

Douglas Haig and the First World War. By J. P. Harris. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 652 pages. \$39.95. **Reviewed by Colonel James D. Scudieri,** Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, US Army War College.

This work focuses on Sir Douglas Haig's tenure as British Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) on the Western Front. J. P. Harris' effort is a superbly balanced reassessment. He has dug deeply and widely in the sources. The book begins with a succinct survey of the more notable critiques of Haig, followed by an account of Haig's early life, military career, and doctrinal reform efforts. Harris also identifies Haig's increasing ambition; his sister Henrietta and wife Dorothy Vivian, a Maid of Honor at Court, ensured strong royal connections.

Coverage of Haig's early experience in France is straightforward. As commander of I Corps, Haig was an uncooperative colleague. Harris also delves into Haig's relative lack of confidence in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), an attitude that the Battle of the Aisne changed by 14 September 1914. Haig as commander of First Army emerges with less credit. Even though he espoused technical innovation as a means of overcoming enemy defenses, Haig generally held the view that an attack could break through multiple German defense lines in a single day.

The bulk of the monograph concerns Haig as C-in-C. This review conveniently draws two, principal threads. The first concerns Haig's preeminent mission to defeat the Germans, and his belief that he could do so decisively. Harris has packaged an impressive depth and breadth of detail in his analysis. He masterfully examines the myriad complexities of the plans and their execution in the bloody and disappointing British offensives of 1916-17, including balanced perspectives on successes such as Cambrai and Messines Ridge. Harris clearly articulates the conflicting ideas and goals of subordinate Army commanders, Haig himself, Haig's superiors, and his French allies. The discussion of the German March 1918 offensives is refreshing. Haig's General Headquarters (GHQ) certainly looked out of touch with regard to Lt. Gen. Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army's extended front and the support required, combined with insufficient time to prepare properly.

Harris also reexamines Haig's supposed imperturbability. Ironically, Haig began the period of Allied counterattacks in 1918 positively, encouraging broader offensive action and supporting General Ferdinand Foch's general offensive in September. British civilian leaders were more circumspect. Chastened by Haig's over-optimism in 1916 and 1917, they doubted the changed conditions on the Western Front. Over time, however, Haig became pessimistic, even arguing for moderate armistice terms, during a period when he in fact had to exercise less control over his forces than ever.

Haig as C-in-C remains generally unflattering in this account. Perhaps Haig's greatest flaw was his preference for intellectual and psychological isolation. He simply did not foster healthy debate among GHQ staff officers or his Army commanders, which might have counterbalanced his over-optimism regarding the power of the offense. Hence, he still tended toward gross unrealism concerning what an attack could accomplish in a single day. Contrary to popular belief, Haig did not isolate himself physically. He spent most afternoons out and about, though these visits generally went no lower than division.

Harris demonstrates skill and verve in his periodic discussion of the second thread, deteriorating civil-military relations. He outlines succinctly the prerogatives, constraints, and restraints of a British C-in-C on the Western Front vis-à-vis the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for War. Moreover, and not

surprisingly, this division of labor rested heavily upon personality. Haig enjoyed no harmonious relationship with Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, or his successor, Sir Henry Wilson. Incidentally, Robertson was the only likely contender as British C-in-C on the Western Front.

While still focused on the relationship between Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Haig, the chasm between the two grew wider and deeper, mostly against Haig. The controversial Calais conferences in February 1917 singularly provide insight into this crisis of confidence. It worsened following the dismal news from Passchendaele in the winter of 1917-18. Harris does a fine job examining this bitter controversy, including civilian insistence on changing certain BEF Army commanders and staff officers and reinforcing the Italian Front. The German 1918 “Peace Offensives” highlighted the senior, British schism over manpower and generated a larger, Allied crisis. The third conference at Douellens on 26 March 1918 granted General Foch greater authority to coordinate the actions of British and French armies on the Western Front, a result of both a sense of desperation and certain political agendas.

Integral to Haig’s stormy civil-military relations was his rather halting, inadequate attention to the powerful British press. A major turning point in domestic public opinion followed Passchendaele. Haig first lost the support of Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mirror*. Worse yet was Lloyd George’s ability to ally with Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Times*, and Rothermere’s brother against Haig.

In closing, Harris’ work belies the efforts of past “engaged” historians. His commendable objectivity, grounded in mastery of sources and subject, has created both a quality biography and a fresh window to review this tragic period. This work will likely remain the definitive account for decades to come. Current senior leaders will find this book an analysis of a truly “wicked problem.” Harris’s work is not just another biography but a detailed case study of high command at war with unforeseen circumstances and the litany of issues which accompany such command. While Harris writes smoothly, this monograph’s size and depth could prove daunting for the nonhistorian.