

**“To what extent was the Battle of
Somme 1916 a British success?”**

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Section A:

This investigation aims to answer the question; “**To what extent was the Battle of Somme 1916 a British success?**”. When considering to what extent the battle of Somme was a success, the perspective of the military, political, and social effects, in regard to the human lives lost, are relevant to analyse. This essay will determine that the battle of Somme was to a great extent a military success but would be considered a social and political failure. Of the various sources I’ve used to conduct my investigation, Niel DeMarco’s “The world this century: working with evidence”, became valuable due to the overview of the war and the general view of the battle in the context of war it provided. Similarly, the more specialised book “The 1916 Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal ” by historian Peter Liddle provided valuable insight in how the battle of Somme is evaluated to be a success.

Source¹

The **origin** of the source is from the textbook “The world this century: working with evidence”, written by British author Niel DeMarco, reprinted in 2004 by the British Collins educational, for the **purpose** of teaching 20th century world history to upper secondary school students, while educating them about the methods of historians. Its **content** is both analytical and neutral in tone, with a low tendency. The **value** of the textbook as a secondary source, is that it contains primary sources for analysis. The textbook describes the context of the Battle of Somme, both from the German and British perspective and as a non-contemporary source has the value of hindsight, combining several contemporary and non-contemporary sources to create a clear and objective narrative. The **limitation** of the source would be that it only provides a narrow and superficial overview of the event.

¹ Demarco, Neil. 2004. The World This Century : Working with Evidence. London: Collins.

Source²

The **origin** of the source is the book “The 1916 Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal” written by British historian Peter Liddle, the 2001 edition published in Great Britain. The **purpose** of published historians would be to communicate a perspective of the battle of Somme’s significance, for trained historians and people interested in the topic. The **content** of the source is written with a high level of tendency, with certain exaggerations and leaning towards portraying Great Britain’s effort in the battle as a success. The **value** of this secondary source is that Liddle is a trained historian who specialises in the history of WWI and WWII, giving the source reliability, as he bases his claims on research and multiple sources at hand. The source provides an in-depth perspective of the battle, from a British perspective, which is relevant for my investigation. The **limitation** of this source would be Liddle being British, thus being biased when thus having a motive for portraying British history in a brighter way.

² Liddle, Peter. 2016. The 1916 Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military.

Section B:

The Somme offensive had been planned since the beginning of February 1916.³ The aim of the offensive in June 1916, was to deflect German resources at Verdun, as French allies had been attacked. Additionally, Russian forces aided their French allies by launching the Brusilov offensive, which initially succeeded, but did by August come to a halt.⁴ The Battle of Somme carried on however, now also trying to occupy the Germans to not send reinforcements to the Eastern front, in order to protect their Russian allies.⁵ By August 1916 the British army was mainly made up of volunteers, as the decision of compulsory military service being introduced in January 1916 had not taken effect yet. As these were mainly made up of territorial units according to Kitchner's appeal, men from the same communities served together in the 'New armies', the majority of which not being experienced in battle. This would lead to the loss of entire communities of men as of 247 infantry battalions taking part of the front line on the first of July, 141 were gathered according to this New Army formation.⁶ The battle of Somme, amounted to 1.2 million casualties.⁷ The first launch of attacks on the 1st of July signified the worst day of British military history as 57.000 casualties were suffered, with about 20.000 dead. By the end of the offensive in November, German casualties amounted to 650 000, British around 410 000 and French 150 000⁸. By the end of 1916, the British had gained 4.5 kilometres worth of ground.⁹ When Prime Minister Lloyd took office in December 1916, he regarded the Somme as a 'ghastly failure'.¹⁰ The negative public perception of the battle revealed the disdain for the ongoing war, as the poems and letters of soldiers in the trenches added to

³ Hart, Peter. 2006. *The Somme*. Cassell Military. Page 37.

⁴ Morris, T A. 1995. *European History, 1848-1945*. London: Collins Educational. Page 199-200.

⁵ Rogers, Keely, and Thomas, Jo. 2010. *History : 20th Century World : Causes, Practises and Effects of Wars*. Inglaterra: Pearson. Page 40.

⁶ Simkins, Peter. 2002. *The First World War : The Western Front, 1917-1918*. Oxford, England: Osprey. Page 69.

