

**GREAT WAR  
(1914-1918) - THE  
WESTERN FRONT:  
BATTLE OF THE SOMME**



# GREAT WAR (1914-1918) - THE WESTERN FRONT: BATTLE OF THE SOMME

## Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the basic facts of the Battle of the Somme, the strategy and objectives of the British and French commanders in the offensive, how allied mistakes cost tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of lives unnecessarily, why the British and French “success” at the Somme was ultimately seen as a failure, and how the Somme ultimately doomed the German army to eventual defeat on the Western Front.

## Subjects

European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes (2-3 wk. prep)

## Tour Links

- Museum of the Great War, Peronne
- Somme Battlefield
- Thiepval Memorial, Somme Battlefield

## Essential Questions

- What happened at the Battle of the Somme? What were the objectives and outcomes?
- What was the British/French strategy in launching an attack at the Somme?
- What mistakes did the British commanders make at the Somme?
- What were the long term effects on both armies as a result of the Somme Offensive?

## Academic Summary

### **German Officer Fredrich Steinbrecher**

Somme. The whole history of the world cannot contain a more ghastly word.

### **Corporal Harry Shaw, Royal Welsh Fusiliers**

Whatever was gained, it wasn't worth the price the men had to pay to gain that advantage. It was no advantage to anybody. It was just sheer bloody murder. That's the only words you can use for it.

### **Philip Gibbs, British War Correspondent, on the Somme Offensive**

It was our offensive that the German Command feared most, for they had no exact knowledge of our strength or of the quality of our new troops. They knew that our army had grown prodigiously since the assault on Loos, nearly a year before.

They had heard of the Canadian reinforcements, and the coming of the Australians, and the steady increase of recruiting in England, and month by month they had heard the louder roar of our guns along the line, and had seen their destructive effect spreading and becoming more terrible.

They knew of the steady, quiet concentration of batteries and divisions on the north and south of the Ancre.

The German Command expected a heavy blow, and prepared for it, but as yet had no knowledge of the driving force behind it. What confidence they had of being able to resist the British attack was based upon the wonderful strength of the lines which they had been digging and fortifying since the autumn of the first year of war - "impregnable positions" they had called them - the inexperience of our troops, their own immense quantity of machine guns, the courage and skill of their gunners, and their profound belief in the superiority of German generalship.

### **Sir Douglas Haig, British Commander in Chief in France and Flanders Excerpt from a Dispatch to Army headquarters, 23 Dec 1916**

By the end of May the pressure of the enemy on the Italian front had assumed such serious proportions that the Russian campaign was opened early in June, and the brilliant successes gained by our Allies against the Austrians at once caused a movement of German troops from the Western to the Eastern front. This, however, did not lessen the pressure on Verdun. The heroic defense of our French Allies had already gained many weeks of inestimable value and had caused the enemy very heavy losses; but the strain continued to increase. In view, therefore, of the situation in the various theatres of war, it was eventually agreed between General Joffre and myself that the combined French and British offensive should not be postponed beyond the end of June.

The object of that offensive was threefold

1. To relieve the pressure on Verdun.
2. To assist our Allies in the other theatres of war by stopping any further transfer of German troops from the Western front.
3. To wear down the strength of the forces opposed to us.

**From the Official German Account at the Battle of the Somme**  
**By Official German Historian General von Steinacker**

The attack launched on July 1 was regarded by the German high command as one fraught with great significance as determining the outcome on the Western front. They believed, indeed, that it was designed to bring about a decisive change, not only on the Western front, but also on every other scene of action, by which the Central Powers would be irrevocably forced to assume the defensive.

This end was to be achieved by piercing the Western front, which thereupon would crumble throughout its entire length and breadth. The intention of the enemy was correctly deduced from the magnitude of the preparations made. Above all, however, it is necessary to point to the fact that both Frenchmen and Englishmen had stationed tremendous masses of cavalry behind the battlefront, designed, after a successful penetration of the German lines, to fall into the rear of the enemy, annihilating such bodies as had not been directly affected in the first onset.

