British Journal for Military History

Volume 12, Issue 3, November 2026

Pseudohistory: The Case of Alan Clark's The Donkeys

David Leeson

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 20 November 2026

Citation: David Leeson, 'Pseudohistory: The Case of Alan Clark's The Donkeys', *British Journal for Military History*, 12.3 (2026), pp. 131-152.

www.bjmh.org.uk

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Pseudohistory: The Case of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*

DAVID LEESON*
Laurentian University, Canada
Email: *mailto:dleeson@laurentian.ca*

ABSTRACT
This article considers how scholarship about the demarcation problem – the problem of distinguishing science from pseudoscience – can help historians distinguish history from pseudohistory. It uses the work of demarcationist scholars to help it provide an original analysis and set of historical demarcation criteria, before moving on to consider a case study: Alan Clark's book The Donkeys, *about the British Army in the First World War. Guided by the principles established in the first parts of this article, the second part examines the contents of* The Donkeys *in a methodical way and concludes that Alan Clark's book is in fact pseudohistorical.*

Introduction

What is pseudohistory? Most historians would agree that there are such things as counterfeit or spurious histories, like the works of Holocaust deniers.[1] But among academic historians, only Ronald Fritze has done substantial research on this topic: and while his books have been wide-ranging and informative, discussing many types of pseudohistory, they do not provide an explicit or clear definition of this concept.[2]

*David Leeson is Professor of History in the School of Liberal Arts at Laurentian University, Canada.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v12i3.1998

[1]Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory,* (New York: Plume, 1994); Richard Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the Irving Trial,* (New York: Basic, 2001); Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[2]Ronald Fritze, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions,* (London: Reaktion, 2009); Ronald Fritze, *Hope and Fear: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories and Pseudo-History,* (London: Reaktion, 2022).

Theoreticians, by contrast, have been too busy questioning history's epistemic status to concern themselves with pseudohistory.[3]

Consequently, the task of defining pseudohistory has mostly been left for debunkers of pseudoscience – with disappointing results. Robert Todd Carroll's criteria mostly cover ancient pseudohistory, and pseudoarchaeology.[4] Michael Shermer's definition ('the rewriting of the past for present political or personal reasons') is too vague.[5] Brian Regal's definition is more specific,

> Similar to pseudoscience only dealing with historical topics, pseudohistory uses the trappings of scholarly historical method – footnotes, citations, bibliographies, and primary sources – yet is designed not as a thoughtful analysis intent on discovering insights into the past, but as a subjective arranging of facts to support a predetermined idea that often supports a political agenda.[6]

But still, this does not provide clear guidelines for distinguishing pseudohistory from history: many works of pseudohistory, for example, do not use the trappings of scholarly method.

Sociologist Damian Thompson even turns to Wikipedia for help: 'For a loose definition of pseudohistory,' he says, 'it is hard to improve on Wikipedia',

> "Pseudohistory is a pejorative term applied to texts which purport to be historical in nature but which depart from standard historiographical conventions in a way that undermines their conclusions." A watertight definition is impossible because the decision to use the word is always subjective. Even so, there are broadly agreed criteria.[7]

---

[3]Robert Eaglestone, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial,* (Duxford: Icon, 2001); Benjamin Kelly, 'Deviant Ancient Histories: Dan Brown, Erich von Däniken, and the Sociology of Historical Polemic,' *Rethinking History* 12, 3 (2008), pp.361-382.

[4]'Pseudohistory,' *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, https://www.skepdic.com/pseudohs.html. Accessed 6 June 2026.

[5]Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman, *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[6]'Pseudohistory,' in Brian Regal, *Pseudoscience: A Critical Encyclopedia,* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009), pp.136-139.

[7]Damian Thompson, *Counterknowledge: How We Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science, and Fake History,* (Toronto: Atlantic, 2008).

This is better, but still not good enough: among other problems, it is broad enough to cover merely bad or mistaken history. And since historians and philosophers of history have only scratched the surface of this topic, Thompson's pessimism seems premature.

Scientists and philosophers of science, by contrast, have spent a lot of time trying to solve what they call the 'demarcation problem', the problem of how to distinguish genuine science from pseudoscience.[8] The demarcation debate has gone back and forth. Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion, for example, has not stood the test of time; but neither has the pessimism of Larry Laudan, who argued that the fuzzy nature of science itself made it impossible to find criteria that would include every science, while excluding every pseudoscience.[9]

Today, philosophers and historians of science are attacking this problem from two directions. Some have been working from the top down, looking for global demarcation criteria that separate science in general from pseudoscience. Others have been working from the bottom up, arguing that while both science and pseudoscience are indeed fuzzy concepts, local demarcation criteria can help us identify pseudosciences and separate them from sciences. And in the process, researchers like Sven Ove Hansson have discovered similarities between pseudoscience and pseudohistory. 'The misrepresentations of history presented by Holocaust deniers and other pseudo-historians,' he says, 'are very similar in nature to the misrepresentations of natural science promoted by creationists and homeopaths.'[10]

In a recent article, the author explored some of the literature on the demarcation problem, to see if it was possible to apply their conclusions about pseudoscience to pseudohistory.[11] It was discovered that, while pseudoscience and pseudohistory are indeed similar, they are not the same: and that both global and local demarcation criteria designed for pseudoscience must be modified before they can apply to pseudohistory. The author then used these modified criteria to survey the field of pseudohistory to propose criteria for demarcating history from pseudohistory.

---

[8]Massimo Pigliucci, 'Pseudoscience and the Demarcation Problem,' *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/pseudoscience-demarcation/. Accessed 6 June 2026.

[9]Larry Laudan, 'The Demise of the Demarcation Problem,' in R. S. Cohen and L. Laudan (eds), *Physics, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1983), pp.111-127; M. Pigliucci and M. Brower (eds), *The Philosophy of Pseudoscience,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[10]Sven Ove Hansson, 'Science Denial as a Form of Pseudoscience,' *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 63 (2017), p.40.

[11]David Leeson, 'The Four Types of Pseudohistory,' *The Historian* (US) 85, no. 3 (2023): pp.285-314.

