

The background of the entire page is a grayscale silhouette of a World War I trench scene. On the left, a soldier in a helmet and uniform is walking towards the right. On the right, another soldier is visible, and in the background, there are structures that appear to be parts of a trench or fortification.

**ON THIS DAY**

**November 18, 1916**

***The End of the Battle of the Somme***

*Teacher's Guide*

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# Introduction

**T**HE BATTLE OF THE SOMME marked a turning point in history. It can be seen as a bloody dividing line between the old world and the modern one. By focusing on November 18, 1916, this edition of *On This Day* seeks to show the impact of the devastating Battle of the Somme on Canada and other countries.

Going into World War I, the Allies held traditional, idealistic views of fighting on behalf of one's country. In previous wars of record, battles occurred at specific places, for limited times, after which the survivors returned to camp or even their own homes. There were illusions of chivalry in war, including the perception that no chemical weapons would ever be used, as agreed in the international conventions of 1899 and 1907. World War I destroyed all illusions, and the most destructive part of World War I was the Somme. Casualties topped an unprecedented, unimaginable 1,000,000. Chemical weapons *were* used, with horrific results. Much-touted advances in technology, such as planes and tanks, were also used – but, contrary to expectation, these prolonged rather than shortened battle.

It is hard to overstate the impact of the Somme. An incredible disillusionment set in, not only with the commanders who'd planned the battle, based on a number of severe miscomprehensions, but also with the society and traditions that permitted such a catastrophic war to occur seemingly without question. Enlistments dropped, forcing Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden to move toward conscription, which led to alienation between French- and English-Canadians. Art and fashion, always the mirrors of social events, changed radically, rejecting, in their own respective ways, long-standing traditions. Then there were the fledgling Olympics, cancelled at risk – so it seemed to athletes and organizers at the time – of any future Games.



There were the more pragmatic effects of a devastating war. Some businesses, for example, Britannia Mining in British Columbia, boomed, while others nearly collapsed. Sir Henry Pellatt, who'd built Casa Loma in Toronto, faced ruin. He'd invested in real estate, which plummeted in wartime.

While the world suffered, cultural developments nevertheless occurred, with the promise of their own effects on society. Canadian Beatrice Lillie became a star of the London stage. She was one of the first comediennes. The recording industry was born, with opera singer Mario Caruso's voice captured on gramophone.

All these changes were swirling into place at the time of – and in many cases because of – the Battle of the Somme. The following *Teacher's Guide* offers questions for challenging students to think about, as well as ideas for exploration into, the different topics covered in the *On This Day* newspaper.

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## I. The Battle of the Somme

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1. What were the goals of the British Expeditionary Force commander, General Sir Douglas Haig, and the Allies in planning the assault on the Somme?

- a. Relieve French troops at Verdun and Russian troops on the Eastern front by forcing the Germans to redeploy their own troops currently at those sites.
- b. Drive the Germans back and thereby gain huge amounts of land.
- c. Lower German morale by destroying their trenches.
- d. Kill huge numbers of German troops.

2. How had wars been fought up until this one?

In previous wars, two sides would fight a battle for up to several hours before one retreated. The battle would then be considered over, with a decisive victory for one side or another. Sometimes, the survivors would march back to camp, or even their homes, in time for dinner.

There were also certain rules of engagement. Delegates to the international Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907 specifically forbade the use of chemical weapons – the effects were too grisly, too grotesque to contemplate. With the Somme, each side decided to use whatever it took to destroy the other, no holds barred.

3. How did the Somme compare to previous battles in World War I and before?

- a. Number of casualties at the Somme, July–November 1916: 1,250,000.  
Number of casualties in the Battle of Verdun, February–December 1916: 510,000.  
Number of casualties in the Battle of Gallipoli, April–December 1915: 500,000.  
Number of casualties in the Battle of Tannenberg, August 1914: 58,000  
Number of casualties in the entire Boer War, October 1899–May 1902: 42,829  
Number of casualties in the entire U.S. Civil War, April 1861–April 1865: 1,147,954

- b. **Number of fatalities:** 24,029. The total of all fatalities in previous battles of World War I didn't reach that total:

Battle	When	Fatalities
Second battle of Ypres	April 1915	6,035
Festubert	May 1915	2,468
Givenchy	June 1915	400
St. Eloi	March–April 1915	1,373
Mount Sorrel	June 1916	8,430
<b>Somme</b>	<b>July–November 1916</b>	<b>24,029</b>

- c. **Length of battle:** July 1–November 18, 1916. Several World War I battles went on for months – a phenomenon previously unheard of. The infamously bloody Battle of Gettysburg, during the American Civil War, for example, lasted only from July 1–3, 1863. In World War I, the traditional tactic of pitting soldiers in head-to-head combat brought no quick resolution.

