



Volunteers or Conscripts?

100 YEARS ON
THE BATTLE OF THE
SOMME
1916-2016



Since the start of the First World War in 1914, the British Army had been transformed. From a small force of highly trained professional soldiers, it had become a mass citizen army, its numbers swelled by December 1915 with the addition of more than two and a half million volunteers.



Left: Lord Herbert Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, fronted Parliament's recruitment campaign in this 1914 poster.
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Main image above: Volunteers wait outside a recruitment office in 1915.
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From far and wide

Men from all corners of the British Isles, Empire and dominions enlisted. Some joined up out of duty, some for adventure, some for a square meal and regular pay.



Above: New volunteer recruits in civilian dress march along a street in Ashted in 1914.
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A last resort

But eventually voluntary enlistment slackened. The government ran national poster campaigns and even 'Pals' schemes offering men from the same towns and factories the chance to serve together. But it wasn't enough. Reluctantly the British government introduced conscription.

“ If it is found that there are single men of military age who have no ground whatever for exemption or excuse, they shall be deemed to have done what everyone agrees it is their duty to the State in times like these to do, and be treated as though they had attested or enlisted. That is the course we propose to adopt in this Bill.”

Prime Minister Herbert Asquith introducing the Military Service Bill to Parliament, January 1916



Left: While some protested against conscription in 1916, the editors of the Daily Sketch newspaper clearly thought it was a good idea.

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British lives or French lives?

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By December 1915 preparations had begun for a joint British and French attack along a 40-mile front to the north and south of the River Somme, designed to destroy the German army. But a massive German assault against French positions at Verdun in February 1916 soon had the French army fighting a defensive battle instead.



“ We knew that we were on the verge this time of a battle such as the world has never seen.”

Ernst Junger, German officer at the Battle of the Somme

Main image above: ‘Off to the front’, an official photograph of troops in 1915.
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Diversionsary tactics

Over the spring of 1916 Douglas Haig, commander-in-chief of the British army in France, re-drew the plan. The British would attack the well-established German positions with limited French support, partly in an attempt to draw the Germans away from Verdun.

Left: French soldiers warmly dressed in sheepskins play cards while manning a trench.
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Right: During the First World War women volunteered for essential work, including making munitions, in order to release men for military service.
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A bombardment

Haig planned to destroy the German positions with artillery fire before unleashing an assault by ground troops. Over the course of the closing week of June 1916, British guns would rain down over one and a half million shells on the German positions. Then, at precisely 7:30am on the morning of 1 July, the infantry would go ‘over the top’.



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Carry on or call it off?

The shattered remains of Delville Wood, a section of the Somme front fiercely contested from July to September 1916.

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The week-long bombardment failed to destroy much of the German defences, although it did serve to announce the long-anticipated Anglo-French attack. As soon as the shelling stopped, the German defenders, who'd been sheltering in relative safety, returned to their positions and engaged the advancing army.



Above: Right to left, the British Minister of War, David Lloyd George, Douglas Haig, the French commander-in-chief Joseph Joffre and the French Under Secretary for Munitions, Albert Thomas, discuss the ongoing offensive on the Somme.

“ Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high watermark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work.”

George Coppard, gunner at the Battle of the Somme



Above: British wounded at an advanced dressing station behind the Somme front, 1916.

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141 days of fighting

By the end of the first day nearly 60,000 British troops had been killed or injured. But the campaign continued, with attack after attack, and heavy casualties mounting on both sides. The deployment of tanks in September 1916 could not force a decision, nor the arrival of the first conscripts a month later. But the steady pressure was beginning to undermine the German defences.

Ultimately, the offensive petered out with the onset of winter, when rain and snow turned the battlefield into a quagmire that left both sides literally bogged down.



Above: One of only 15 Landships – nicknamed ‘tanks’ to keep their existence secret – to make it to enemy lines. The remaining 34 broke down or got stuck.

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Victory or defeat?

The temporary grave of an unknown British soldier on the Somme front.