Laudan sets out the minimum standards that any demarcation criterion must meet. First, he says, 'a philosophical demarcation criterion must be an adequate explication of our ordinary ways of partitioning science from non-science and it must exhibit epistemically significant differences between science and non-science;' second, 'the criterion must have sufficient precision that we can tell whether various activities and beliefs whose status we are investigating do or do not satisfy it;' in addition, 'it would specify a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for deciding whether an activity or set of statements is scientific or not.'[12]

From this, it should be clear why pseudoscience debunkers have not succeeded in demarcating history from pseudohistory. Regal's criteria, for example, are neither individually necessary, nor jointly sufficient; Shermer's are not sufficiently precise; and Wikipedia's criteria neither explain our usual ways of distinguishing pseudohistory from history, nor provide us with epistemically significant differences between the two.

Since historians reason from the particular to the general, the author surveyed the field and found four types of pseudohistory. The first is *fake history* – pseudohistory based on deliberate falsehoods. The second type of pseudohistory is *weird history* - pseudohistory based on impossible beliefs.[13] The third type of pseudohistory is *crackpot history* – pseudohistory based on unwarranted conspiracy theories.[14] And the fourth type of pseudohistory is *junk history* – pseudohistory based on egregiously deficient sources or methodologies. These four categories are not mutually exclusive, because it is possible to satisfy more than one of these criteria.

Clearly, pseudohistory, like pseudoscience, is a fuzzy concept: a cluster of similar but not identical statements and practices, all of which pretend to be historical, but which

[12]Laudan, p.118.

[13]On pp.14-30 of *How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age,* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2020), Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn identify three types of impossibility: logical impossibility (anything that violates the laws of thought), physical impossibility (anything that violates the laws of science or nature), and technological impossibility (anything that is beyond our capabilities at present). On weird history (and weird archaeology), see Fritze, *Invented Knowledge*, especially pp.167-220.

[14]'Conspiracy theories assert the existence of a covertly operating group of people—the conspirators – who seek, from base motives and by underhand means, to achieve a certain end.' Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), p.9. On the distinction between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories, see Matthew Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014). For a survey of crackpot history, see Fritze, *Hope and Fear*.

lack an epistemically reliable core, and are compromised by some type of epistemic misconduct. This fuzzy concept requires a fuzzy, multicriterial definition,

(*Pseudohistory*) (1 and/or 2 and/or 3 and/or 4) and 5.

1. Is based on deliberate falsehoods.
2. Is based on impossible beliefs.
3. Is based on unwarranted conspiracy theories.
4. Is based on egregiously deficient methodologies or sources.
5. Is presented as historical knowledge.

That is to say: pseudohistory is anything that is based on deliberate falsehoods; and/or is based on impossible beliefs; and/or is based on unwarranted conspiracy theories; and/or is based on egregiously deficient methodologies and sources; and is presented as historical knowledge.

This definition satisfies all of Laudan's requirements for a demarcation criterion: it is an adequate explication of our ordinary ways of partitioning history from pseudohistory; it exhibits epistemically significant differences between history and pseudohistory; it is precise enough to guide our investigation of statements that may be pseudohistorical; and it specifies a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for deciding whether statements are pseudohistorical or not. Any statement that is presented as historical knowledge, but which satisfies at least one of the four other conditions, is a pseudohistorical statement.

The rest of this article will examine a detailed case study of a controversial work that presents itself as history – Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* – to show how this analysis can help determine if such works are historical or pseudohistorical. Previous attempts to consign *The Donkeys* to the fringes of history have not been successful, because they were not guided by clear demarcation criteria. Whereas the analysis here will show that Alan Clark's book satisfies three of the five necessary conditions described above. *The Donkeys* presents itself as a work of history. But as a work of historical scholarship, Clark's book is egregiously deficient: his book is full of mistakes, and its mistakes all tend in the same direction – to support his thesis. To make matters worse, Clark embellished his work with deliberate falsehoods: he says things in *The Donkeys* that he must have known were not true. From this, we must conclude that *The Donkeys* is, in fact, a work of pseudohistory. Once we reach this conclusion, we will consider some of the wider implications of these findings.

The Great War and Pseudohistory

Historians of the First World War do not often write about pseudohistory: but they do write about 'myths,' in the sense of 'widespread but untrue or erroneous beliefs or stories; widely held misconceptions; misrepresentations of the truth.' This concept is vague enough to cover memory as well as history: German historians, for example, write about 'the Langemarck Myth,' a widely held German misconception about the final German attacks at the First Battles of Ypres, while American historian Terence Zuber has criticized the British for believing a 'myth' about the Battles of Mons and Le Cateau.[15] But in both cases, these 'myths' originated in official pseudohistories: after the Battle of Langemarck, Germany's OHL (Supreme Army Command) issued a communiqué that described how 'young regiments singing "Deutschland über alles" broke forward against the front line of the enemy's positions and captured them,' while according to Zuber, the postwar British official history promoted a false narrative about the Battle of Mons, in which massed German infantry attacks were defeated by rapid British rifle fire.

Moreover, if we look more closely at the historiography of the First World War, we do sometimes find historians talking about pseudohistory without using that word. The British official historian, James Edmonds, has been accused more than once of downplaying and even concealing the deficiencies of Britain's military leaders.[16] Jesse Pyles has argued that the commander-in-chief of the British Armies in France, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, falsely blamed the Portuguese Corps for the German breakthrough at the Battle of the Lys in 1918, and that Edmonds later embodied this falsehood in the battle's official British narrative.[17] And in his book *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (1991), Denis Winter even argued that 'Haig had systematically falsified the record of his military career,' and that 'the official record of the war – political as

[15]Bernd Hüppauf, 'Langemarck, Verdun, and the Myth of a New Man in Germany after World War I,' *War & Society* 6, no. 2 (1988), pp.70-103; Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel, 'Forgetting the Great War? The Langemarck Myth between Cultural Oblivion and Critical Memory in (West) Germany, 1945-2014,' *Journal of Modern History* 94, no. 1 (2022), pp.1-41; Terence Zuber, *The Mons Myth: A Reassessment of the Battle,* (Stroud: History Press, 2010).

[16]David French, "'Official but not History?" Sir James Edmonds and the Official History of the Great War," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution for Defence Studies'* 131, no. 1 (1986), pp.58-63; David French, 'James Edmonds and the Official History: France and Belgium,' in Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.70-86.

