

# Propaganda Film *With Our Heroes at the Somme* (1916)

## Abstract

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One of the most devastating battles in the Western theater of war was the first battle of the Somme in the Picardy region of France, which began on July 1, 1916. It turned into a mud-clogged battle of attrition lasting for 141 days during which all sides suffered heavy losses—more than one million casualties across British, French, and German forces combined. This German propaganda film was produced by the Bild- und Filmamt (BUFA), which had been founded in January 1917 by the Supreme Army command to coordinate the production of propaganda film and newsreels as well as censorship for all visual media. *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* was its first major production, conceived as a counterpart to the British documentary *The Battle of the Somme*, which had been released in August 1916 while the battle still raged. Released in German cinemas in January 1917, the film portrayed the British and French as warmongers while the Germans nobly cared for the enemy's wounded. The intertitles claim that the German military showed no signs of exhaustion even after months of battle. In fact, the German army had suffered devastating losses and, combined with the equally horrific German losses at the Battle of Verdun in 1916, left the German army severely short of manpower by early 1917, requiring the Germans to shorten their lines by pulling back to the Hindenburg Line in early Spring of 1917. While claiming to be a documentary, many of the film's scenes were actually staged. For instance, many of the frontline troops are wearing the new steel helmets introduced in 1916, which were still in limited numbers at the Battle of the Somme. The emphasis on showing motor vehicles (automobiles and trucks) is also misleading, as the German army was perpetually short of such equipment. The battle scenes (e.g. the minefield in the forest) are also certainly staged. (Actual mine or artillery explosions would dismember soldiers and bodies (and body parts) would be flung into the air and strewn everywhere.) Note also, in the footage of British and French prisoners (29:13), how the camera focuses on French colonial troops (from Africa)—a standard tactic in German visual propaganda materials, whether photographs or film. The attack at the end of the film is also likely staged (as only one or two soldiers fall in the attack) and ends on a positive message: "Assault successful. Ordered goal has been achieved. Many prisoners taken."

## Source

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Intertitles:

Behind the German frontlines./

The Battle of the Somme has been raging for months./

How German doctors take care of the enemy's wounded men./

Frenchmen and Englishmen for whom the war is over in the citadel at Cambrai./

The reserves of the exhausted Germany!./

German ammunition convoys travel day and night./

German storm troops on their way to the front./

German railway workers rescue French refugees from the indiscriminate artillery fire by their own countrymen./

The remains of smoke-blackened houses around the ruins and rubble that was one the church of Bapaume - this is Bapaume now, the ignominious victim of French and English warmongering./

Until recently this town was a bustling county seat in the north of France--/

...now it is a pile of ruins due to the will of its English ally./ [Images of Péronne]

Even in this desert German order -- denounced as "militarism" -- reigns./

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The enemy's main position is attacked./  
The enemy detonates his countermines./  
Our brave soldiers continuously increase pressure on the enemy with new mines./  
Only at nightfall did we manage to capture the blockhouse and its trenches./  
...and in a long procession to Péronne, which has been blown to pieces by the English, the German fighters are followed by the white and colored standard bearers of culture./  
Part III./  
While fresh troops carrying more ordnance swarm to our positions at the back of the front lines.../  
...the gunfire intensifies./  
8:30 am. The detonation has been triggered and the German storm troops begin the attack./  
Strong units of German riflemen occupy the stormed trenches./  
Report by the unit to its division: "Attack successful. Target has been reached as per orders. Numerous prisoners have been taken."/

"And those who died in holy battle will rest peacefully in their homeland even in a foreign soil."/

Source: *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme*, Bild- und Film-Amt, 1916. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv, Filmwerk ID: 209.

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