

Chapter 19

Ten Key Generals of the First World War

In This Chapter

- ▶ Highlighting generals who should be more widely known
 - ▶ Identifying the planners and fighters
 - ▶ Working out what makes a good First World War general
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The generals of the First World War haven't had a good press, and it's certainly true that they made some catastrophic mistakes that cost thousands of lives. But it's not true that they were all uncaring or incompetent. Some generals were extremely able and successful. They paid attention to detail, analysed the battlefield closely, took pains to avoid unnecessary casualties to their own men and made full use of the latest technology.

In this chapter, I steer clear of the really famous generals, such as the British Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig or the German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. You can read about them elsewhere in the book. Instead, here I present some generals who deserve to be better known, including some who deserve a place among the very best.

Max Hoffman (1869–1927)

Let me put this simply: Max Hoffman won the war against Russia. People usually think Hindenburg and Ludendorff did it, but a strong school of thought holds that Hoffman really deserves the credit. He planned the German victory at Tannenburg in 1914 (see Chapter 4): Hindenburg and Ludendorff simply inherited Hoffman's plan and followed it. As Chief of Staff to the rather neurotic Ludendorff, Hoffman also planned the crushing victories against the Russians in Poland (which you can also read about in Chapter 4). He even

arranged for Lenin and the Bolsheviks to get to Russia and stage the revolution, knowing they'd pull Russia out of the war, and then he negotiated the crushing Treaty of Brest Litovsk with them to get maximum advantage for Germany (see Chapter 15).

Hindenburg and Ludendorff couldn't have done what they did without Max Hoffman.

Sir Henry Rawlinson (1864–1925)

Yes, Rawlinson was in charge of the disastrous British attack on the Somme on 1 July 1916 (you can read about it in Chapter 6). But he was actually a very able commander, who paid the sort of painstaking attention to detail that victory in the First World War demanded. The British plan for the Somme offensive was a mixture of Haig's and Rawlinson's ideas: it might have gone better had Rawlinson had more freedom to do things his way. Later, he went on to win a stunning victory at Amiens in 1918, when the British broke the German offensive and drove the German line right back: Ludendorff called it the black day of the German army (see Chapter 16).

So Rawlinson was responsible for the worst disasters of the war for both the British *and* the Germans. An interesting and often underrated man.

August von Mackensen (1849–1944)

Like Max Hoffman, Mackensen did much more for German success in the east than people usually remember. A striking figure in his cavalry uniform, Mackensen worked out the best way to break through the enemy lines: by attacking only a small stretch of the line but with overwhelming force. He applied his tactics with great success against the Russians in Poland (you can read how in Chapter 4), where he did so well he was promoted to Field Marshal. In 1915 he took command of the forces that crushed Serbia, and the following year he repeated the trick by organising the different armies that crushed Romania too (see Chapters 5 and 6).

He's been rather overshadowed by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, but Mackensen was definitely not a man you wanted to find facing you across a battlefield.

Sir Herbert Plumer (1857–1932)

The problem with Plumer is that, with his bald head and thick white moustache, he looked exactly like everyone's idea of a blimpish, old-fashioned general with his mind stuck in the past (he even went to Eton!). In fact, Plumer was one of the most successful British commanders of the war. He took command at Ypres in 1915 and retrieved the situation after the Germans' heavy offensive had come close to taking the town (see Chapter 5). His mastery of meticulous planning lay behind his biggest victory, at Messines in 1917, where his attack plan involved a huge concentration of artillery and gas and a series of enormous mines that exploded underneath the German lines. Messines was a devastating British victory where, for once, the defenders lost far more men than the attackers (see Chapter 15).

If you hear people saying the British generals were all incompetent fools, tell them about Plumer: they probably won't have heard of him but you might change their ideas.

Mustafa Kemal (Kemal Atatürk) (1881–1938)

Mustafa Kemal was the most successful commander to emerge from Turkey's very mixed war record. He'd fought in Libya and the Balkans before the war, but he became a national hero at Gallipoli, where he played a major role in defeating the Allied landings at Suvla Bay, launching one fierce attack after another on the Allied lines (see Chapter 9). After Gallipoli, Kemal found himself trying to pick up the pieces after other Turkish commanders' disasters, in the Caucasus against the Russians and in the Middle East against the British. Turkish politics had been getting ever more dangerous since the Young Turks revolution in 1908 and Kemal had enemies in high places, including the Turkish leader, Enver Pasha. When the Young Turks government collapsed at the end of the war, Kemal managed to prevent the Allies from carving the country up and he seized power.