[17]Jesse Pyles, 'The Battle of the Lys: The Uncovered History,' *Antologia Militare* 3, 12 (2022), pp.97-124.

well as military, had been systematically distorted both during the war as propaganda and after it, in the official history.'[18]

Historical opinions concerning senior British commanders in the First World War – and especially concerning Douglas Haig – have ranged from very positive to very negative.[19] But since the late 1920s, the British popular memory of generals like Haig has been mostly negative. This consensus is reflected in a hyper-critical school of, mostly but not exclusively popular, historical writing, which has persisted in the face of repeated attempts by, mostly but not exclusively academic, military historians to fringe it out. Most reviewers, for example, concluded that Winter's conspiracy theories were unwarranted; one researcher even wondered 'why people in Britain seem disposed to believe just about anything about Haig and his generals, the more disreputable and fantastic the better, so long as it is critical.'[20]

It is fair to say that no book in this hyper-critical tradition has had a more enduring influence, or has earned a worse reputation among British military historians, than Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, a popular study of British generalship on the Western Front in the second year of the First World War, published by Hutchinson of London in 1961. *The Donkeys* was part of a wave of popular histories about the First World War in the late '50s and early '60s.[21] But unlike his contemporaries, who wrote about large, well-known battles and campaigns like Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele, Clark chose to write about small and obscure British battles on the Western Front in the year 1915.

For most of 1914 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France had been a single army under its Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Sir John French. At the end of the year, on 26 December, it was divided in two: the First Army was on the right, under the command of General Sir Douglas Haig, and the Second Army was on the left, under General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. During 1915 the Second Army became the

[18]Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment,* (London: Viking, 1991), pp.3-4, pp.225-57.
[19]Stephen Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchener in Twentieth Century Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp.147-190; Keith Simpson, 'The Reputation of Sir Douglas Haig,' in Bond, *First World War and British Military History*, pp.141-162.
[20]Correlli Barnett, 'Did They Doctor the Records?' *Times Literary Supplement* (19 April 1991), pp.7-8; Gerard DeGroot, *Haig's Command* (review), *International History Review* 14, 2 (1992), pp.387-390; David French, *Haig's Command* (review), *History* 77, 250 (1992), pp.345-346; Jeffrey Grey, 'Denis Winter's "Haig's Command: A Reassessment,"' *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 71, 285 (1993), p.63.
[21]Alex Danchev, '"Bunking" and Debunking: The Controversies of the 1960s,' in Bond, *The First World War and British Military History*, pp.263-288.

shield of the BEF, and the First Army the sword. On the left, the Second Army was battered by the Germans at the Battles of Ypres, 1915 (22 April-25 May), where the Germans carried out attacks with clouds of chlorine gas – the first large-scale chemical attacks in history. In this battle the Second Army suffered heavy casualties – 2,150 officers and 57,125 other ranks; when the fighting subsided, the Ypres Salient was less than half its former size and was surrounded by German-occupied high ground.

On the right, the First Army hacked and stabbed at the German lines four times, at the Battles of Neuve Chapelle (10-13 March), Aubers Ridge (9 May), Festubert (15-25 May), and Loos (25 September-8 October, followed by the Actions of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, (13 -19 October). Each of these blows was heavier than the last, but none of them pierced the German defences. By the end of the year the First Army had lost 5,927 officers and 134,579 other ranks – more than the full complement of the BEF at the start of the war – and the German line remained unbroken.

The First Army's defeats had important political and military consequences. Field Marshal French blamed a shortage of munitions for the debacle at Aubers Ridge: the resulting 'shell scandal' worsened a political crisis in Great Britain that ended only when Prime Minister Asquith formed a coalition government and established a Ministry of Munitions. Later, after an almost equally disastrous attack by the British reserves at the Battle of Loos on 26 September, the new coalition government relieved Field-Marshal French and appointed General Haig to command the BEF – a post that Haig held for the rest of the war.

Two volumes of the British official history were devoted to these operations: *The British Campaign in France and Flanders, 1915* by J. E. Edmonds (and G. C. Wynne), which were published in 1927 and 1928. But when it appeared in 1961, *The Donkeys* offered its readers a short, accessible, and hyper-critical alternative to the lengthy, dense, and apologetic official British history. While he relies on Edmonds for the bare facts of his account, Clark tells a tale of butchery, bungling, and backstabbing. At Ypres, for example, French interferes with Smith-Dorrien's direction of the battle, ordering Second Army to make futile counterattacks: when Smith-Dorrien opposes any further waste of life, and advocates withdrawal instead, he is relieved of his command. Later, General Haig orders two divisions of raw New Army troops to their deaths on the second day at Loos, then blames this hideous blunder on French, engineers the dismissal of his chief, and then fails upward by taking French's job. And so on.

Thirty years later, Denis Winter would call *The Donkeys* 'the single most accurate book in print on any Western Front campaign, despite systematic attempts to discredit it.'[22] But Clark's hyper-critical conclusions were challenged even before his book appeared

[22]Winter, *Haig's Command,* p.255.

in print. In 1960, Clark had published an excerpt from his forthcoming book, 'The Dismissal of Sir John French,' about the affair of the reserves at Loos and its aftermath, as an article in *History Today*. This led to an exchange of letters with Haig's most prominent defender, John Terraine, who was the first to suggest that Clark's work was, in effect, pseudohistorical.[23]

In October 1915, for example, King George V was thrown from his horse while inspecting Haig's troops in France. Clark says that Haig devotes more space in his diary to this accident than he does to the whole Battle of Loos; this is false, Terraine says. He disputes Clark's account of the handling of the reserves at Loos, arguing that French was to blame, not Haig. And then, most seriously, he accuses Clark of both cherry-picking evidence and ignoring contrary evidence, to support his account of the fall of Sir John French. In particular, he says that Clark has created a misleading impression by quoting selectively from Haig's diaries, and by not mentioning that his narrative is contradicted by passages from the same source. 'I must apologize for taking up so much space with this,' he concludes. 'It is, however, the great advantage of systematic misrepresentation that the reply has to be of inordinate length.'

