

## Battle of the Somme Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**  
*Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*

### Materials:

- PowerPoint
- Documents A-C
- Graphic Organizer

### Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Overview of the Battle of the Somme. Use the PowerPoint presentation to provide an overview of the battle as it occurred between July 1, 1916, and November 18, 1916, and to introduce the day's central historical question.
  1. The Battle of the Somme was one of the most costly battles of World War I. It lasted from July 1, 1916, to November 18, 1916, and resulted in over 1 million casualties.
  2. The Allies, in particular the British forces led by General Haig, initiated the battle. The plan was for a "great push" through German lines on the western end of the Western Front.
  3. In many ways the battle was characteristic of trench warfare. After massive artillery bombardments of German lines, thousands of allied soldiers went "over the top" pouring out of trenches and into "no man's land." Hundreds of thousands were killed due to the military technologies used in the war – in particular, machine guns, artillery, hand grenades, and gas attacks. Months of fighting, with several assaults up and down the northern end of the Western Front, resulted in relatively small, Allied gains in land.
  4. Many historians argue, however, that the Battle of the Somme ultimately turned the tide in favor of the Allies by fatally weakening German forces.
  5. Our job today is to investigate what happened on the first day of the battle, July 1, 1916, by reading three historical accounts of the day:
    - a British newspaper article written by a journalist who was at the battle
    - the memoir of a British soldier who fought in the battle
    - the memoir of a German soldier who fought in the battleIn particular, we will explore these documents to address the question: *Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*
2. Hand out Document A (*The Daily Express*) along with the Graphic Organizer for the lesson.
  1. Students read document and answer the guiding questions.
  2. Share out and discuss responses.

- *Points to note:*
    - *The generally cheery tone of the article and its optimistic assessment of the British advance.*
    - *Although written on July 1, this article appeared in the newspaper on July 3.*
    - *The author notes that he was not actually at the battle.*
    - *The authors claim that British troops are advancing and that German troops are surrendering.*
3. Hand out Documents B and C
1. Students read documents and answer guiding questions in Graphic Organizer.
  2. Share out and discuss responses
    - *Points to note:*
      - *Difference in tone between Coppard and The Daily Express.*
      - *These are first-hand accounts, but they are memoirs, written long after the battle.*
      - *Difference in outcomes on day 1 of the battle described by Coppard and Lais as compared to The Daily Express.*
      - *How Coppard's and Lais' accounts include reasons for the high number of British casualties – namely, how the British artillery bombardment preceding the battle failed to adequately destroy German machine gun positions and the massive lines of barbed wire used to protect them.*
4. Final Claim
1. Students use evidence from the three documents to address the question: *Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*
5. Discussion
1. Why are documents B and C so different from document A?
  2. Which of these documents is most trustworthy? Why?
  3. Share final slide on casualty statistics for Day 1.
    - Which documents does this data corroborate with?
  4. Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?

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Citations:

Phillips, P. (1916, July 3). *The Daily Express*. In Farrar, M.J. (1998). *News From the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (104). Gloucestershire, U.K.: Sutton Publishing.

Coppard, G. (1969). *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*. London: Cassell Military Paperbooks.

Lais, U.O. (Date unknown). In Sheldon, J. (2007). *The German Army on the Somme: 1914-1916* (142-143). South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books.

## Document A: The Daily Express

The Daily Express is an English newspaper founded in 1900. Like other English newspapers, it printed daily news and stories on the war. Here is an excerpt written by correspondent Percival Phillips describing the first day of the Battle of the Somme, which appeared in the paper on July 3, 1916.

The great day of battle broke in sunshine and mist. Not a cloud obscured the sky as the sun appeared above the horizon – in the direction where the German trenches lay.

From a ridge a little to the west of Albert, overlooking the town and commanding a wide view of the beautiful **undulating** country, I witnessed the last phase of the bombardment which preceded the advance. It was six o'clock (summer time) when we arrived there. The guns had been roaring furiously all through the night. Now they had, so to speak, gathered themselves together for one grand final effort before our British lions should be let loose on their prey...

A perceptible **slackening** of our fire soon after seven was the first indication given to us that our gallant soldiers were about to leap from their trenches and advance against the enemy. Non-combatants, of course, were not permitted to witness this spectacle, but I am informed that the vigor and eagerness of the first assault were worthy of the best traditions of the British Army. I have myself heard within the past few days men declare that they were getting fed up with the life in the trenches, and would welcome a fight at close quarters...

We had not to wait long for news, and it was wholly satisfactory and encouraging. The message received at ten o'clock ran something like this: "On a front of twenty miles north and south of the Somme we and our French allies have advanced and taken the German first line of trenches. We are attacking vigorously Fricourt, La Boisselle, and Mametz. German prisoners are surrendering freely, and a good many already fallen into our hands."

**undulating:** a wavy surface

**slackening:** loosen up, or taper off

Source: Phillips, P. (1916, July 3). *The Daily Express*.

## Document B: George Coppard

*George Coppard was a British soldier who fought during the entire First World War and was twice wounded. He fought at the Battle of the Somme as a machine gunner and wrote about his experiences in his book, With a Machine Gun to Cambrai. In this excerpt, Coppard recollects his experience on July 2, 1916.*

The next morning we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of our trench. There was a pair of binoculars in the kit, and, under the brazen light of a hot mid-summer's day, everything revealed itself stark and clear...

Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. From the way the dead were equally spread out, whether on the wire or lying in front of it, it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack.

Concentrated machine gunfire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the (barbed) wire, had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing the wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked a black mass. The German faith in massed wire had paid off.

How did our planners imagine that Tommies (British soldiers), having survived all other hazards - and there were plenty in crossing No Man's Land - would get through the German (barbed) wire? Had they studied the black density of it through their powerful binoculars? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such (barbed) wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts (barbed) wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.

Source: Coppard, G. (1969). *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*.

## Document C: Otto Lais

*Otto Lais was a soldier in German Infantry Regiment 169. He was a machine gunner and fought at the battle of the Somme. Here is an excerpt from his memoir recounting his experience during the battle's first day. The date of his memoir is unknown.*

Wild firing slammed into the masses of the enemy. All around us was the rushing, whistling, and roaring of a storm: a hurricane, as the destructive British shell rushed towards our artillery which was firing courageously... The machine gunners were earning their pay today. Belt after belt was fired, 250 rounds – 1,000 – 3,000...

The British keep charging forward. Despite the fact that hundreds are already lying dead in the shell holes to our front, fresh waves keep emerging from the assault trenches... 18,000 rounds! The other platoon weapon (machine gun) has a stoppage. Gunner Schwarz falls shot through the head over the belt he is feeding. The belt twists, feeds rounds into the gun crookedly and they jam! Next man forward. The dead man is removed. The gunner strips the feed mechanism, removes the rounds and reloads. Fire; pause; barrel change; fetch ammunition; lay the dead on the floor of the crater. That is the hard unrelenting tempo of the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916. The sound of machine gun fire can be heard right across the divisional front. The youth of England bled to death in front of Serre [our position].

Source: Lais, U.O. (Date unknown). In Sheldon, J. (2007). *The German Army on the Somme: 1914-1916* (142-143).

## The Battle of the Somme Graphic Organizer

	Doc A	Doc B	Doc C
Who wrote it? When? What type of source?			
Author's Tone (include 1-2 examples)			
Did the author witness the events he describes?			
Who won the first day of the battle? How?			
Is this source trustworthy? Why?			

Use evidence from the three documents to write a paragraph addressing the question:  
*Who won the first day of the Battle of the Somme?*