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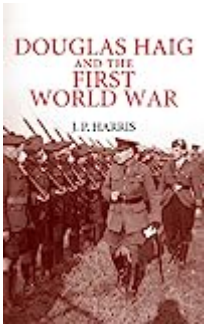

J. P. Harris. *Douglas Haig and the First World War.* Cambridge Military Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Illustrations, maps. xi + 652 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89802-7.

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"A human being of at least average complexity"

J. P. Harris, senior lecturer in war studies at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, has not written a new biography of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig (1st Earl Haig of Bemersyde, 1861-1928) *stricto sensu*, rather, as the title indicates, he has authored a deliberately unbalanced narrative in which the First World War takes pride of place (seventeen chapters out of twenty). Two chapters cover his years before 1914, one his years after 1914. The title has been carefully chosen for the ambiguity introduced by âandâ: Harris aims to explore both the incidence of the war on Haigâs psyche and Haigâs contribution in making the war take the shape it did.

One important element in Haigâs formative years was his visit to German maneuvers in 1895. Haig was impressed by both the efficiency of German cavalry (his corps) and the hospitality of German officers (including the kaiser), so much so that Harris tells us âhe never endorsed the hysterical hatred of Germany vented in the worst sort of wartime propagandaâ (p. 15). This admiration may in fact have impaired his judgment in the final weeks of the war, when he wrongly overrated the Germansâ will and capacity to resist–after arguing from late August to early October âthat the German army was on the brink of collapseâ (p. 515). Harris tries to explain such wide variations in Haigâs assessment of the military situation–naturally a capital responsibility for a commander in chief– by the fact that he was âa human being of at least average complexityâ (p. 4).

This notion, complexity, seems in fact to provide the mainspring of the book, with the difficulty of grasping the seemingly intractable elements of the war, notably the factors that might lead to victory–or at least avoid defeat and surrender–redounding on Haigâs internal decision-making process. The various chapters show the fluctuations of Haigâs thinking, closely following the fluctuations of the Anglo-French Alliesâ fortunes of war on the Western Front. Incidentally, we learn (or we are reminded) that Haig–unlike Winston Churchill in the two world wars–never believed in the peripheral approach. He always affirmed that the decisive battleground was on the Franco-Belgian frontier and that any other operations would only remain sideshows, with lit-

tle if any effect on the final outcome of the war. If France were allowed to fall, Russia would not be able to hold out and Britain would be faced with a Continent entirely dominated by Germany. The obvious priority was, therefore, to contain the advance of German troops into France.

Curiously, in view of this deeply held conviction from the start of the war, Haig was initially against sending a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France immediately, on the grounds that British troops were poorly trained and ill prepared and therefore risked elimination before they made any impact. This was politically untenable, however, and the BEF was duly sent to France. Haig crossed the English Channel with his officers on August 14, 1914, as commander of I Corps, that is, half of the BEF, whose overall command was entrusted to Field Marshal Sir John French, for whose military qualities Haig had little respect. Indeed, we are told, âon occasionâ he âdeliberately disregarded his ordersâ (p. 110). His fears– fortunately not his worst fears of annihilation– were confirmed when the British had to retreat at the Battle of Mons (Belgium), their first encounter with the German army, in late August. Lack of coordination with the French–a constant problem of the war, until at least the spring of 1918–was blamed for this poor start.

It would be tedious to sum up here all the minute details of Haigâs deeds in the war–as appropriately recounted in this heavy tome, with the author leaving nothing out, not even the vintage (1820) of the brandy that went with the Christmas dinner of 1914, or the fact that Haigâs trip to London to meet the highest military and political authorities in June 1917 seem ânot to have been his only significant activitiesâ since âhis son and heir was born the following Marchâ (p. 354). For readers of the book who are not interested in the military minutiae of the actions in which Haig participated, but only in the broad narrative, Harris provides a recap for each chapter, entitled âAssessment.â

Haig emerged from the first Battle of Ypres (November 1914) with an enhanced reputation, so much so that following the reorganization of the BEF from the early days of 1915–the BEF now consisting of two armies, each with two corps–he received the command of the First Army. Harris naturally has no illusion on what makes a war hero, as his comments on the Neuve Chapelle offensive make clear: âAn attack on Neuve Chapelle was being driven by the need for the British to do *something* on the Western Front in 1915â (p. 115). It resulted in âlimited victory,â but at a great cost in casualties, and Harris argues that Haigâs âown analysis of what had happened at Neuve Chapelle was superficial,â since by mid-spring 1915 he continued to believe that a quick rupture of the German front was possible (pp. 127, 131). Haigâs strategy was in conflict with that of some senior British officers who believed in short advances minimizing casualties by reliance on artillery–the âstep-by-stepâ approach (p. 143).

