

BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Written By [John Hunt](#)

The Battle of the Somme, or the Somme offensive, was the first major British offensive of WWI. It was also the most bloody, resulting in more than 57,000 British casualties in the first day. This outstripped the total number of casualties the British suffered during the Korean, Crimean, and Boer war combined. These staggering losses occurred, in part, due to a faulty strategy. The joint British-Franco force relied upon an artillery barrage that lasted several days in order to weaken the German line. However, due to the heavily entrenched position of the Germans, the artillery proved largely ineffective. When it came time to order the charge, the British command was so sure the Germans had been decimated, they ordered their men to walk – in orderly lines – across No Man’s Land. The result was pure devastation as the unscathed Germans opened up with the automatic fire of their machine guns and mowed down men line by line. ([Cowley and Parker](#)) Documents

Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme

[Source](#)



Keep these questions in mind as you look through the following sources. Thinking about the context of the people writing, the different points of view they each have. What are the different ways we can construct a narrative of this battle from the perspectives of these unique players?

Reading Questions

A. What might the motivation be behind the official reports sent by Haig to his superiors? To what extent do you think these reports might have been motivated by a desire to deceive? To what extent might have they been motivated by intrinsic feelings such as hope and/or resignation?

B. How would you describe the feelings and thoughts of the soldiers who served in the Battle of the Somme? Complete a word, sentence, and phrase that summarize your answer. For example:

Word: Desperation

Sentence: There was an incredible gulf between the British command and the soldiers who served on the ground.

Phrase: They lived to die

Make sure to click on pictures for additional text!

General Douglas Haig

“Also impressed on the world, England’s strength and determination, and the fighting power of the British race... The maintenance of a strong offensive pressure will eventually in the enemy’s complete overthrow.”

[\(Haig\)](#)

Haig to Robertson, 1 August 1916

“Friday, June 30: The weather report is favourable (sic) for tomorrow. With God’s help, I feel hopeful. The men are in splendid spirits. The wire has never been so well cut, nor the Artillery prepara-



[Douglas Haig](#)

General Douglas Haig – Official Dispatch

“The results of the operations of the 14th July and subsequent days were of considerable importance. The enemy's second main system of (sic) defence had been captured on a front of over three miles. We had again forced him back more than a mile, and had gained possession of the southern crest of the main ridge on a front of 6,000 yards. Four more of his fortified villages and three woods had been wrested from him by determined fighting, and our advanced troops had penetrated as far as his third line of (sic)defence. In spite of a resolute resistance and many counter-

Rendezvous with Death

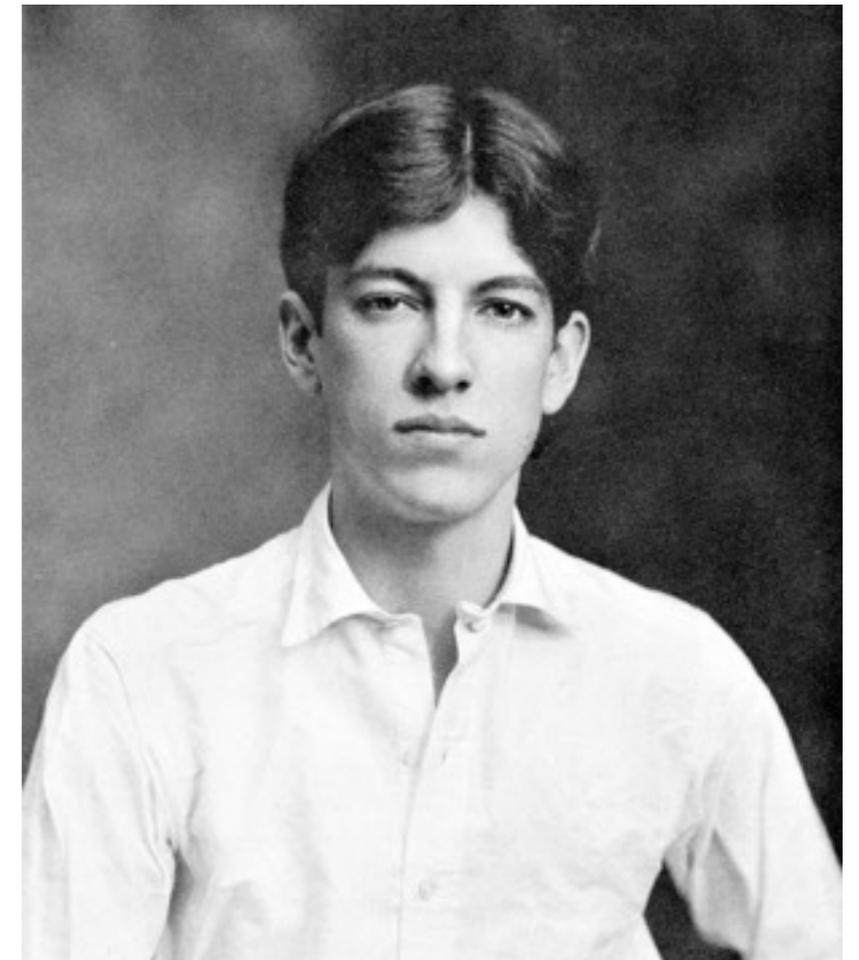
Alan Seeger

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.
It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death



