

# World War One Watch

## John Gittings

In this centenary of the First World War, no one should be surprised that Michael Gove has been quick to let us know how we should learn from its history ‘in the right way’. His verdict in the *Daily Mail* (2 January) has at least the merit of simplicity. World War One may have been a horrific war but it was also a Just War. General Haig was not a butcher but a patriotic leader ‘grappling honestly with the complexities of industrial warfare’. And we should not be taken in by the ‘Left-wing’ views of some academics – or by *Oh What A Lovely War* and *Blackadder*.

Whether or not we accept the theory of Just War, it would be intriguing to debate its meaning here with Gove, for it is probably a more complex doctrine than he realises. To have a ‘just cause’ (in this case, Germany’s invasion of Belgium and France) is not enough. There are other criteria to be met, including crucially the ‘probability of success’ and ‘proportionality’, meaning that there should be a reasonable timescale for success, and that the benefits of waging a war should outweigh the harm it will do. Does a four year war and the deaths of at least ten million, plus other consequential losses such as the vast number of those seriously wounded, the suffering of civilian populations, the epidemics which ensued etc. really meet these standards?

Yet we should be less concerned with Michael Gove (what else did we expect him to say?) than with the tide of post-revisionist analysis along much the same lines which has appeared in the media – particularly in the BBC’s output — so far. Presentation has been tilted towards assigning all, or almost all, blame to Germany. As stated by Jeremy Paxman at the start of his four-part series,

‘In 1914 Britain faced its greatest threat for nearly a thousand years ... Kaiser William aimed to dominate all of Europe by invading both France and Russia. He also had his eyes on a chunk of the British empire.’

The confused military and diplomatic build-up – on all sides – to the war has been brilliantly charted in two recent histories – by Christopher Clark (*The Sleepwalkers*) and Sean McMeekin (*July 1914: Countdown to War*), but their view that the great powers blundered into war, and that there was no German master-plan, has hardly been heard on the BBC. There has been no attempt to delineate the framework of imperialist rivalry over the preceding years which created the climate for war. The argument for or

against Britain's decision to enter the war is being put in narrow terms as I write by two right-wing historians: Max Hastings who believes that Britain had no alternative but to take part in this 'necessary war', and Niall Ferguson who argues that Britain should have stood aside, perhaps to intervene more effectively at a later stage.

An online BBC series of guides to the war (under the title 'iWonder') has been launched to clear up what it calls 'common misperceptions'. The first, by military historian Dan Snow, argues against 'the widely held view that the majority of soldiers died in the trenches'. This is wrong, he says: actually 88 per cent of British soldiers survived 'to return home and rejoin their families'. Yet Snow's statistics are suspect. It is true that the death rate among all British servicemen during the war was about one in ten, but that includes everyone who served everywhere, not only those in the trenches. He also minimises the large number of soldiers who were seriously wounded.

Another allegedly myth-busting article is written by Professor Gary Sheffield, the historian (much admired by Michael Gove) who claims that history has misjudged the generals, and especially General Haig. Sheffield 'partially acquits' Haig of the charge that he lost too many lives, with the argument that 'win or lose, Western Front battles were costly in human life'. And he insists it is wrong to say that Haig never won an offensive: didn't he win the last battle of the war?

These are early days in what will be four years of remembering this terrible war. The BBC promises 130 TV programmes spanning 2,500 hours. Let us hope for more balanced argument and judgement to come.

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*With grateful acknowledgments to Oxford CND.*

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