The Donkeys

In 1961, author and Member of Parliament Alan Clark published a book titled "The Donkeys," in which he asserted that the British army during the First World War was commanded by generals who lacked the competence to achieve victory in battles or the war. The phrase "lions led by donkeys," which existed prior to the First World War, re-emerged following the publication of Clark's book and became closely associated with the British generals of that period. This raises the question: Was the British generals truly incompetent, and why did Clark's book become representative of mainstream First World War history in the 1960s?

The phrase "lions led by donkeys" originates from Plutarch's assertion to General Chabrias, stating that "an army of deer commanded by a lion is more to be feared than an army of lions commanded by a deer." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels employed this expression in an 1855 article critiquing British military errors during the fall of Sevastopol, particularly focusing on General James Simpson's leadership in the assault on the Great Redan. A common jest among Russian troops, "L'armée anglaise est une armée de lions commandée par des ânes" ["The English army is an army of lions led by asses"], was seemingly confirmed by the events at Redan. Over time, particularly by the 20th century, the phrase became specifically associated with the British army, implying that the high casualty rates reflected the incompetence of its generals.

Clark's "The Donkeys" details the first two years of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) campaign under Commander-in-Chief Sir John French. At his appointment, French faced doubts from his generals and Lord Kitchener. One of his main critics, General Douglas Haig, even expressed his concerns directly to King George. Haig had a close relationship with the king due to his wife, Dorothy Maud Vivian, being related to Hussey Vivian, 3rd Baron Vivian.

Clark's first example demonstrating the incompetence of World War One Generals is derived from the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (March 10-13, 1915). While some historians, such as George Cassar, have considered this battle to be a British success, the strategy ultimately failed to secure significant territory from the German Empire. Additionally, communication breakdowns hindered British advances. At critical moments, failures in communication between Generals Henry Rawlinson, Douglas Haig, and Sir James Willcocks, who led the Indian Corps, resulted in halted progress and confusion. These events underscored notable leadership deficiencies.

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle marked the British Army's first encounter with trench warfare. The army adapted effectively to this new combat style, coordinating attacks on German positions until communication breakdowns caused confusion on the battlefield.[1] This initially demonstrated that British Generals were capable of leading successful assaults, as evidenced by the initial attack on the village. Enemy lines were captured with significant impact; however, when the opportunity arose to advance further out of the village of Neuve Chapelle, senior officers halted the progress, opting to bombard the village with artillery. Their aim was to ensure no German soldiers remained within the village, but the Germans had already retreated further back than what was expected, in anticipation of the British Army's next offensive. These decisions by the commanders ultimately resulted in additional losses for British soldiers later in the war, despite their intentions of minimizing casualties at the time.

The last example that Clark covers in his book (Donkeys) is from the Battle of Loos in September 1915. This battle is highly significant because it marked the end of Sir John French as commander of

[1] Harris, Paul, and Sanders Marble. "The 'Step-by-Step' Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915–1917." *War in History* 15, no. 1 (2008): 17–42.

the BEF. The first two days at the Battle of Loos is among the most controversial in British military history, and here is why. Both Haig and Kitchner knew that there would be substantial heavy British; losses at Loos to acquire a victory, and at first, there initial attack against the Germans, easily overran much of their front lines, but still, it resulted in heavy casualties for the British. With few men capable of continuing fighting, Haig still wanted to push on his advances to capitalise on his previous success. This was not to be. Haig had seen a gap in the German lines, where the British reserves could have pushed through, but they were unable to because Sir John French had not positioned the infantry in the right position to where Haig wanted them, showing another failure in communication and lack of leadership under French. Haig had always believed that a breakthrough was possible at Loos, but Ultimately, he was stopped by the incompetence of his superior officer.[2]

Clark attributes the BEF's early high death tolls to these leadership failures, though only covering the war's first two years under French's command may limit the scope of his critique. After French's resignation post-Battle of Loos, Haig's reforms improved training, weaponry, and tactics, evidenced in the gradual adaptations following the Battle of the Somme. By 1917, advancements like tank warfare indicated lessons learned from earlier mistakes. No longer was the need or Calvary units to mount an offensive which would have mounted in heavy loss of life once again, but tanks were a great usage to negate the cost of unnecessary loss of life, and an away to adapt and create more diverse tactics on the battlefield. Even though significant changes did happen once French was relieved of duty, this does not indicate that the new Generals in command were more competent than he was, but in fact, it shows how a generation of leaders fell behind over the course of time.

The historiography of the First World War has evolved significantly over the past century. Early research often highlighted Britain's victory, but perspectives shifted through the mid-20th century, influenced by technological advances and comparisons with World War II. Media portrayals in the 1960s and 70s, such as "Oh What a Lovely War" and "The Donkeys," depicted the First World War negatively, contrasting it with the glorified narrative of World War II. Joan Littlewood, who wrote the musical "Oh What a Lovely War" was influenced upon reading Clark's assessment in his book.[3] In the 1980s, media continued to depict the First World War negatively, emphasising failure's that Haig did once becoming Commander of the British Army. 'Blackadder Goes Forth' is an example of this, making references towards Haig, and how he showed incompetence and a lack of care for the men who were under him.[4] In more recent years, scholarships by historians like Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman are seeking to reframe the First World War and how we all understand it by emphasising its complex legacy.[5]

Regarding Clark's assessment of the British Generals of the First World War and how he had deemed them to be incompetent remains mixed. While early leadership under John French displayed considerable flaws, subsequent improvements under Haig suggests a learning curve rather than outright incompetence. In Shefield's book (Haig: Commander and Chief) he put the assessment of the high casualties not down to incompetence within the ranks but rather down to the old-fashioned methods of war, and their military tactics. Sheffield explained that Haig was an old fashion Victorian man when it came to war and tactics, therefore you can also categorise the other Generals into this bracket. By no means were they not capable of winning wars or coordinating offensives efficiently but rather wanting to go about it in the only way that had previously worked for them in the past.

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[2] Ibid

[3] "Polychronicon: Douglas Haig: Donkey or Scapegoat?" *Teaching History*, no. 117 (2004): 32–33.

[4] Ibid

[5] Webber, Nick, and Paul Long. "The Last Post: British Press Representations of Veterans of the Great War." *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 3 (2014): 273–90.

Up until the introduction of the First World War, battles had been fought on relatively small battlefields and over a short amount of time. This was the case for the First World War too, or at least that is what the Generals had in mind, because everyone had assumed the war was going to be over quick. As for tactics, especially during the early years of the war, the Generals always had in mind of that final breakthrough passed the enemy lines. Emphasised on cavalry and pushing as many men as possible forward in hopes of that breakthrough consumed the logical thoughts and new nature of warfare during the early 20th century. The First World War was not going to be won with methods of pushing through enemy lines and doing it at all costs, but it was one that needed careful attention to detail and one that needed the best strategy at the right time. Clark's focus on the war's initial stages may have limited his perspective, given the evolving strategies and technologies later in the conflict.

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