

Digging up the dirty secrets of Britain in World War I

by Alan Clayton

Haig's Command

by Dennis Winter

Viking, New York, 1991

362 pages, hardbound, \$27.95

Our reviewer has been active in the Scottish nationalist movement for over 30 years and is a member of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq. The book he reviews has been the object of an extraordinary polemic in the English newspapers; Haig's latter-day defenders never having demobilized. Winter spent years searching Australian, Canadian, and New Zealander archives for the unpleasant truths about his subject. Travel he must: There is no Freedom of Information Act in England; furthermore, although a 50-year rule applies to official documents, in fact many of the most sensitive papers covering the course of the two world wars have been put under a 75-, and in some cases, 125-year rule.

Since the review was delivered, Gerald de Groot, an American historian, wrote a paper for the Edinburgh daily The Scotsman on Douglas Cameron, a minister of the Church of Scotland who was an irrationalist mystic, as well as being Gen. Douglas Haig's spiritual adviser throughout the World War I, a cataclysm for which Cameron never failed to find a fundamentalist justification. The parallel between their relationship, and that of George Bush to Billy Graham, is, to say the least, eerie.

The First World War of 1914-1918 was of a scale and a horror never before witnessed in all of human history. The vigor and malthusian determination with which the slaughter

took place could hardly be described as sacrifice, sacrifice implying a purpose which would indeed be difficult if not impossible to find in the actions of that war. The military commanders dispensed with human life on a scale which seemed quite unimaginable in previous centuries; on the British side it was almost as if they wished to "do mankind a favor" in clearing the cities' slums of "excess" humanity.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Winter's study of the British Supreme Commander, Gen. Sir Douglas Haig. Haig was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, of a commercial family which tried hard to claim aristocratic antecedents, but without much success. The young Haig was sent by his parents to school in England, where he imbibed the certainties of the British state and ruling elites.

Just what the content was of the philosophy of one of these British public schools can be seen perhaps in the entry from Haig's diary, early on in the war, when he writes (Winter, p. 26): "We almost seem to be fighting against the laws of nature, in trying to keep alive races who are obviously of an inferior kind and who themselves feel inferior to the Germans. So England has a burden to carry. The Italians seem a wretched people, useless as fighting men but greedy for money. Moreover, I doubt whether they are really in earnest about this war. Many of them, too, are German spies."

The Somme massacre

Winter examines the Battle of the Somme of July-November 1916, the war of attrition which saw the deaths of 60,000 British soldiers on its first day, and a similar number of Germans. Facts little known, or unknown before, because of British censorship, come out clearly in Winter's book. It is now quite apparent that the attack on the Somme was

originally intended as a diversion to a larger attack up North in Flanders in the Ypres salient, around Paschendale. Only late in the day did Haig decide that the attack on the Somme was to be a full-scale attempt to break the German line. The planning for the battle was defective in almost every sense. Infrastructure, in terms of railways and road communications, was simply not there in sufficient depth to sustain a large-scale attack. Infantrymen were told on the first waves of attack to walk towards the enemy lines, as all the enemy would be dead from artillery fire. In fact, the artillery fire and its techniques were highly defective, and large numbers of enemy soldiers were quickly able to man their machine-guns and mow down the oncoming army in their countless thousands.

Similarly, the following year, in 1917, at the Battle of Paschendale, inadequate preparations were made. No senior officer appears to have even attempted to assess the water table of the land at Paschendale, with the result that large numbers of soldiers actually drowned in the mud, as rain and the smashed-in drainage system caused flooding on a large scale. Winter quotes from a senior British officer, Lieutenant Colonel Head, comparing the British with the French tactics, who wrote: "The French in their attacks did not shoot the ground to bits before they moved over it. A short, intense bombardment, followed by a rush of men, gave them the position clean and intact. Then a labor battalion arrived hot-foot to construct the necessary shelter and prepare roads. We had labor battalions, but I never saw them at the front. We would shoot our ground into a quagmire and then send troops slowly forward over it, and expect them to provide their own cover from the enemy's retaliation."

After the Paschendale Battle in 1917 failed to break the German line in any way whatsoever, the possibility of a Dunkirk was high within British thoughts. A British aristocrat, the Earl of Cavan, who was commanding the 14th Corps, wrote to King George V, in these terms: "Even if Russia made peace, and France did the same, I am convinced that the Navy could get us home and could, in conjunction with the Americans, absolutely forbid the sea to any German merchantmen whatever."

Winter reports on how the Canadian Corps developed tactics and skills under the Commanders Bing and Currie, comparing this to the moribund techniques and attitudes of the officers of the British Army, most of whom came, of course, from the ruling cliques. He writes: "On a larger scale, the Germans showed the same progression. Their attacks during the first battle of Ypres, in October 1914, had been marked by colonels on horseback leading frontal attacks into the gunbarrels of the Old Contemptibles. On the Somme, two years later, the Germans had become masters of defense in depth, or rapid counter-attacks delivered by highly trained *Stoss-truppen*, and of integrated machine-gun and artillery fire."

Similarly we have evidence that the building of a railway

infrastructure, to the Somme battle front in particular, was a catalogue of incompetence. A professional railman, a Canadian called Jack Stewart, was brought in, but was made subordinate to Army officers who knew little or nothing about the building of railways. The consequence, of course, was that the supply to the Somme front was chronically poor.