Clark's reply to Terraine is not very convincing. 'As regards to the relative space devoted in Haig's diary to the battle of Loos and the King's fall from a horse,' he says, 'I can only repeat that the proportion quoted by me holds true in respect to those passages from his diary which it has been thought fit to *publish*.' Note Clark's lapse into the passive voice. Clark does a better job of defending his version of Haig's handling of the reserves at Loos, by pointing to mistakes in Terraine's critique. But his response to the charge of 'systematic misrepresentation' indulges in *ad hominem*. 'The remaining "points" seem really to be matters of interpretation,' he says.

> Readers will doubtless be aware that Mr. Terraine is currently the official custodian of Haig's reputation and is working on a biography. And this explains why he has been entrusted with the full text of Haig's diaries. His objections seem to be that in quoting from them I have not reproduced the surrounding text.[24]

[23]Alan Clark, 'The Dismissal of Sir John French,' *History Today* 10 (1960), pp.623-630; John Terraine and Alan Clark, 'John French and Douglas Haig,' *History Today* 11 (1960), pp.65-67.

[24]On the King's fall from a horse: 'Haig's diary devotes much space to an account of, and apologia for, this incident; more space, indeed, than is occupied by the whole of the battle of Loos.' [Note: 'I am referring to the published text of Haig's diary. Robert Blake has kindly pointed out to me that in the original document (which has not been published) this ratio does not apply.'] Clark, *The Donkeys,* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), p.180.

And when *The Donkeys* was published the following year, some of its reviews were very negative. A. J. P. Taylor thought that Clark's work was entertaining: 'There are plenty of laughs in this book,' he wrote, 'tempered with sadness at the thought of the forgotten men who died because their commanders were incompetent, jealous, blundering, and complacent.' However, Taylor also wrote that *The Donkeys* 'lacks understanding and sympathy,' 'disregards the most elementary rules of historical scholarship,' and 'is valueless as a serious contribution to history.'[25] Michael Howard's opinion was like Taylor's: 'As "'entertainment" this book is good value,' he wrote. 'As history it is worthless.'[26] Rudest of all was John Terraine, whose review article damned and blasted *The Donkeys* once again, calling it 'the apotheosis of distortion.'[27]

So: was Terraine correct? Had Clark engaged in 'systematic misrepresentation' and was *The Donkeys* 'the apotheosis of distortion'? What is the verdict of the relevant group of historians? No historian besides Terraine has criticised *The Donkeys* in any detail. Terraine confines his criticism to just one chapter of Clark's book. And John Terraine is not always a reliable source: he was a partisan historian who devoted much of his career to rehabilitating the reputations of senior British commanders of the First World War.[28]

Dan Todman's *The Great War: Myth and Memory* devotes a chapter to the generalship controversy, but while this chapter is entitled 'Donkeys,' its analysis and critique of *The Donkeys* is brief and superficial. Both Todman's book and Ion Trewin's *Alan Clark: The Biography* have confirmed what John Terraine suspected, that Clark had fabricated the quotation that gave *The Donkeys* its title, and we will return to this point later.[29] But neither of these authors answer the question that concerns us here: is *The Donkeys* itself a work of pseudohistory?

[25]*The Observer*, Sunday, 23 July 1961, p.19.
[26]*The Listener*, 3 August 1961, pp.180-181.
[27]John Terraine, 'Instant History,' *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 107 (1962), pp.140-145.
[28]For a summary of his position, see John Terraine, 'British Military Leadership in the First World War,' in Peter Liddle (ed.), *Home Fires and Foreign Fields: British Social and Military Experience in the First World War,* (London: Pergamon, 1985), pp.39-51.
[29]Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2005), pp.99-103; Ion Trewin, *Alan Clark: The Biography,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), Kindle edition, chapters 15-17.

The only other general book about the British army on the Western Front in 1915 argues that Alan Clark was wrong, but does not accuse him of historical misconduct.[30] The best and most recent academic work on this general topic, by contrast, is *Courage without Glory*: *The British Army on the Western Front in 1915*; published in 2015 it is a collection of essays edited by Spencer Jones. In his introduction, Jones makes it clear that in his view, *The Donkeys* has been discredited: he describes Clark's book as 'an influential but notorious study of British High Command in 1915 which popularised the phrase "lions led by donkeys" and became the foundation of much critical historiography. Although academically dubious,' he says, 'Clark's contrast between an ignorant officer class and the courageous, stoic common soldier struck a powerful chord that still resonates in many popular interpretations of the war.' And that is the last word about *The Donkeys* in *Courage without Glory*: not one footnote in the fifteen chapters of Spencer's collection references Clark or his work.

But not all academics have rejected *The Donkeys*: the best recent account of the Battle of Loos, for example, calls *The Donkeys* 'a bitter, if unreliable polemic,' but cites Clark as a source on a number of points.[31] An interesting comparative study of British and German histories of the sector between Armentières and La Bassée cites Clark as well.[32] For their part, popular historians have been referring to *The Donkeys* for information about the British campaigns on the Western Front ever since its publication.[33] And some of Clark's arguments have stood the test of time: at least some historians agree nowadays that Haig was responsible for what happened to the reserves at Loos, and concede that Clark's conspiracy theory concerning the dismissal of Sir John French was not unwarranted.[34]

Junk History and Fake History

Let us therefore consider if *The Donkeys* will satisfy the conditions in our new definition. It does present itself as historical knowledge. It is not based on impossible

[30]Robin Neillands, *The Death of Glory: The Western Front 1915* (London: John Murray, 2006), esp. pp.xvii-xxii, pp.268-274.

[31]Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915,* (Brimscombe Port Stroud: History Press, 2008).

[32]John F. Williams, *Modernity, the Media and the Military: The creation of national mythologies on the Western Frant 1914-1918,* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[33]David Leeson, 'Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* and the History of the British Campaign in French Flanders and Artois, 1914-15,' unpublished paper, Laurentian University, 2000, pp.24-25.

[34]See e.g. Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front, and the Emergence of Modern Warfare 1900-1918,* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp.16-19; Gerard J. DeGroot, *Douglas Haig, 1861-1928,* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 203-214; J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.174-185.

beliefs, or on unwarranted conspiracy theories, or on egregiously deficient sources. But is it based on deliberate falsehoods, or on egregiously deficient methodologies? Does it really disregard the most elementary rules of historical scholarship, and systematically misrepresent British military leadership on the Western Front in 1915? Is it junk history, or worse – fake history?