**From the War Diary of Private Fred Ball from Liverpool**  
**British Soldier at the Battle of the Somme**

The date was July 27th, 1916. We were bivouacked in a valley near Fricourt, a place of vast mine craters in virgin chalk. I remember clambering about them, trying to stop my imagination from recreating the sensations of the troops who once had occupied trenches there. Lying about were bits of equipment, clothing, bodies. God! imagination was not needed. The thing was reconstructed before my eyes. I was in this frame of mind when we were told to be prepared to move into the line that night.

I was a signaller. Most old soldiers will know what this implies. Bayonet drill, bombing practice, in short, all those exercises which were supposed to make an efficient soldier, had been carefully and cunningly dodged. I began to regret this. Already I could see myself outclassed by some proficient German in a hand-to-hand encounter.

To be sure, the blade of his bayonet would be saw-cut. Good Lord! what a fool I had been! Or I might be lying in a trench or shell hole, encumbered with rifle, flapper, telephone, and lamp, engaged in an unequal bombing duel with only the stone-throwing skill of my boyhood to help me against a highly trained adversary. I wondered what it might feel like to be wounded - to be killed!

All through that night I never had a wink of sleep. My stomach would insist on rising to my throat to choke me each time I thought of some lurid possibility.

And so the night passed and we remained where we were.

In the morning we were told that our affair had been postponed twenty-four hours.

... Last night we thought we were going over the top. Tonight we know. Our C.O. himself has told us so. Back come all the bogies of the previous night. I find myself engaged in calculating the chances of escape. Surely a quarter of our number will remain unscathed. I have one chance in four of coming out none the worse. And the other chances, what are they? Maybe they are three

to one against being killed.

There is some comfort in that. One chance in four of being wounded, which means a respite, and one in four of being taken prisoner - almost as good as escaping scot free.

And so I tortured myself all through that second night. At times I would nod off to sleep. "It's all off. It's all off," something would say, and my whirling, maddening thoughts, becoming smoother, less insistent, more incoherent, would creep almost into the arms of sleep... "Fool. Wake up, wake up. It's postponed one hour, two hours, that's all." I jump with a start. The whole mental anguish began all over again.

... Just before we arrived in our jumping-off trench something happened which I can never forget. A young soldier of my 1 own section was struck by a shell fragment square between the eyes. His cries haunt me now. "Mother of God! Mother of God!" he shrieked time and time again. We left him behind where he lay, whimpering "Mother of God! Good God! I'm blind!" It got in my ears. "Mother of God!" I reiterated, scarcely knowing what I was saying.

Then I realized the meaning of the words. In a flash of violent emotion I denied Her there and then. If She existed, why were we here? She didn't exist. There was no such thing. My strength was in my three to one odds. It was all chance. Oh for a Blighty one. Even the fourth chance, death, was becoming less dreadful. It would take me out of it all, whatever else might happen... So, at last, we arrived in the front line.

Zero was 7.15 a.m. In a few minutes we should endure the supreme test. Furtive peeps over the parapet revealed nothing of the enemy trenches, for a mist lay over all. What if our artillery had failed to cut "his" wire? Were his machine-gunners waiting to mow us down as we struggled to break a way through his entanglements? The monotonous hammering of these questions must have had different effects on different men.

In me, strangely enough, they induced feelings of utter weariness followed by spasms of fatalistic carelessness, which I could have wished to last the whole war through. But our emotions come and go like clouds in the sky, and my new-found peace of mind was short-lived.

Suddenly the noise of the guns eased off. For a second or two there was quiet. Then the fury of our barrage dropped like a wall of roaring sound before us. By some means the signal to advance was given and understood and we found ourselves walking forward into the mist, feeling utterly naked. Who can express the sensations of men brought up in trench warfare suddenly divested of every scrap of shelter?