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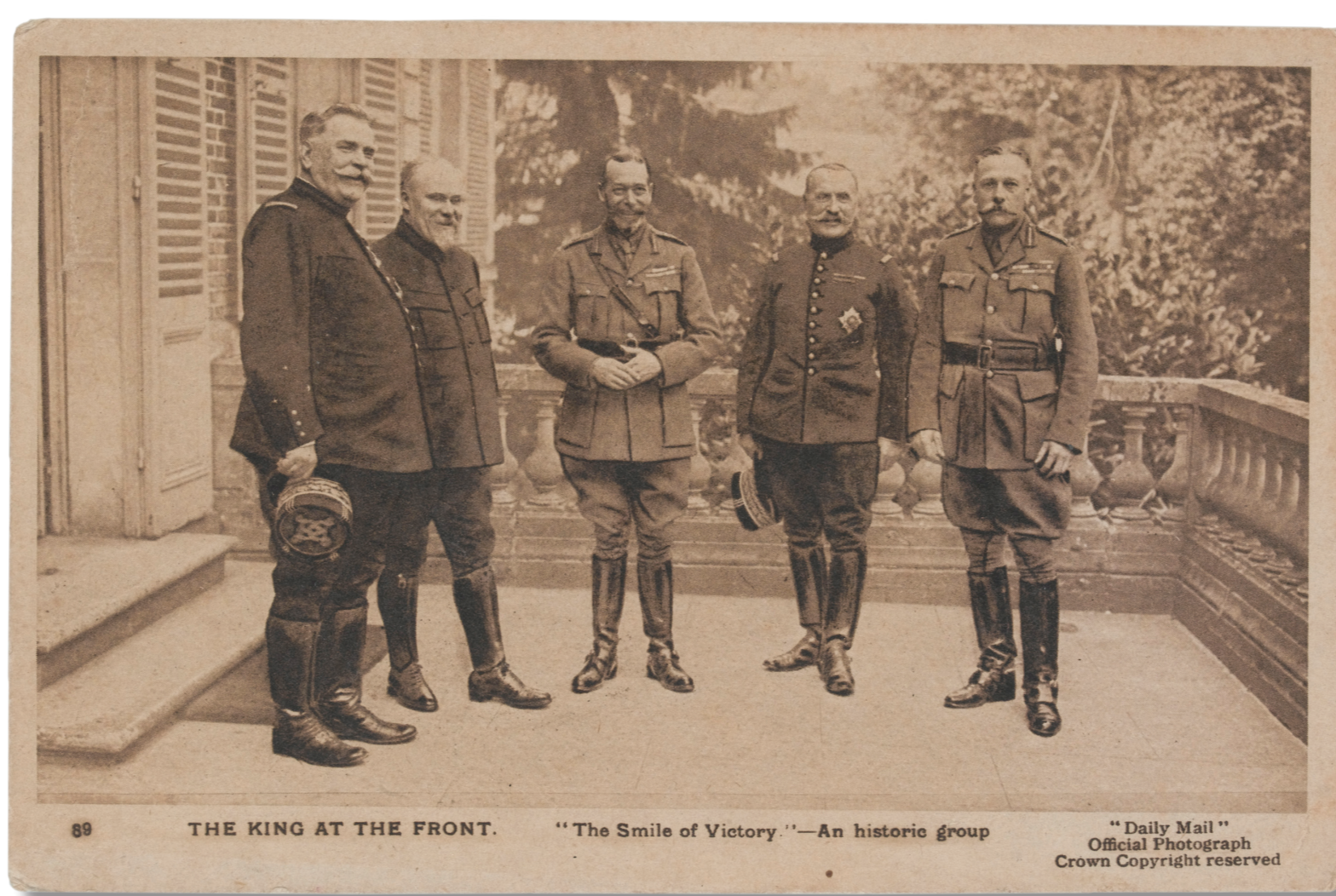
On 18 November 1916, the Battle of the Somme finally ground to a halt. After four and half months of fighting the British and French had advanced seven miles, Verdun had been saved, and the German army had suffered such losses that it would have to retreat in the spring of 1917 rather than face another such battle.

And the cost? Some 620,000 British and French troops dead or wounded; perhaps the same number again on the German side.



Above: A wounded German prisoner of war assists wounded British soldiers on the Somme front in July 1916.

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Above: The British King George V (centre) visited the Western Front in August 1916. He met (from left to right) Joseph Joffre, the French President Raymond Poincaré, Ferdinand Foch, who commanded the French forces on the Somme front and Douglas Haig.

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The price of victory

Was it worth the loss of life? That question provokes strong reactions even to this day. Certainly Haig seemed to think so, as he reported in his official despatch from the front: "Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down. Any one of these three results is in itself sufficient to justify the Somme battle."

But back home the new Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, began to question the competence of those leading operations overseas. His observations, while perhaps personally and politically motivated, have influenced British memory of the Somme.



Above: Aerial photographs of Guillemont, a village on the Somme front taken on 16 May and 1 Sep 1916 respectively.

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“Haig does not care how many men he loses. He just squanders the lives of these boys.”

David Lloyd George, Prime Minister from December 1916, quoted in the diary of Frances Stevenson, January 1917

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