The Luddendorf offensive

The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 resulted in Russia signing a peace with Germany, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which saw large stretches of Russian land being confiscated. The British cabinet and High Command knew very well, as did the French, that large numbers of German troops would be moved from the Eastern to the Western Front. Quite clearly, a massive counter-attack would come at any time, and indeed, the attack, known to historians as the Luddendorf offensive, began in March 1918. Within a week, the German Army had smashed through the British lines and gained miles and miles of land. In Winter's words: "If the British had been unable to break the German front after two years of bloody attrition, why had the Germans managed to achieve the impossible within a week, and how had Haig performed during the crisis? Strong doubts about his competence had been raised by Paschendale and Cambrai. . . . In fact, reality was that Haig had proved himself equally incompetent in defense as well as in attack."

Someone had to take responsibility for German success. Haig told one of General Gough's staff officers: "After considerable thought, I decided that public opinion at home, right or wrong, demanded a scapegoat, and that the only possible ones were Hubert Gough or myself. I was conceited enough to think that the Army could not spare me." In fact, General Gough was sacked as a result of the German successes.

General Haig rewrites history

At the end of the war, Haig made every attempt to get what honors he could for himself. Winter reports: "Titles, grants and honors of every kind, all symbols of public gratitude, were showered upon him, but he was given no work. He did not join the councils of the nation, nor was he invited to reorganize its army. He was not consulted upon the treaties. No sphere of public activity was open to him." What was open to him was determined rewriting of histories, of diaries, now for the first time thoroughly exposed by Winter's new research. He appears even to have bought spare diaries with the same date and watermark to cover the subsequent rewriting of history in his own favor.

Why did the government, so well aware of the inadequacies of its own commander, let pass such blatant rewriting of history? Indeed, it was encouraged, by a careful selection of official historians. Winter advanced a simple but very plausible reason: "Party animosity, trade union bitterness and Irish dissatisfaction could all have led to *civil war* [emphasis

added] and gave Britain the appearance of disintegration on an almost Hapsburg scale. If the country was to be held together, the credit of authority had surely to be maintained. And that was not easily done in November 1918. The war had ended unsatisfactorily. Social divisions had been exploited by the various factions to manipulate the press throughout the war, while military deficiencies had been appallingly clear to many of the 5 million who had worn Khaki and returned in a disgruntled, unsettled state of mind.”

Then, as now. Up to the neck in an unprecedented crisis of the Anglo-Saxon economies, fearing the industrial might of reunified Germany, the British aristocracy pushed their American ally to war with Iraq, killing countless civilians and risking world war, merely to keep British control over Gulf oil, and thereby, over continental Europe as a whole. Then, as now: Those historians who would cover up the slaughter of the Iraqis had better get down to their scribbling now.

Two post-mortems on the Gulf war

by Nancy Spannaus

Iraq, Military Victory, Moral Defeat

by Thomas C. Fox

Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, Mo. 1991

192 pages, paperbound, \$9.95

Desert Mirage, The True Story of the Gulf War

by Martin Yant

Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1991

228 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

Both of these books are attempts by men who are not very oriented to the world of intelligence, to convince Americans that the war against Iraq was wrong. Fox, who has been the editor of the *National Catholic Reporter* since 1980, takes a moral, philosophical approach. Yant exposes a number of the dirty lies which the U.S. government told to explain the war, in a not-unsuccessful effort to show that the public version was created by government lies.

I find Yant's book to be the more effective, although it is not very hard-hitting. Its understatement may help provoke doubts in a certain layer of the population. Yant's major point, however, is to prove that the press lied by covering up for the U.S. overkill, and unfortunately most Americans think that is just fine. What is perhaps most interesting for the potential of future backfire against the perpetrators of the atrocities, however, is the fact that Ohio Democrat Sen. John Glenn has written the foreword, urging the pursuit of the truth, no matter how ugly it is.

That is not to say that Yant, a journalist in international affairs for the *Columbus Dispatch*, Ohio, doesn't include explosive information; he does. For example, he discusses the Army War College report which casts doubt on the now much-accepted story about Saddam Hussein having gassed the Kurds. But he doesn't give it much prominence—and one fears that many may miss the bombshell altogether.

EIR's Feb. 8 issue contained three pages of excerpts from the report, which was written in spring of 1990. In the March 15 issue, a U.S. military analyst, who asked to remain anonymous, told us: “One of the questions we are going to have to ask [about the U.S. policy of seeking confrontation with viable developing sector nations], is how do our friends out there see this? I am working with a foreign officer on a project, and . . . I have asked him, ‘What does this say as a message to you? Does it say that if you choose to go out and start nuclear research, we're going to bomb the hell out of you?’ He says, ‘We have to consider that now.’ I said, ‘Okay, how about your fertilizer plants, do you expect international inspectors to come in to see that you're not making chemical weapons?’ He says, ‘We have to consider that.’ So we have a major diplomatic task ahead of us, and that is to reassure people that they can make peaceful progress and no one is going to be looking over their shoulder.”

Yant also presents some effective material on the “turkey shoot” bombings of the Iraqi soldiers (plus civilians) in retreat at the end of the war. Amazingly, he gives virtually no attention to the “bomb now, die later” strategy taken by the Americans of destroying Iraq's infrastructure, so that this developing country would be reduced to Stone Age standards of living. Given the amount of material available on this in the public domain, this is a big omission.

Catholic pacifist outlook

Fox's book proceeds from the standpoint of a Roman Catholic pacifist, who joined the anti-war movement at the time of the Vietnam War, and looks at United States policy as a continuous pursuit of militarism. For non-pacifists, it has a more limited appeal.

One very useful aspect, however, is its chronicling of some of the policy statements made during the course of the buildup to this unjust war, especially from the Vatican. One tends to forget just how much opposition there was to Bush's Hitlerite bombing campaign, in the current political climate.