NEVER AGAIN

As Europe marks the centenary of one of its bloodiest ever battles, **Lord Lexden** explains how the wholesale slaughter at the Somme changed Britain forever

It was meant to be the year in which Britain and its allies won the First World War. In 1916, generals looked forward to decisive victories in all the main theatres of war in Europe, leaving the weak Ottoman Empire, their other enemy, isolated and with no option but surrender in the Middle East.

A grand plan of campaign was agreed at a conference of the allied top brass at Chantilly in December 1915. A huge Russian offensive, led by General Alexei Brusilov, an outstanding commander of men, would be launched in the middle of 1916 against the Austro-Hungarian armies in Eastern Europe. At the same time Italy, which had entered the war in 1915, would attack Germany's principal ally in the Alps. Assisted by the predicted victories in these campaigns, Britain and France would prevail on the Western Front over a demoralised Germany deprived of allies.

Douglas Haig, the ambitious newly appointed British commander-in-chief on the Western Front, was determined that his troops should play a conspicuous part in this grand design. A massive assault on Germany's strongly fortified defensive positions near the Somme would be his contribution to the success of the co-ordinated allied strategy. The Somme was chosen in large part because it was there that the British and French armies were adjacent to each other, enabling them to conduct operations jointly.

The fullest possible British participation in the combined operations planned on the Somme became ever more important as the French fought desperately on their own further along the Front from February 1916 onwards to save Verdun from capture by the Germans. The French city became the scene of the longest, and possibly the deadliest, battle in history. It lasted until December 1916; total casualties amounted to some 800,000. Defeat at Verdun would have spelt disaster for the allies by opening the road to Paris to the forces of the Kaiser. The turning point in French fortunes came in July 1916, the first month of the Somme. Haig's mighty offensive helped save Verdun by relieving the intense German pressure on it.

As it turned out, this was to be the only really significant positive result of all the bloodshed and suffering at the Somme, though no-one realised that when battle was joined on 1 July. Haig had drawn up ambitious and detailed plans, the objective of which was total victory. Under these carefully laid plans, the prospects of victory were to be enhanced by a ferocious prelude to the battle: the greatest artillery bombardment ever seen. It lasted the whole week leading up to 1 July, with some 1,500 guns firing along the 18-mile battlefront. They could be heard clearly in Kent. One British officer described the bombardment as being "in magnitude and terribleness beyond the previous experience of mankind".

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It had to succeed if Haig was to have any chance of winning the battle. As Andrew Roberts puts it in his marvellous book *Elegy: The First Day on the Somme,* Haig believed that as a result of the unremitting barrage "his troops would be able simply to occupy the trenches of a demoralised enemy and then pursue the breakthrough he had wanted for so long". After that his impressive cavalry would sweep the Germans from the villages and towns of northern France.

But Haig's plans miscarried at the very outset. At least 30 per cent of shells failed to explode. Only in one section of the long battlefront (where the French were in charge) were the deep, well-equipped German dugouts penetrated by shellfire. On 1 July the deadly German machine guns were swiftly rolled out to mow down the massed ranks of the British infantry as they advanced slowly, weighed down by equipment. It is for the appalling casualties on that terrible first day that the Somme will always be chiefly remembered. 19,240 were killed and 35,494 wounded.

Instead of winning a swift victory, Haig found himself enmeshed in one of the worst battles of attrition ever fought. When it ended on 18 November, the British army had suffered 419,655 casualties; the German army around 600,000. The British had gained just 10 kilometres of territory. Efforts were made to find consolation. One infantry officer wrote that as a result of the lessons learned at the Somme the British army was "for the rest of the war, the best army in the field".

The grand allied strategy for 1916 failed elsewhere too. In the Alps, the Italians were routed. General Brusilov alone achieved success — and on a spectacular scale. He inflicted nearly a million casualties on the Austro-Hungarians and took 400,000 prisoners. But the failure of other Russian commanders to support him turned victory into massive defeat.

There were few words of praise for the allied commanders among senior politicians at Westminster. Lloyd George, who became prime minister shortly after fighting had stopped at the Somme, later described it as "horrible and futile".

He had a low opinion of Haig but was unable to get rid of him. This highly political general had strong support among MPs. During a heated debate on 14 December, 1916 there were calls for "a radical change in command" in view of Haig's " signal incapacity".

The critics were silenced by an impassioned speech by a serving officer just back from the Somme, who stressed that the troops had "absolute confidence" in their commander and his ability "to resume the offensive on a vast scale" in 1917 and "improve greatly upon former results". Haig escaped the public inquiry that had followed the Dardanelles disaster the previous year.

After the war, the Somme became an overwhelming argument for radical change in the conduct of war. Never again would soldiers alone decide how Britain's wars would be fought.

Winston Churchill, a fierce critic of the Somme and Haig, kept the generals on a tight leash during the Second World War and ruthlessly sacked those who might spill unnecessary blood as a result of their inadequacy. Churchill was determined that nothing like the Somme would ever happen again.

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian. His work can be found at alistairlexden.org.uk.