Kemal did more than anyone to keep Turkish heads held high during the war and to turn Turkey into a modern, secular state. He became known as Atatürk – 'Father of the Turks'.

Sir John Monash (1865–1931)

Ask who was the most successful general on either side on the Western Front and many experts on the war would name an Australian, Sir John Monash. Yet outside Australia very few people nowadays have even heard of him. Monash pioneered a new way of attacking, known as *peaceful penetration* (also known as 'winkling' or 'nibbling'). Instead of sending huge numbers of men against well-defended enemy lines, Monash used small raiding parties to seize isolated German positions during quiet periods, or else he'd send in large numbers of machine guns, aircraft and tanks to attack a small part of the enemy lines, and only then did he send the infantry in to occupy the whole sector; meanwhile the mechanised units moved on to attack the next section.

Monash developed his successful peaceful penetration tactic in the spring of 1918 when the Allies halted the great German offensive and started to drive the Germans out of France (see Chapter 16). He provided the Allies with the key to defeating the Germans, and in that way you could say that he won the war in the west.

Sir Arthur Currie (1875–1933)

The Canadians consistently proved some of the toughest troops fighting on the Allied side and Sir Arthur Currie was their suitably tough-minded commander. He showed his worth at Ypres in 1915, when his Canadians were the only troops not to run when the Germans used gas for the first time in the war (see Chapter 5). Currie was also responsible for the Canadians' greatest success, the attack on Vimy Ridge in 1917 (see Chapter 15). The British and French had lost thousands of men trying to take Vimy ever since the Germans first dug themselves into the chalk there in 1914, and the Germans were determined to hold on to their position. Currie had tunnels built so his men could approach unseen and he pushed the attack forward through a snowstorm. The Canadians suffered heavy casualties, but their capture of Vimy Ridge was the greatest Allied success on the Western Front until the great battles of 1918.

Canadians are rightly proud of their fighting record in the First World War, and Currie deserves the credit for leading them against the Germans with such devastating effect.

Alexei Brusilov (1853–1926)

Brusilov was by far the most consistently successful of the Russian generals in the First World War; in fact during the German offensives in Galicia (Poland) in 1915 he was just about the *only* successful Russian general (see Chapter 5). Brusilov made his name with his famous offensive in 1916 that finally achieved the elusive breakthrough that commanders in all armies had been groping for (you can read about his achievement in Chapter 6). Brusilov dispensed with the preliminary bombardment, which was basically a very noisy way of announcing to your enemy when you were about to attack and telling him where. Instead he amassed huge numbers of men and attacked over a very wide area, not just concentrating on a small one as most generals did. Brusilov's plan worked: the Austrians didn't know where the main Russian thrust was, so they didn't know where to send their reinforcements.

Brusilov also served under the Russian Provisional Government in 1917, but they replaced him with a much less successful general who promptly lost and had to be sacked. But then that was the Russian Provisional Government all over. (You can find out about it in Chapter 15.)

John J Pershing (1860–1948)

Pershing was already an experienced commander when he arrived at the head of the American Expeditionary Force in France in 1917. He'd started out in the wars against the American Indian tribes, fought in the Spanish–American War and, in 1917, led the US invasion of Mexico. When he arrived in France later the same year, Pershing was very critical of Allied tactics, which he thought wasted lives for minimal gains, and he reckoned that Americans could do better. They certainly had a convincing victory at St Mihiel in 1918 (see Chapter 16), but Pershing made mistakes trying to follow it up, mainly because he didn't want to follow advice from other Allied commanders.

Pershing kept the American Expeditionary Force as a separate army: he was the first American commander ever to operate in a war on the European mainland and he wasn't going to start taking orders from anyone else. His presence on the Western Front was an important sign of the United States' commitment to gaining victory over Germany and achieving a lasting peace settlement.

Ferdinand Foch (1851–1929)

Foch was a 'fighting general': he believed armies were for attacking the enemy, not wasting time sitting around in trenches. He once said: 'My centre is giving way, my right is in retreat: Situation excellent – we attack!'

Foch first made his name as a pugnacious commander in the French invasion of Alsace-Lorraine at the start of the war (see Chapter 4), but it was towards the end of the war that he really came into his own. He'd performed well co-ordinating the different Allied forces in Italy in 1917 (see Chapter 15) and was appointed to command all the Allied forces on the Western Front after the German spring offensive had broken through the Allied lines. He proved surprisingly good in this role. He got on particularly well with Haig, who shared his preference for attacking.

When the Germans asked for an armistice, Foch met them in his personal railway carriage and imposed heavy terms, so as to make sure the Germans couldn't suddenly start fighting again. In that way, it was Foch who actually brought the war to an end.