was to return to England after the heavy fighting during the winter of 1917-18 on the Passchendaele front. Before leaving he said he would like to visit the Passchendaele Ridge and see the country. When he saw the mud and the ghastly conditions under which the soldiers had fought and died, he was horrified and said: "Do you mean to tell me that the soldiers had to fight under such conditions?" And when he was told that it was so, he said: "Why was I never told about this before?"

Lieutenant Montgomery criticising his senior officers on the Western Front in his autobiography (1958)



“Some enthusiasts to-day talked about the probability of horses becoming extinct and prophesied that the aeroplane, the tank and the motor-car would supersede the horse in future wars. But history had always shown that great inventions somehow or other cured themselves; they always produced antidotes, and he believed that the value of the horse and the opportunity for the horse in the future were likely to be as great as ever.”

The Times newspaper 5th June 1925, describing remarks made by Sir Douglas Haig about the impact that the First World War had on military tactics.

“One undeniable fact is that Britain and its allies, not Germany, won the First World War. Moreover, Haig's army played the leading role in defeating the German forces in the crucial battles of 1918. In terms of the numbers of German divisions engaged, the numbers of prisoners and guns captured, the importance of the stakes and the toughness of the enemy, the 1918 'Hundred Days' campaign rates as the greatest series of victories in British history.

Even the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917), battles that have become by-words for murderous futility, not only had sensible strategic rationales but qualified as British strategic successes, not least in the amount of attritional damage they inflicted on the Germans. No one denies that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had a bloody learning curve, or that generals made mistakes that had catastrophic consequences. However, before dismissing the generals as mere incompetent buffoons, we must establish the context.”

The Western Front: Lions Led by Donkeys? Dr Gary Sheffield (2011). A modern day military historian.