Before we can distinguish junk history from bad history, we must be ready to distinguish what is *egregiously* deficient from what is merely deficient. That is to say: we need a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for deciding if a historian's methods are obviously wrong or bad, beyond a reasonable degree.

Here is a tentative list of such conditions. A historian's methods are egregiously deficient if they repeatedly,

1. Misquote and mis-reference their published sources, and
2. Provide misleading and selective quotations, and
3. Take passages from their sources out of context, and
4. Put words in people's mouths, and
5. Misrepresent passages from secondary sources as passages from primary sources, and
6. Provide misleading, inaccurate figures, and
7. Provide misleading, inaccurate captions for images.

One additional test for egregiously deficient methods might be called 'the criterion of miscoherence.' Bad historians are incoherent: they make all kinds of mistakes, which do not cohere with each other, and gallop madly off in all directions. Pseudohistorians, by contrast, tend to make just one kind of mistake: the kind that supports their thesis. Their mistakes are miscoherent, charging in formation toward their conclusions. So, a historian's methods are egregiously deficient if, in addition to the conditions above:

8. Their mistakes are miscoherent.

The author believes that most historians would agree that these are both appropriate and reasonable standards. Any work that presents itself as history, and meets all these conditions, is junk history.

We should note, moreover, that there is an important precedent for accepting miscoherence as evidence of deception. In his expert report for the defence in the case of *Irving v Penguin Books Ltd*, Richard Evans found that the work of Holocaust denier David Irving was also full of miscoherent mistakes. This was enough to convince the judge that Irving had engaged in deliberate misrepresentation. As Evans explains:

> 'Historians are human,' the judge noted. 'They make mistakes, they misread and misconstrue documents and overlook material evidence.' But in all the instances in which Irving had done these things, the effect was to cast Hitler in a favourable light. There were no instances in which his errors worked in the opposite direction. His mistakes were thus 'unlikely to have been innocent.'[35]

But while these are good grounds for suspecting deception, miscoherent mistakes might simply be the result of bias. Perhaps, out of an abundance of caution, we should only conclude that historians have based their works on deliberate falsehoods if we find convincing evidence that they knowingly (or must have knowingly) made false statements in their work. If, for example, they confess to lying, then that would be convincing evidence that they lied. If, on the other hand, we find them saying things in their work that are clearly contradicted by the sources they cite, then that would be convincing evidence that they must have lied. Any work that presents itself as history, and which meets either of these conditions, is fake history.

Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*

If we check Alan Clark's footnotes, we will soon discover that *The Donkeys* is riddled with errors. Out of twenty-nine references to the two volumes of the British official history for 1915, for example, just eight are correct and complete. Some of Clark's mistakes are minor: in nine cases, he refers the reader to the wrong page, or the wrong volume, or the wrong page in the wrong volume.[36] But in other cases, his work includes misleading and selective quotations, just as Terraine says. On p.94, for example, Clark describes how, on the evening of 26 April, Smith-Dorrien tried to dissuade Field-Marshal French from ordering any further counterattacks at Ypres. 'Sir John, however, was steadfast in his contention that "he did not wish any ground to be given up if it could possibly be avoided", and the situation should be "cleared up", and the area "quieted down" as soon as possible.'

On p.254 of Volume I of the official history, by comparison, it says: 'During the evening Smith-Dorrien motored to Hazebrouck, and in a personal interview was given the Commander-in-Chief's instructions.'

> These were to the effect that he did not wish any ground to be given up if it could possibly be avoided; but unless the French regained what they had lost, or a good portion of it, it might be impossible to retain the very salient position in front of Ypres. It was essential, however, that the situation should be cleared up and the area quieted down so that the offensive of the First Army might be

[35]Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, p.227; for another example, see Richard Evans, *In Defence of History,* (London: Granta, 1997), pp.135-142.
[36]Clark, *The Donkeys*, pp.37n, 38n, 41n, 70n, 86n, 89n, 94n, 100n, and 104n.

> carried out even if this involved the Second Army withdrawing to a more retired line.

Clark has omitted much more than just 'the surrounding material.' He has distorted the meaning of this passage. To make matters worse, his footnote is misleading: it says 'OH, 1915, II, 16,' but that is the wrong page in the wrong volume.

Some of Clark's references to British regimental histories are just as unreliable as his references to the British official history. On p. 62 of *The Donkeys*, for example, Clark quotes at length from a first-person account of the British advance at Neuve Chapelle and attributes this passage to John Ewing's *The Royal Scots*. But Clark's quotation does not appear in Ewing's book; to make matters worse, 8 Royal Scots was present at Neuve Chapelle but was kept in reserve throughout the battle, as Ewing makes plain: 'The 8th Royal Scots, forming the left pivot of the division, were not called upon to advance, and their participation in the conflict was confined to standing fast in the trenches, which were intermittently bombarded by the enemy.'[37]

When discussing British casualties, Clark sometimes exaggerates for emphasis. In Chapter 3, which covers the fighting on the morning of the first day at Neuve Chapelle, Clark describes the failed assault of 2 Middlesex on the German front line. The British official history states that, when the 2 Middlesex attacked, its three leading lines were 'completely annihilated' by 'heavy machine-gun and rifle fire at point-blank range both from their front and left flank.'[38] According to *The Donkeys*, every soldier in the battalion died in this assault: 'every man,' he writes, 'and there had been nearly a thousand, was killed.'[39] In fact, not only was every man in 2 Middlesex not killed, but enough of the battalion survived to advance again later, capture its objective, and hold it until relieved.[40] According to their regimental historian, the 2 Middlesex lost 78 killed, 307 wounded, and 89 missing on the first day at Neuve Chapelle – about 50 per cent of their total strength.[41]

Later, in Chapter 12, at the end of his account of the massacre of 21 and 24 Divisions on the second day at Loos, Clark writes that twelve attacking battalions, 'a strength of just under ten thousand,' lost 385 officers and 7,861 men.[42] This attack was indeed

[37]John Ewing, *The Royal Scots 1914-1919*, II, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1925), p.89.
[38]J. E. Edmonds and G. C. Wynne, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Flanders, 1915*, I, (London: Macmillan, 1927), p.98.
[39]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.55.
[40]Edmonds and Wynne, *1915*, I, p.100. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.49.
[41]Everard Wyrall, *The Die-Hards in the Great War* (London: Harrison, no date), p.102.
[42]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.173.