Forward we stumbled into a mist that seemed to grow ever thicker. So great was the noise that the order to keep in touch with one another was passed only by means of shouting our hardest, and our voices sounded like flutes in a vast orchestra of fiends.

All at once I became conscious of another sound. A noise like the crisp crackle of twigs and branches, burning in a bonfire just beyond my vision in the mist, made me think I must be approaching some burning building. I realized, when

my neighbor on the right dropped with a bullet in the abdomen that the noise was machine-gun and rifle-fire, and I felt the tiniest bit happier when I touched my entrenching tool which, contrary to regulations, was attached to the front of my equipment instead of the side.

Presently we came to the first enemy trench. How one's thoughts race at such a time! But the surge of apprehension dropped, the steeled muscles relaxed and our hearts ceased their frantic overtime - at least, mine did - when we saw that our artillery had done its work well and truly. We had to pass this trench, but there was no need to jump over it for it was almost filled in - blown in.

Maybe the ground over which we walked already buried the enemy we had hoped to slay.

After scrambling over what remained of this trench, I found myself with another signaler, cut off completely from the rest by the mist. We had come close together in our scrambling and remained together. We were alone in a mist which we began to suspect was not altogether made by Nature. Here was a fine mess. Fryer (that was my companion's name) and myself cut off from our comrades, not knowing whither we were going nor how far we should go.

What should we do? We did what irresponsible private soldiers could do - dropped into the nearest shell hole. Discussing our position over a Woodbine, shared by the simple and wasteful expedient of breaking it in two, we went to sleep!

... "Look behind." Carefully I raised my head again and looked. Behind us, in a part of the trench we had crossed that had escaped the general smashing in of high explosives, was a German. A brave man, braver than either Fryer or I, was standing in that bit of trench.

With a rifle to his shoulder he was firing steadily in the direction of our old front line, and by his side, keeping under what little cover there was, was another, busily loading a second rifle. I raised my own to shoot the first active German enemy I had seen, but Fryer pulled me back. "Don't be a bloody fool," he said. "Don't you see we're surrounded?"

I won't worry you with the argument I had with Fryer - nor with myself - about what was our duty. Enough that discretion won and, astonishing though it may seem, we lay down and went to sleep again.

We awoke a second time and fell to discussing plans to get back to our lines. If the worst came to the worst we considered how we might manage to be safely taken prisoners. Once more we carefully peeped over the lip of our shell hole, but the heroes of an hour ago were no longer there. Our inaction was getting on my nerves. I decided to look about me to see what had been happening, but Fryer wouldn't come. He, poor devil, had started to crack up.

... It was with real thankfulness that I found the captain of our company. He was sheltering in a shell hole just as Fryer and I had done. I grew positively superior when he insisted on telling me how his servant had saved his life. In tones as shaken as Fryer's, he described how a tin plate which his servant had put in his haversack had deflected a bullet which otherwise would most certainly have killed him.

I fancied I knew where one Military Medal would go. Then he remembered his men. "Go back," he said to me, "and tell the C.O. that we are absolutely lost; too much damned mist and smoke; and ask for orders. Is there anyone with you? Fryer? Take him with you."

We went back, Fryer and I, reported to the adjutant of one of the battalions of our brigade who was acting brigadier, all his superiors having been killed or wounded, and received instructions to remain in the trench. Messages had already gone out, we were told, ordering a general withdrawal to our starting-point. The attack had failed. Pray God we should not have it to do all over again.

I am sorry I cannot finish this short account of a "push" with some stirring deed of valor. Fritz soon became aware of our intention to abandon the attack and it was not long before his artillery was blowing our trench to pieces. Fryer was killed at my side. I cannot describe the "incident." I saw about as much red as was left in the poor chap's face when he settled in a crouching posture - dead. From that time until we were relieved I waited every second for a similar end. I was buried, and got out. I trembled violently for ten solid minutes with shell-shock, but recovered and had to hang on. When the relief did come it was due more to sheer fatigue than self-control that we refrained from running out of the trenches.

