



Resource B

The historic reputation of Allied commanders on the Western Front

During the First World War and in its immediate aftermath victorious Allied commanders such as Sir Douglas Haig and Marshall Foch were often lionised in the press, enjoying immense respect among many of the soldiers they had led. Their post war reputations suffered from self-serving memoirs of politicians such as those of the former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George who sought to shift the blame for high casualties during the War on to military leaders. This coincided with the popularity of anti-war poetry and rising pacifist sentiment during the 1930s.

The strand of historiography was reinforced during the 1960s. An influential book by Alan Clark entitled "Lions led by donkeys" caricatured generals for their alleged stupidity and callous indifference towards high casualty figures. These views were further popularised through the satirical stage musical (which was later filmed) "Oh what a lovely War!" This view of the First World War and its generals has remained popular subsequently through novels, films and TV series such as "Blackadder goes Forth".

However the reputation of Allied commanders in general has been rehabilitated through the work of military historians such as Gary Sheffield. They claim that;

- Commanders used the best tactics and technology that were available to them at a time when a war had never been fought on this scale before between powerful industrialized countries. It is doubtful whether anyone else could have done better.
- Although casualties were very high Allied offensives did succeed in wearing down the Germans and their morale. The evidence for this can be seen in the German collapse of 1918.
- The tactics used by commanders did not remain the same throughout the War. They learned from their mistakes and by 1918 Allied strategy had improved so much that commanders were able to inflict huge defeats upon the German army. Gary Sheffield calls the British Army of 1918 "a highly tuned instrument of war" and the successes of late 1918 "the greatest victories in British history". He asserts that there should be much more public commemoration of these victories and that there is too much emphasis in popular accounts of the First World War on the miseries of trench life and the alleged incompetence of generals.