a bloodbath, but the attacking battalions did not suffer 82 per cent casualties, as Clark suggests. According to the official history, the two divisions, a force of *twenty-four* battalions, numbering about *twenty* thousand men, lost 385 officers and 7844 other ranks in the day's fighting, or about 41 per cent casualties. The twelve attacking battalions lost 183 officers and 4316 other ranks – about 45 per cent. [43]

Clark also sometimes takes passages from sources and presents them out of context. In his account of the Calais Conference in July 1915, Clark quotes Brigadier-General Sir Edward Spears, who describes a foolishly optimistic Rawlinson raising impossible French hopes of unlimited British artillery support.[44] In this case, the reference is accurate: Spears's words can be found on p.88 of his book *Prelude to Victory*, just as Clark says.[45] What Clark neglects to mention is that the incident described by Spears took place in 1917, during the preparations for the Nivelle offensive during the spring of that year.

Similarly, Clark says that on 18 April 1915 German General Erich von Falkenhayn wrote: 'The English troops, in spite of undeniable bravery and endurance on the part of the men, have proved so clumsy in action that they offer no prospect of accomplishing anything decisive against the German Army in the immediate future.'[46] But the original, in Falkenhayn's *General Headquarters 1914-1916 and its critical decisions*, is written in the past tense: 'In any case, the English troops, in spite of undeniable bravery and endurance on the part of individuals, had proved to be so clumsy in action, that they could offer no prospect of accomplishing anything decisive against German troops for the immediate future.'[47] This passage was not written in 1915, as Clark suggests, but after the war, along with the rest of Falkenhayn's book.[48]

Nor is this the only case in which Clark rewrites a passage from a secondary source and presents it as a quotation from a primary source. On p. 115 of *The Donkeys*, at the head of Chapter 8 describing the Attack on Fromelles during the Battle of Aubers Ridge, Clark quotes the following conversation between two British commanders:

---

[43]J. E. Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Flanders, 1915*, II, (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp.341-342. These numbers are endorsed by Prior and Wilson, *Command*, p.129fn.
[44]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.136.
[45]Edward Spears, *Prelude to Victory,* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), p.88.
[46]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.104.
[47]Erich von Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters 1914-1916 and Its Critical Decisions*, (London: Hutchinson, 1920), p.74.
[48]Clark also provides two different titles for this work in his footnote and bibliography, both of which are incorrect.

> General Rawlinson: This is most unsatisfactory. Where are the Sherwood Foresters? Where are the East Lancashires on the right?
> Brigadier-General Oxley: They are lying out in No Man's Land, sir, and most of them will never stand again.

Clark attributes this to the '*Rifle Brigade Official History*, p.186.' There is no 'Rifle Brigade Official History,' and this conversation does not appear in Reginald Berkeley's *History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918*, the closest thing we have to an official history of that regiment. Furthermore, Berkeley's account of 2 Rifle Brigade at the Battle of Aubers Ridge begins on p.99 and ends on p.106. Interestingly, however, the following passage *can* be found in Berkeley's account of this battalion at Aubers Ridge: 'The Rifle Brigade was on the first objective. Where were the East Lancashires on the right, and the Sherwood Foresters beyond them? They were lying out in No-man's-land; and most of them would never stand again.'[49]

Another doubtful epigraph appears at the head of Chapter 12, which describes the second day of fighting at the Battle of Loos:

> The machine-gun is a much over-rated weapon and two per battalion is more than sufficient.
> (HAIG, in a minute to the War Council, 14th April 1915)[50]

The War Council was a Cabinet sub-committee on war policy. This quotation was questioned in the 1980s by Dominick Graham: 'Considering that the scale of machine-guns in a battalion had been doubled by April 1915,' he says, 'that Haig was unlikely to have been in a position to "minute" the War Council from France where he commanded the First Army, and that Clark does not quote the source of his information, this old canard may be safely discarded.'[51]

Clark may have got this 'old canard' from Basil Liddell Hart. In *The Real War 1914-1918*, Liddell Hart writes: 'Even when the machine-gun had obviously gained a dominance of the battlefield, General Headquarters in France resisted its growth from the puny pre-war scale of two in each battalion. One Army commander, Haig, declared that it was "a much overrated weapon" and that this scale was "more than

[49]Reginald Berkeley's *History of the Rifle Brigade in the War of 1914-1918,* I, (London: Rifle Brigade Club, 1927), pp.99-100.
[50]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.163.
[51]Dominick Graham, 'The British Expeditionary Force in 1914 and the machine gun,' *Military Affairs* 46 (1982), p.193fn. The number of machine guns per battalion had been increased from two to four, in February: Edmonds and Wynne, *1915*, I, p.11.

sufficient.'"[52] But in *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War* (1984), John Terraine traces this anecdote back to the memoirs of Brigadier-General Christopher Baker-Carr.

Baker-Carr was the first head of the BEF's Machine Gun School in France. Sometime after Christmas 1914, he claims to have sent a memorandum to GHQ, and notably not a 'minute to the War Council,' proposing to double the number of machine guns per battalion. When his file was returned, with comments from senior commanders, 'we nearly wept,' he says.

> Not a single individual had had the courage to support our suggestion, not even those who had given it their private approbation; many had 'hedged' badly; others were frankly hostile. One Army Commander gave his opinion that 'the machine-gun was a much over-rated weapon and two per battalion were more than sufficient.' Another half-heartedly approved of the idea, but doubted it could be carried out.[53]

Terraine says that Liddell Hart identified the Army Commander in question as Haig, based on private information from Edmonds.[54] But even if what Baker-Carr says is true, Clark has committed a pious fraud, by rewriting this passage in the present tense and providing a false reference.