Our whole brigade had suffered very heavy losses. We were taken behind the lines for a rest, addressed by our G.O.C., told how, through lack of information, we had valiantly attacked a force three times our number and, after being brought up to strength, we were sent in to do it again.

On 18 Nov 1918, after over four months of fighting, the British army abandoned its operations in the Somme Offensive. Casualties were horrific. In one of humanity's bloodiest battles, over 1,000,000 men were killed and wounded on both sides. The first day of the battle, 01 Jul 1916, was the worst day in the history of the British Army, with 60,000 casualties. In the end, the battle ended as an allied victory as British and French armies gained about 6 miles of territory, but the cost had been considered by many to be a worthless waste of men and materials. At times, soldiers referred to operations on the battle field not in miles, but rather in yards or even feet.

The offensive known as the "Battle of the Somme" was actually a series of British and French attacks along a small section of the Western front in France. These allied attacks were in turn countered by German attacks along the same front. The armies often fought back and forth over the same miserable patch of earth day after day as the bodies piled up. The battles were fought along either side of the Somme River, a body of water ironically named for an ancient Celtic word meaning "tranquility."

The British and French objectives at the Somme were simple. A major multi-pronged offensive had been planned by the Allied powers along many fronts for 1916. The prevailing theory by military strategists at the time was that different multiple attacks coordinated simultaneously along the Russian, Italian and Western Fronts would spread the German army to a point where the Kaiser would have to capitulate or face certain annihilation. Allied commanders figured (correctly) that Austria-Hungary, Germany's

main ally, was on the verge of internal chaos. If the Germans failed to hold in any one area, a breakthrough might even be achieved. The key to allied victory was coordination and pressure.

Of course, no one informed the German High Command of the allied plans. Their commanders had plans for a western offensive as well, and in late February the German Army attacked French forces along a 15-mile front in what became known as the Battle of Verdun. The slaughter lasted 10 months and cost the German army almost 500,000 men by December, but it did succeed in tying down most of the French army for most of 1916. The Battle of the Somme, four months into Verdun, would have to mainly be a British operation with French support. Fighting both battles ultimately led to the demise of the German Army, a force so weakened by Christmas 1916 that it would never recover, but because of Verdun the allied armies were never able to put enough of a force into the field at the Somme to achieve real victory. As a result, both operations proved futile and bloody.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will understand the basic facts of the Battle of the Somme, the strategy and objectives of the British and French commanders in the offensive, how allied mistakes cost tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of lives unnecessarily, why the British and French “success” at the Somme was ultimately seen as a failure, and how the Somme ultimately doomed the German army to eventual defeat on the Western Front.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the events of the Battle of the Somme.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the strategy and objectives behind the British Army’s decision to launch an offensive at the Somme in 1916.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how allied mistakes cost tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of lives unnecessarily.
4. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why the British and French “success” at the Battle of the Somme was ultimately seen as a failure.
5. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how losses of men and material at the Somme ultimately doomed the German army to eventual defeat on the Western Front.



## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Are there any battles in American history that have ingrained themselves in American memory (for example – Gettysburg, Pearl Harbor or Yorktown)? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Battle of the Somme (20 min)
- Video – Somme (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Battle of the Somme, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Battle of the Somme. (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the facts of the Battle of the Somme, the strategy and objectives of the British and French commanders in the offensive, how allied mistakes cost tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of lives unnecessarily, why the British and French “success” at the Somme was ultimately seen as a failure, and how the Somme ultimately doomed the Germans to eventual defeat on the Western Front.