- d. **The new technology** of airplanes, tanks and submarines, intended to make fighting more efficient, ironically slowed it to days and months. Soldiers were stuck in filthy trenches because advances were so hard to make. When one side emerged from the trenches to attack, the soldiers were instantly pounded by tank guns and airplane bombs. On the first day of the Somme, 60,000 British soldiers attempting to advance were killed or wounded. With both sides using the new technology, neither side had the advantage. A stalemate ensued. Soldiers, stuck living in the trenches, waited for more and more munitions, supplies and reinforcements. These, in turn, took longer and longer for their commands to send. As the war dragged on, munitions, supplies and reinforcements were harder to produce.

- e. **Chemical weapons:** With battles turning into stalemates, the two sides started using chemical weapons. In August 1914, the French attacked the Germans with shells containing an irritant to induce violent sneezing. Three months later, on the Eastern front, the Germans sent tear gas into Russian lines – only to have freezing temperatures prevent the gas from vaporising. Chlorine gas and phosgene were introduced by the time of the Somme battle; mustard gas lay not far in the future.

4. **When the Battle of the Somme was over, Sir Sam Hughes, Canada’s minister of militia and defence, summed up the four-and-a-half months of near-futile fighting: “As everyone knows, what may seem workable in theory does not so turn out in practice.” Contrary to the commanders’ expectations, what went wrong at the Somme?**
  - a. **Wrong type of shells:** As the Allies used concussion shells instead of high explosive shells, their artillery fire had the effect of lifting the barbed wires up and dropping them down again in a tangle. The constant barrage of shells created craters in the mud, enabling the Germans to set up more machine-gun nests.
  - b. **Ineffective “secret weapon”:** The much-heralded new Model D-1 tank proved not to be the miracle “secret weapon” the Allies had hoped for. With the Somme offensive stalling, Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig decided to launch six of the tanks a month early, on September 16. The D-1, expected to roll over barbed wire entanglements and crush German trenches wholesale, had mixed results. One tank immediately enabled the capture of an enemy trench. However, that D-1 was then disabled by a shell. Of the other six tanks, three became stuck in the mud, and one simply broke down. Reporting the tanks as too slow, the British infantry moved ahead unsupported. Much more training would be needed in how to use the tanks, which themselves still as yet weren’t very manoeuvrable.
  - c. **Frustration:** The inability to advance grew so frustrating that some Allied soldiers charged German strongholds and resorted to hand-to-hand combat and using bayonets.
  - d. **Bad weather:** The weather was also against Allied soldiers. On November 13, for example, a major fortress, Beaumont Hamel, was captured – only to be abandoned shortly after, due to heavy snow.
  - e. **No French reinforcements:** According to the initial plans by French Commander-in-Chief Joseph Joffre, it would be mainly French soldiers fighting at the Somme. As it turned out, the French, desperately fending off the Germans at Verdun, were unavailable to help the Canadians and British.
  - f. **German preparedness:** The Germans had spent months beforehand setting up machine-gun nests on lookouts with commanding views of no-man’s land. They built 12-metre-deep trenches, fortified with concrete walls and protected by nine-metre-wide rolls of barbed wire so thick the Allies could hardly see through them.
  - g. **Naïve belief in “our side”:** Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig assumed the Allies would easily rout the Germans at the Somme in eight days.
5. **Who warned against the Somme initiative, and what was General Sir Douglas Haig’s reaction?**
  - a. Several prominent Allies warned Haig against embarking on the Somme initiative: The French General Ferdinand Foch, former British Prime Minister Aruthur James Balfour, and British Munitions Minister and Secretary of War David Lloyd George – the future British prime minister.
  - b. **Haig refused to face facts:** Even with mounting casualties, General Sir Douglas Haig refused to acknowledge that the Battle of the Somme was a mistake. Instead, Haig advocated more Allied advances, more weapons, more deaths. He said, “The nation must be taught to bear losses. No amount of skill on the part of the higher commanders, no training, however good, on the part of the officers and men, no superiority of arms and ammunition, however great, will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men’s lives. The nation must be prepared to see casualty lists.”
6. **Why were chemical weapons considered unthinkable? Describe the effects of the chemical weapons unleashed at the Somme: chlorine, phosgene, and “white star,” a mixture of the two. How did soldiers know that gas was heading toward them, and what countermeasures did they have?**
  - a. Chlorine gas, one of two chemical weapons at the Somme, invaded the bloodstream, then swelled lungs into a spongy mass, resulting in asphyxiation. Soldiers could suffocate from