And finally, and notoriously, there is the snippet of conversation that appears at the beginning of *The Donkeys*, and gives this book its title:

> Ludendorff: 'The English soldiers fight like lions.'
> Hoffman: 'True. But don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys.'[55]

Clark gives only 'Falkenhayn, *Memoirs*' as the source of this exchange. No such book exists. Erich von Falkenhayn authored two books before his death in 1922: *Die Oberste Heeresleitung, 1914-1916: in Ihrenwichtigsten Entschliessungen,* (Berlin: Mittler, 1920), and *Der Feldzug der 9. Armee gegen die Rumanen und Russen,* (Berlin: Mittler, 1921). Only the former is listed in Clark's bibliography, and the conversation between Ludendorff and Hoffman cannot be found in either book. We now know that Clark was evasive about the provenance of this quotation, both before and after his book

[52]Basil Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914-1918,* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), p.128.
[53]Christopher Baker-Carr, *From Chauffeur To Brigadier,* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930).
[54]John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War, 1861-1945,* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), pp.133-142. Interestingly, Terraine's critique also relies in part on evidence from a private source.
[55]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.1.

was published; claimed (falsely) to have received it from Liddell Hart; and according to his friend Euan Graham, admitted privately that he had invented it.[56]

What even Clark's critics have not noticed, however, is that he mentions lions and donkeys even before this epigraph. A picture of a soldier being decorated faces the title page, with the caption "Donkey decorates Lion. General Alderson pins the D.C.M. on an unknown Canadian lance-corporal for bravery at 'Second Ypres.'". This photograph is held at the Imperial War Museum, and if we check its item description, we will find something strange. 'A Lance Corporal of the 10th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force,' it says, 'being decorated by Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson with the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Near Locre, 1916.' [57]

The Donkeys includes thirteen photographs from the holdings of the Imperial War Museum. Eight of these thirteen photos are from the wrong year: they were taken in 1916 or 1917, instead of 1915. Chapter 5, about the Second Battle of Ypres, includes two photos. The first, facing page 80, is captioned "No-Man's-Land in the salient, looking north-east. A quiet day. In the background a 4.7 shell bursts short of the enemy position. In the foreground, human remains and detritus.' But this photo was taken in 1916, at the Battle of the Somme. The Imperial War Museum's online catalogue describes it as, 'A view of the battlefield at Guillemont, September 1916.'[58] It is part of a series of such views taken by photographer Ernest L. Brooks, who was not even in France in 1915.

Clark's account of the Second Battle of Ypres continues in Chapter 6, in which Clark writes of 'a haunting picture of an advanced dressing station taken at this time.'[59] This photo faces p. 81; according to Clark's list of illustrations, this photo was taken at Potijze. But this picture could not have been taken at the Second Battle of Ypres, or at any time in 1915, because it shows men wearing steel helmets; these were not issued to British troops in France until the spring of 1916. And if we check the reference for this photograph in the IWM's digital collections, we will discover that it

[56]Terraine, 'British Military Leadership,' p.39; Ion Trewin, *Alan Clark: The Biography,* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), Kindle edition, chapters 15-17.
[57]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM) Q 447, the 'Lion' in this picture is Lance-Corporal Frank Cox of the 10 Canadians, who won the DCM, not at the Second Battle of Ypres, but in a trench raid on the night of 4/5 February 1916. Daniel G. Dancocks, *Gallant Canadians: The Story of the Tenth Canadian Infantry battalion 1914-1919,* (Calgary, 1990), p.57. There is nothing in *The Donkeys* to justify Clark's name-calling in this case: Alderson is hardly mentioned.
[58]IWM Q 1167, there is another picture from the Battle of the Somme facing p. 112 which comes from IWM Q 811.
[59]Clark, *The Donkeys*, p.99.

was taken at the Battle of Arras. Its object description reads: 'Tending wounded outside an advanced dressing station at Tilloy, April 1917.'[60] The photographer, once again, was Ernest L. Brooks.

So: in *The Donkeys*, Alan Clark repeatedly misquotes and mis-references his published sources. In one case, he first distorts Field Marshal French's instructions to General Smith-Dorrien during the Second Battle of Ypres and then directs his readers to the wrong page in the wrong volume of the British official history. He also provides misleading and selective quotations; takes passages from his sources out of context; exaggerates British losses; puts words in people's mouths; rewrites passages from secondary sources and presents them as passages from primary sources; provides misleading, inaccurate figures; provides misleading, inaccurate captions for images; and his mistakes are miscoherent. *The Donkeys* is junk history.

We would also be justified in suspecting that *The Donkeys* is fake history. When Richard Evans found that all of David Irving's mistakes tended to cast Hitler in a favourable light, this was enough to convince the judge in the *Irving v Penguin Books Ltd* case that Irving had probably lied. Similarly, whenever Alan Clark makes mistakes, or misreads or misconstrues documents, the effect is always to cast British generals in an unfavourable light. His mistakes are just as unlikely to have been innocent. To argue otherwise would be special pleading.

In one case, Clark even refused to correct an obvious mistake. Haig's diary does not, in fact, devote more space to the King's fall from his horse than it does to the Battle of Loos. This exciting falsehood trades on a trivial truth: Robert Blake's book *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, which consists of selections from Haig's diaries and correspondence chosen by Blake, devotes more space to the King's fall from his horse than it does to the Battle of Loos.[61] But when this was pointed out by Terraine, and confirmed by Blake, Alan Clark responded with a misleading footnote that refers to Blake's book as 'the published text of Haig's diary.'

Still: suspicion is not proof. Have we found convincing evidence that Clark either knowingly made or must have made false statements? The author believes we have. It is now certain that Clark lied about the quotation that gave his book its title. He must

[60] IWM Q 2024, there are more pictures from the Battle of Arras facing p. 112 IWM Q 6229, and p. 160 from IWM 2104. Even photos from 1915 are miscaptioned: compare 'Pinned-down in the wire' (facing p.64) with IWM Q 49750 and IWM Q 49751; 'Aubers: looking back at the English parapet', facing p.113, with IWM Q 49213; and 'The German line in Lone Tree Ridge', facing p.160 with IWM Q 49290.

[61] On this rhetorical manoeuvre, and others, see Nicholas Shackel, 'The vacuity of postmodernist methodology,' *Metaphilosophy* 36 (2005), pp.295-320.

also have lied about other quotations in his book: it is hard to see, for example, how he could have mistaken a passage from the *History of the Rifle Brigade* for a conversation between General Rawlinson and Brigadier-General Oxley. Finally, he must have lied about the photographs in his book, presenting photos from the Somme and Arras in 1916 and 1917 as pictures from Ypres in 1915.