⁷ DeMarco, Neil. 2004. *The World This Century : Working with Evidence*. London: Collins. Page 15-16.

⁸ DeMarco, Neil. 2004. *The World This Century : Working with Evidence*. London: Collins. Page 15-16.

⁹ Ross, Stewart. 2004. *The Battle of the Somme*. Chicago: Raintree. Page 46.

¹⁰ Sheffield, Gary. 2004. *The Somme*. London: Cassell. Page 157.

this despair.¹¹ Thus the battle of Somme became a symbol for the Great war and its effect on Great Britain.

From a military perspective, it can be argued that the Battle of Somme succeeded in fulfilling the aim of the offensive, as the French reclaimed much of the land lost at Verdun¹². The cost and gains of the battle is yet to determine if the offensive was successful. Historians arguing for the Somme being a military failure consider traditional military battle evaluation; such as casualties and physical advancement. Historians such as John Keegan argue that the loss of soldiers, even when considering the volunteers “willingness for sacrifice”, both before and during Somme as an explanation for the horrific outcome, it’s not excusable for sacrificing so many countrymen’s lives in the long-term, when only gaining a small proportion of land in the making.¹³ Comparatively, historian Cowley agrees with this assessment, considering the offensive to be a failure for both the Germans and British, arguing that even if Britain lost less manpower than the Germans, the British number of casualties cannot be justified through comparisons.¹⁴ Though these historians are correct in their assessments that, when considering solely the battle’s outcome separate from its effect on the whole war, it is a failure, this is a limited evaluation of how extensive the effect of the battle had on the rest of the war.

Historian Peter H. Liddle argues that in the context of the Great War, considering the availability of new weapons and technology, the battle only represented the appropriate consequences of when two great powers meet in conflict, which would result in the large scale of human resources lost.¹⁵ When further considering the short term consequences of the soldiers that did survive, historian Gary Sheffield argues that even if the British had lost inexperienced soldiers, the ones that did survive gained some preparation for the next big offensive in 1917, which the Germans could not match, thus

¹¹ Morris, Matthew, and British History. 2010. “The Shaping of British Public Opinion during World War I.” <https://users.manchester.edu/Student/mrmorris/ProfWeb/BritishResearchPaper.pdf>.

¹² Sheffield, Gary. 2004. *The Somme*. London: Cassell. Page 155.

¹³ Keegan, John. 2014. *The First World War*. London: The Bodley Head. Page 299.

¹⁴ Cowley, Robert. 2004. *The Great War : Perspectives on the First World War*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks. Page 341.

¹⁵ Liddle, Peter. 2016. *The 1916 Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military. Page 142.

making it into a British success.¹⁶ Liddle continues by arguing that joint British and French pressure had by September 1916 been recognized, which ultimately led to the German troops' retirement in February 1917. Liddle concludes a British military success as it was a German principle not to retire their troops unless to avoid another Somme.¹⁷ It's these combined factors which contributed to the Allies victory in 1918, which then makes the battle of Somme a success.¹⁸ The gains of the battle of Somme outweighs the cost of human lives, thus making the battle a military success. This perspective weighs much from a short-run term, but to consider the long-term effects from a social, economic, and political perspective provides the extent of the Battle's effect.

Even if it can be concluded that a military success was achieved with the battle of Somme, it did have far reaching consequences on British diplomacy with its allies, though it did stride against the public viewing Somme as a failure. Historian Gary Sheffield considers the gain in coalition politics, as Britain had shown that it was willing to shed blood in order to win, and not shy away from confronting the enemy.¹⁹ However, the resignation of Asquith emphasises the political effect the Somme had on British leadership, implying the battle to be a failure, according to Neil DeMarco²⁰. Secret peace talks between Great Britain and Germany had been present throughout 1916, which had been put on hold due to the promises of the Somme Offensive.²¹ These negotiations ended with Lloyd George becoming prime minister as Great Britain by 1917. In a speech addressed to The New York Magazine in 1917 he states that if the objectives of the war had not been fulfilled, thus the sacrifices of Entente would be in vain, calling the German call for peace one of deception²². Prolonging the war, and not settling for peace did stride against the growing disdain felt by the public. In order to battle this public perception, Lloyd employed propaganda usage of media and propaganda directly

¹⁶ Sheffield, Gary. 2004. *The Somme*. London: Cassell. Page 160.