[Alan Seeger in French Foreign Legion Uniform](#)

[A Younger Alan Seeger](#)



John Masefield

An Account of the Battle of the Somme

A MOMENT before the whistles blew, in the morning of July 1, 1916, when the Battle of the Somme began, the No Man's Land, into which our men advanced, was a strip of earth without life, made smoky, dusty, and dim by explosions which came out of the air upon it, and left black, curling, slowly fading, dust and smoke-devils behind them. Into this smoke and dust and dimness, made intenser by the stillness of the blue summer morning, came suddenly the run of many thousands of men at the point of death. Not less than twenty thousand men clambered up the parapet at that instant. They tripped and tore through the wire, already in lanes, and went on to their fronts, into the darkness of death, cheering each other with cries that could be heard above the roaring and the crashing of the battle. On the instant, before all the men were out of the trenches, the roaring lifted up its voice as the fire doubled and the enemy machine guns opened.

Many men among those thousands were hit as they showed above the parapet, many others never cleared the wire; but the rest drew clear and went forward, some walking, some running, most of them in

[John Masefield](#)



German WWI Footage – Questioning the Source Activity

The below video is a compilation of German documentary footage from WWI, including but not limited to the battle of the Somme. Information regarding the individuals in the video are scarce. There are no captions, no explanations. This provides us the perfect opportunity to practice the critical analysis of a source, asking questions, and performing research.

As you watch the video, complete the following activity:

A. Being a historian requires you to be critical about sources, not just consuming information, but formulating questions and searching for answers. As you watch the video, note at least ten visuals that are interesting and make you ask a question (what is that, what does this mean, when did this happen?)

B. When you finish watching the clip, pick five of your most interesting or important questions. For each question, you are responsible for answering that question through research documented by at least two different sources

[WWI Footage](#)

Question	Answer	Source
I see a lot of younger men in these videos. That makes me wonder, what the average age of soldiers was during World War I?	According to ...	Title and URL



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Images

Alan Seeger in his French Foreign Legion uniform [online image]. (1919). Retrieved November 17, 2015 from (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Seeger#/media/File:Alan_seeger_foreign_legion.jpg)

Field Marshal Douglas Haig [online image]. (1920). Retrieved November 17, 2015 from (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Haig,_1st_Earl_Haig#/media/File:Douglas_Haig.jpg)

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Reflection

The creation of an book is fundamentally different from anything I have ever done before. It is a truly strange creature, halfway between the old publishing world and the new world of digital media. This is true in more ways than one. Not only does the power of publication, and dissemination, lie in one's own hands, the inclusion of digital media upends the traditional book format. Videos, pictures, and interactive widgets replace text. The author becomes more than a writer. Rather, they take on the role of designer and publisher as well. It is truly a democratization of the publishing process, even more so than previous online publishing platforms.

More than all of this though, it is a unique way to present history. We all know that history is dry. Although we might imagine science or even math using interactives, history has a special place in the realm of books. It is something we have always read. Part of history's mythos, its identity as a scholarly pursuit, is sitting down with a dusty tome and discovering facts line by line. That is no longer the case. There is nothing particularly more or less intellectual or factual about reading. People listen, people appreciate art, and people watch movies. These are all valid sources of information and deserve the place in history afforded by platforms such as

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThiepvall_Memorial

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FROM EXPLORING
HISTORY: VOL III

Available free at [iTunes](#)

This eBook is a collaborative project of Peter Pappas and his Fall 2015 Social Studies Methods Class [School of Education](#) ~ University of Portland, Portland Ore.

Graduate and undergraduate level pre-service teachers were assigned the task of developing an engaging research question, researching supportive documents and curating them into a DBQ suitable for middle or high school students.

For more on this class, visit the course blog [EdMethods](#)
For more on this book project and work flow tap [here](#).

Chapters in chronological order

1. *Finding Egyptian Needles in Western Haystacks*
by Heidi Kershner
2. *Pompeii* by Caleb Wilson
3. *Samurai: Sources of Warrior Identity in Medieval Japan*
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4. *The Declaration of Independence* by David Deis
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7. *Battle of the Somme* by John Hunt

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Cover image: Door knocker

Amsterdam NL Photograph by Peter Pappas