## Extension

### On tour: Somme Battlefield and the Thiepval Memorial

While on tour, students in Northeastern France can visit the Somme Battlefield and the Thiepval Memorial where they can see for themselves the huge memorial to the 72,191 missing British and South African men who died at the Battle of the Somme. The memorial was designed and built after the Great War. At 140 ft. above the podium, the memorial is the largest British monument to war dead in the world. The memorial is inscribed with names of missing soldiers. At the base of the memorial are the graves of 300 British and 300 French identified soldiers killed at the Somme.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.firstworldwar.com/diaries/ordinarywaronthesomme.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/diaries/ordinarywaronthesomme.htm)  
Ordinary War on the Somme (primary source) — from Private Fred Ball, British soldier on the Western Front
- [www.firstworldwar.com/source/somme\\_gibbs.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/somme_gibbs.htm)  
Philip Gibbs on the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916 (primary source)
- [www.johndclare.net/wwi\\_somme\\_docs.htm](http://www.johndclare.net/wwi_somme_docs.htm)  
Source Documents on the Battle of the Somme (primary sources)
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/somme.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/somme.htm)  
A Death at the Battle of the Somme, 1916 (primary source) – words of Alan Seeger, an American who was living in France in 1914 and joined the French Foreign Legion when the war broke out. He was killed at the Somme on the first day of the battle.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle\\_somme.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle_somme.shtml)  
Battle of the Somme – article from the BBC website
- [www.iwm.org.uk/centenary](http://www.iwm.org.uk/centenary)  
“First World War Centenary” – Imperial War Museums. Articles, primary sources, films, photographs and podcasts on the Great War. Great resource for teachers and students.
- [www.bartleby.com/136/7.html](http://www.bartleby.com/136/7.html)  
“How to Die” – poem by Siegfried Sassoon at Bartleby.com
- [www.1914-1918.net/bat15A.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/bat15A.htm)  
The Battles of the Somme (website)
- [www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html)  
Dulce Et Decorum Est (poem by Wilfred Owen) at the War Poetry Website, David Roberts, editor
- [www.firstworldwar.com/battles/somme.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/somme.htm)  
The Battle of the Somme (website) – from firstworldwar.com
- [www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/battlefields/373-somme-1916.html](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/battlefields/373-somme-1916.html)  
The Battle of the Somme 1916 – web article from the Western Front Association (UK)
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/somme](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/somme)  
The Battle of the Somme (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- [www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/PowerpointPresent/WW1.ppt](http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/PowerpointPresent/WW1.ppt)  
World War I PowerPoint from Susan Pojer, history teacher at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY.
- [www.whitchurchhs.com/Departments/History/Y11Coursework/haig/HAIG.pptx](http://www.whitchurchhs.com/Departments/History/Y11Coursework/haig/HAIG.pptx)  
Haig Innocent or Guilty (PowerPoint) – from the history department at White Church High School in Cardiff, UK
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in

Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPT1MKOP8TQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPT1MKOP8TQ)  
First World War – Battle of the Somme and experiences of trench warfare (video). This 11-minute video contains a good deal of primary source video and is appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cK5xL6QBM0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cK5xL6QBM0)  
BBC The Somme From Defeat to Victory (video) – from the BBC, this 60-minute documentary is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for AP and Advanced students.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzw6Vkjfq4o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzw6Vkjfq4o)  
The Battle of the Somme (documentary) BBC 1976 (video) – from the BBC, this 70-minute documentary was made for the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme.

### **Background Information**

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Somme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Somme)  
Battle of the Somme – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Front\\_\(World\\_War\\_I\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Front_(World_War_I))  
Western Front (World War I) – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Lesson Plans from Passports Educational Travel**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia)  
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914)  
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen)  
England and the Great War – Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918)  
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles)  
Great War – Treaty of Versailles 1919
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme)  
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles)  
Great War – France: Clemenceau
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916)  
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914)  
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)  
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918)  
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

### **Key Terms**

- Breakthrough
- British Expeditionary Force
- General Haig
- Great War
- Somme
- Western Front