¹⁷ Liddle, Peter. 2016. *The 1916 Battle of the Somme: A Reappraisal*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military. Page 143.

¹⁸ Sheffield, Gary. 2004. *The Somme*. London: Cassell. Page 160

¹⁹ Sheffield, Gary. 2004. *The Somme*. London: Cassell. Page 160

²⁰ Demarco, Neil. 2004. *The World This Century : Working with Evidence*. London: Collins. Page 16.

²¹ Zelikow, Philip. 2021. *The Road Less Traveled : The Secret Battle to End the Great War, 1916-1917*. New York: Publicaffairs.

²² "Lloyd George's Historic Speech Regarding Peace." *Current History* (1916-1940) 5, no. 4 (1917): 592–600. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45328138>. Page 594

connected to the Battle of Somme, such as the propaganda movie with the same name premiered in August 1916. The film did not shy away from the horrors experienced by the western front, such as showing the deceased and wounded, even though the movie also significantly expresses the strength and power of the allies in an attempt to boost public morale. After *The Battle of Somme* (1916), historian Reeves concludes that during the last 18 months of the war, the propaganda became more selective, due to the growing discontent of the public towards the war. Reeves asserts the possible reason for this was due to the contra-productive effect the more realistic portrayals of the war, such as the Battle of Somme had, contributing to a growing public desire to end the war. The failures of Lloyd's employment of propaganda, emphasises the failures of the government to change the public views of the war and the battle of Somme, which from the public perception was a failure. Even though short-term gains were made regarding the diplomatic relationship to war allies, the long-term public perception of the war was a failure according to the political perspective.

The failures of changing the public perception of the war also stemmed from the losses explained by the social perspective of the battle of Somme. The human lives lost, horridities experienced by the young soldiers in the trenches and the loss of a generation of men, affected several British communities. From a generational perspective the Battle of Somme did contribute to the emotional and psychological damage experienced by the members of the lost generation throughout their lives²³, according to Historian Peter Clarke. Clarke continues to emphasise that even if the battle did not reflect the failure of Somme demographically, the sheer human cost and experience of the people left behind compensated for this, making it a social failure.²⁴

It can then be concluded that even though the battle of Somme is considered a success from a military perspective, in the context of winning the war, the loss of human lives did have a greater long-term social and short-term political effect on Great Britain.

²³ Clarke, Peter. *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–2000*, Second Edition (Penguin History of Britain). 2nd Revised ed., Penguin Books, 2004. Page 103.

²⁴ Clarke, Peter. *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–2000*, Second Edition (Penguin History of Britain). 2nd Revised ed., Penguin Books, 2004. Page 102.

Section C:

The method used by historians consists of the analysis of primary sources and secondary sources, to determine the context of an event, and from that creates a theory of the significance and role of the event. In order to create a theory that is valid, the sources also need to be evaluated and analysed in order to justify their relevance. Sometimes theories are conflicting, and then the sources need to be evaluated in order to determine what theory is most relevant. In comparison to other subject areas, even if all sources are valid, different and conflicting theories can still hold up in history. The factors of an event can be considered from multiple perspectives, making the interpretation of historical events more complex and comprehensive.

The main method that I used when applying this skill was to consider secondary sources through the opinions of trained historians as a basis of my discussion. This was relevant to the discussion of military success or failure, as the basis of each argument were built differently and thus had to be contrasted through explaining the sources of the arguments. I evaluated my primary sources, such as the speech from Lloyd George in 1917, in order to sustain my argument. Comparing it to the historians explaining his motives and aims with the war gave an insight into how this historical figure was viewed both within the government and in the public, as the different sources gave depth to his role in my investigation.

Not every historian considers all factors as not all factors are available to them to evaluate when the sources were written. Historians do not consider the events from the same angle, and usually consider different aspects of the Battle of Somme, with no direct counterargument to that specific aspect. There are many perspectives to evaluate and choosing the most relevant one to answer the research question had to be debated. Thus, it became a limitation of my investigation as I selected arguments and opinions, this selection issue also being relevant for historians. The main issue had to be sustaining arguments for the political and social perspective, as those are not discussed as much by historians compared to the military perspective in relation to the battle of Somme. This gave me the opportunity

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to go more in depth into my arguments and look at primary sources to create a new perspective regarding the battle of Somme.

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