Their French ally came in to arbitrate between the two, or at least to try to inflect British policy in Haigâs own direction. General Joseph Joffre, the French commander in chief, was poorly impressed–to say the least– when the replication at Aubers Ridge in May of the March offensive at Neuve Chapelle resulted this time, not in âlimited victory,â but in disaster. In contrast, the contemporary French offensive at Vimy Ridge, further south, was reasonably successful. This time the British failure was blamed on shell shortage–a highly sensitive political issue which eventually had repercussions on a reshuffle of the British government. Again, Harris shows no apparent pity. âExplaining Haigâs defeat at Aubers Ridge mainly in terms of shell shortage was essentially false,â he writes (p. 142). As at Neuve Chapelle, he had rejected the âstep-by-stepâ approach. Yet Harris asks his reader to see Haigâs action âin proper perspectiveâ: he was ânot the first commander in military history to mount an inadequately planned, bloody and futile frontal assault on a strongly held positionâ (p. 144). What counts is that he showed, âat least, some willingness to adaptâ after drawing the lessons from his defeat (p. 144). Here, we see at work Harrisâs efforts to look at Haig as âa human being of at least average complexity.â Haig was not entirely conceited since he was prepared to learn from his mistakes, but he was also slow to abandon his initial belief in a decisive breakthrough–which he still held in midsummer 1915–provided he had the required quantity of heavy guns and ammunition, to which he added gas in September.

âUnder no circumstances should our forthcoming attack [on Loos] be launched without the aid of gas,â Haig wrote to General Headquarters (GHQ) on September 16, 1915, nine days before Zero Day for the new offensive ordered and coordinated by Joffre (p. 164). Haig had many personal misgivings about this new attack, but, Harris tells us, âhe was too ambitious and too canny to try to resist simultaneous pressure from Joffre, GHQ and the British government, as represented by [Lord] Kitchenerâ (p. 158). In the event, the weather conditions made the gas largely inoperative, sometimes even counterproductive, killing British men. Harrisâs assessment on Haig at

the Battle of Loos (âa bloody and humiliating fiascoâ) is unambiguous: âHaig could not get it out of his head that he was on the cusp of a tremendous victory. He continued to give orders based on this erroneous reading of the battleâ (pp. 178, 177).

In the informal inquest that followed, Haig put the blame on French, his superior, who had supposedly not sent the reserves at the right moment, when he was on the verge of an irresistible breakthrough. Harris leans on recent scholarship to argue that this is pure fantasy on Haigâs part, not really deliberate lies, but something âmuch more seriousâ for those under his command (p. 180). âHe had developed a remarkable facility for closing his mind to things he did not want to accept and for making himself believe what he wanted to believe,â Harris writes in his exploration of âa human being of at least average complexity,â noting his âself-righteousnessâ and âapparent self-assuranceâ and the fact that he âwould sometimes prove blinder than the one-eyed men he ruledâ (pp. 180, 186, 192). French had made so many enemies in high places–as high as the palace itself–that he finally had to leave the command of the BEF in December 1915. The best candidate to replace him was General Sir William âWullyâ Robertson, who was âa consistent advocate of the step-by-step approach,â and Chief of Staff of the BEF under French, but it was believed in the same high places that he would make a more acceptable Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) than Haig thanks to his adaptability–a desirable trait for the job, which Haig did not have–and therefore he became CIGS in December, when Haig became commander in chief of the BEF (p. 211).

The first major test of the new commander in chiefâs competence was of course the Battle of Somme, finally launched (on French insistence) on July 1, 1916, to which Harris devotes some seventy pages–a small monograph, in fact, and a delight to read for anybody interested in the central controversy, namely, âwhy British casualties overall were so massive in relation to the ground gained and to what extent Haig was personally responsible for thisâ (p. 234). Haig weathered the storm. Indeed, he was promoted to the rank of field marshal.

His next struggle was more political and diplomatic. David Lloyd George, who became prime minister in December 1916, never liked Haig, who had a reciprocal distrust of the Welsh Wizard. But each needed the other, and they managed to sustain this modus vivendi until the end of the war. Likewise, as commander in chief of the BEF, Haig had to ensure that his relations with his French opposite number remained at least ostensibly cordial. When General Robert Nivelle replaced Joffre, also in December 1916, Haig had to make sure he hurt neither his political master nor his closest military ally. In the event, âHaig benefited enormously from Nivelleâs arrogance and tactlessnessâ vis-Ã -vis the British authorities, including Lloyd George (p. 295). The Nivelle Offensive, starting on April 16, 1917, coincided with the Battle of Arras, launched by the BEF on April 9. None produced the expected breakthrough and, as in the Somme, the Battle of Arras âresulted in excessive loss of British life for very limited gain of groundâ (p. 326). It was little consolation to Haig that Nivelleâs losses were even higher. Still, Nivelle was dismissed in May, to be replaced by General Philippe PÃ©tain, but Haig kept his job.