For these reasons, *The Donkeys* deserves also to be condemned as fake history. Historians can make mistakes, and be wrong, but they cannot lie. Anyone who lies while pretending to write history is writing pseudohistory. Otherwise, we must ask ourselves: how many lies are too many?

Conclusion

We can see, then, how scholarship on the demarcation problem in the philosophy of science, the problem of how to distinguish genuine science from pseudoscience, can help historians distinguish genuine history, even bad or mistaken history, from pseudohistory. History and science are not the same: they are different disciplines with different methods. But these two disciplines are alike in at least one crucial respect. Both scientists and historians must obey what Michael Strevens has called 'the iron rule of explanation.' Historians, like scientists, must 'conduct all disputes with reference to empirical evidence alone.'[62]

Pseudoscientists violate this iron rule of explanation – and so do pseudohistorians. Fake historians try to fool their audience with spurious evidence. Junk historians fool themselves with evidence obtained from unreliable sources, or by following unreliable procedures. And both weird historians and crackpot historians offer insufficient evidence to support their deviant doctrines. In some cases, these deviant doctrines are fringe beliefs like 'the Holocaust never happened.' But in other cases, they have wide currency, like 'British senior commanders in the First World War were asinine butchers and bunglers.' A clear definition of pseudohistory, with individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for demarcating genuine history from pseudohistory, can help us disrupt the consensus in such cases.

This interdisciplinary approach could help guide historians in other ways as well. Angelo Fasce, for example, has proposed what he calls the Explanation-Polarisation model (EX-PO) to help explain why some people endorse pseudoscience. 'Unwarranted beliefs increase their explanatory appeal by science mimicry,' he says,

[62]Michael Strevens, *The Knowledge Machine: How Irrationality Created Modern Science,* (New York & London: Liveright, 2020), pp.7-8.

'on the basis of spurious categorisations and flawed mechanistic explanations.'[63] In similar fashion, pseudohistorians enhance their appeal by history mimicry: Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, for example, includes numerous quotations and footnotes—but his quotations are often selective, and his footnotes inaccurate. But more importantly, his book provides a spurious categorisation, 'lions led by donkeys', and a flawed mechanistic explanation, the callousness and incompetence of senior British commanders, which both possess a strong intuitive appeal for some.

The case of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* is also revealing in other ways. History does not happen by itself. Like a lawn, it must be seeded with reliable sources, watered and fertilised with research, and mowed and trimmed with peer review; and we should also leave space for competing viewpoints, like patches of clover. The weeds of pseudohistory thrive where the turf is thin or bare.[64]

Alan Clark did not choose the campaigns of 1915 by chance. His original intention was to write a book about the Ypres Salient from 1914 to 1917; but he changed his topic after Leon Wolff published *In Flanders Fields*, about 1917's Third Battle of Ypres.[65] The First Army's 1915 offensives did more than give Clark a fresh angle from which to attack Haig. Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, and Loos were, and still are, some of the most neglected and obscure battles in the history of the First World War. Since the sources were not easy to check, he could tell his audience what they wanted to hear, without fear of contradiction; and he could without most people noticing even leave out the Battle of Festubert, where the First Army won a partial victory. It was bad luck that John Terraine was working on a biography of Haig at the same time, and had been given privileged access to Haig's diary. But it was good luck that nobody followed up on Terraine's critique.

The techniques of the pseudohistorian have not changed much since *The Donkeys* was published. Today, pseudohistory proliferates on the internet, on streaming platforms, and on social media. Like Alan Clark before them, some digital pseudohistorians engage in traditional history mimicry, editing articles on Wikipedia for example to distort the history of the Holocaust by promoting the fringe theories of Polish

[63]Angelo Fasce, 'The Explanation-Polarisation Model: Pseudoscience Spreads Through Explanatory Satisfaction and Group Polarisation,' *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 10, 2 (2022), p.699.

[64]'Pseudo history exists largely in that world where the evidence is slight and the opportunities for the human imagination to roam are consequently large.' Greg Melleuish, Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, 'Pseudo History/Weird History: Nationalism and the Internet,' *History Compass* 7, no. 6 (2009): p.1484. << ???

[65]Todman, *The Great War,* p.100.

nationalists.[66] In some other cases, digital pseudohistory, or 'post-truth history', has become even cruder than its physical predecessor, by discarding even the pretence of real scholarship.[67] But Alan Clark anticipated this trend as well. The first few pages of *The Donkeys* resemble an internet meme: with a miscaptioned photograph saying 'Donkey decorates Lion'; and a framing headline 'THE DONKEYS'; and a fabricated quotation with '…lions led by donkeys'; that all prepare the reader to believe Clark's tendentious version of the campaigns of 1915. A 'post-truth' version of *The Donkeys* would just omit the rest of the book.

Finally, the case of Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* highlights the need for two distinct approaches to the problem of pseudohistory. We need patient scholarship and thorough criticism, guided by clear demarcation criteria, to debunk the spurious claims of counterfeit historians. It is not enough to mow the weeds or pull them out by hand: they must be rooted out with a fork. This is hard work, which is made harder by publication bias; historical journals, like scientific journals, prefer studies with positive results.

But ultimately, the best defence against pseudohistory is history itself, just as the best defence against weeds is a thick carpet of healthy grass. Historians must provide an alternative to pseudohistory. They must practice history communication, and make their findings relevant, accessible, and interesting to their students and the public. It was never enough simply to shun *The Donkeys*, or to hold it up as a bad example: what was needed was a better history of the campaigns of 1915. And if historians today cannot find effective ways to connect with audiences of digital natives, then pseudohistorians undoubtedly will.[68]

[66]Jan Grabowski and Shira Klein, 'Wikipedia's Intentional Distortion of the History of the Holocaust,' *Journal of Holocaust Research* 37, 2 (2022): pp.133-90.
[67]Marius Gudonis and Benjamin T. Jones, 'Who Controls the Past?' in Marius Gudonis and Benjamin T Jones, *History in a Post-Truth World: Theory and Praxis,* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp.1-13.
[68]On 'e-history' and the need for digital history communication, see Jason Steinhauer, *History, Disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past,* (Washington DC: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).