After his small success at the Battle of Messines in June 1917, âthe prospect of a decisive summer offensive in Flanders became a growing obsession in his mindâ (p. 354). This led to the Third Battle of Ypres, a lasting sinister memory under the popular name of âPasschendaeleâ (p. 381). It was a battle in which, âin terms of morale, Haig had done proportionally very much more damage to his own army than to the Germansâ (p. 382).

The Battle of Cambrai, from November 20, 1917, was meant to restore his stock, which had understandably fallen very low after âPasschendaele,â and âthis offensive had raised hopes, especially at home in Britain, only for these to be cruelly dashedâ once more, by November 30 (p. 408). Even so, he survived the extensive purges that the war cabinet effected in the high command. One reason may have been Lloyd Georgeâs reasoning that his departure would further weaken the morale of the BEF, at a time when a major stake-all attack was expected by Germany in the spring, according to the best intelligence.

Haig had his doubts about the Germansâ real intentions. In fact, in early 1918, he then believed that the best outcome of the war would be a compromise peace–the Germans had sent peace feelers that he misinterpreted as meaning that their territorial claims would be strictly limited. Another factor was that he had been much impressed and terrified by the Bolshevik Revolution. He believed that the crumbling of the Hohenzollernsâ Empire would probably lead to a Bolshevik takeover in Germany, as it had in Russia the year before. In the event, the German offensive was launched on March 21, 1918, with dramatic gains in the next four days. At a crisis meeting with the French at CompiÃ¨gne on March 25, Haig, for all intents and purposes, agreed to serve under Ferdinand Foch, who would coordinate the activities of the British

and French armies as Generalissimo.

Harris naturally gives a detailed account of the military operations that gravely imperiled the positions of the Allies initially, with the gradual recovery under Fochâs faultless handling of both the French and British forces at his command. But Harris does not give Haig much credit for the final Allied success: âHaig arguably never had the right instinct or aptitude to be a good general in crises of this magnitudeâ (p. 484). He further belittles Haigâs role in the final Allied victory when he writes: âThe British contribution to the Second Battle of the Marne, the battle that marks the turn of the tide on the Western Front in 1918, was relatively small and (on Haigâs part) reluctantâ (p. 486).

The final weeks of the war saw another element forcefully enter the military equation, namely, the political terms that should be offered to the Germans if they accepted an armistice. Haig was evidently no expert at international relations, as shown by his hesitations when Lloyd George asked him for his views on October 19, 1918, but his military expertise was also seen to be gravely deficient when he argued that the Germans would probably be able to fight on for several months if the terms offered were too harsh. âIt seems like intellectual obstinacy–the unwillingness to admit that advice so recently tendered had been based on false premises,â Harris comments, when Haig refused to admit that the collapse of Austria radically transformed the situation (p. 512).

After victory, Lloyd George was loath to grant Haig the title that he coveted. Marlborough and Wellington received their eponymous dukedoms for their labors, but Lloyd George was only prepared to make Haig a viscount. After unseemly negotiations behind the scenes, Haig finally got an earldom, with a financial reward of one hundred thousand pounds. He was now in charge of the Home Forces, but in spite of his extreme dislike of Socialism he exercised considerable restraint in the use of troops to maintain order against left-wing demonstrators. His instinctive distrust of foreigners (including President Woodrow Wilson) made him skeptical about the value of the new League of Nations. By the time of his fatal heart attack in 1928, it seems that the population had forgotten the slaughter of the Somme or Passchendaele or at least that it did not hold the former commander in chief responsible, and Haig âdied a national heroâ (p. 530). The sixteen pages of conclusion provide a superbly balanced evaluation of Haigâs action, convincingly summing up all the arguments which compel us to accept that he was indeed âa human being of at least average complexity.â

This is a most impressive book, thoroughly researched (*vide* the seventy pages of end notes, often referring to the long list of archives consulted, given in the bibliography) and written with exemplary clarity (not the least trace of jargon there) and linguistic correctness (only one mistake was detected, on the spelling of Serqueux [p. 63], in a text proper of some 550 pages, with many complicated Flemish and French place names). The numerous large maps provided are a great help in following the military operations described in the text, and the photographs, mainly from the archives of the Imperial War Museum, are also helpful in helping the reader visualize what the terrain, equipment, and men really looked like.

Harris has rightly adopted a judgmental attitude: no one can write the biography of controversial historical characters like the major war leaders of world history (and if there was any doubt that Haig was one, the book dispels it) without taking sides in the many controversies that still surround them, but he does it in a commendably dispassionate tone, giving his readers all the elements that may enable them to form the opposite opinion. *Douglas Haig and the First World War* is unreservedly recommended for all students, from the first year to doctoral candidates, and it should be in all university libraries. It is naturally to be hoped that a paperback edition will soon make it financially accessible to private individuals.