ALL THE KAISER'S MEN

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE GERMAN ARMY ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1914–1918

IAN PASSINGHAM

Deutschland
Und wenn uns nichts mehr übrig blieb,
So blieb uns doch ein Schwert,
Das zorngemut mit scharfem Hieb
Dem Trotz des Fremdlings wehrt.

So blieb die Schlacht als letzt Gericht
Auf Leben und auf Tod,
Und wenn die Not nicht Eisen* bricht,
Das Eisen bricht die Not.

Emanuel Geibel

Germany
And if nothing else to us be left,
There still remains the sword,
Which boldly wielded with fierce cleft
Defies the enemy horde.

Thus combat unto death we make,
Last arbiter indeed,
For if need will not iron* break,
Then iron shall break the need.

* *Eisen*/iron = sword

Quoted in Sven Hedin, *With the German Armies in the West* (John Lane, the Bodley Head, London, 1915), p. 79.

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CONTENTS

To

John Terraine

for whom truth, context and balance
were the most effective items
in a military historian's kitbag;

and to

All the Kaiser's Men –

who lived, loved and died
in the same way as their enemies,
but whose courage, endurance and sacrifice
were betrayed by Germany's
first great catastrophe.

To Germany (Autumn 1914)

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
But gropers both through fields of thought confined
We stumble and we do not understand.
You only saw your future greatly planned,
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

When it is peace, then we may view again
With new-won eyes each other's truer form
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm
We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm,
The darkness and the thunder and the rain.

Charles Hamilton Sorley

ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

MAPS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in the First World War did not begin formally at school, where the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian eras more occupied my history, but with a play, *Journey's End*, by R.C. Sherriff. What captured my imagination more than any other part of this remarkable drama was that it was set on the eve of the great German offensive of 1918. My curiosity led me to read Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and after that, the history books. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to serve in the Army myself and to understand that little bit more about the experience of military life in peace and war. Half of my career was spent in Germany/Berlin within the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR) as part of NATO, and in Berlin as a liaison officer to the former Soviet forces stationed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). From these roots has grown an abiding interest in German history, culture and the German people, who have a great deal more in common with the British than we often acknowledge.

The First World War turned so many 'certainties' on their heads, not least of which was the dramatic reversal of alliances, especially those between Great Britain and France (traditional enemies), and that of Great Britain with Prussia/Germany as traditional allies. All this has led me to wonder precisely what the true experience of the German soldier was like between 1914 and 1918, and at the other end of the scale, whether German leadership was genuinely superior to that of the Allies during the First World War, for which much 'testimony' still exists.

I have been privileged to carry out research on this book in places far and wide and, as usual, sources range from individual testament or memory of loved ones through a considerable wealth of primary and secondary sources, many of which have been translated from the 'notorious' German Gothic script, and other excellent studies of all aspects of the battles, campaigns, strategy, doctrine, leadership and tactics of the First World War on the Western Front in particular. While every effort has been made to acknowledge copyright holders of the references and illustrative material used in *All the Kaiser's Men*, should any copyright holders inadvertently have been omitted, I would urge them to contact the publishers directly.

I have received particular help from the Bundesarchiv, Imperial War Museum, Public Record Office, (now known as The National Archive), the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds, Australian War Memorial and the German Historical Institute and hope that their advice, assistance and genuine interest in my efforts to realise my aim will be rewarded. The Imperial War Museum has provided continual support through its Department of Printed Books, Documents and Mapping Department, Photographic and

Sound Archives, as well as the Reading Room and Library. I wish to extend my thanks to all the staff who have helped me to read and use extracts especially of captured letters, diaries, individual memoirs, and German regimental and other unit histories. My thanks go also to Renate and Oliver Farley, for their poignant family history of Renate's father, Robert and his brothers Karl and Alois, as well as that of Valentine Kühns.

As ever, I am immensely grateful for the support and encouragement of members of the Western Front Association (WFA), British Commission for Military History (BCMH) and the many travellers with Holts' Battlefields and History Tours who have shown a real desire to have a German version of the events of the First World War that they so diligently study and on which they spend time travelling to 'see the ground'. Of a large cast of fellow enthusiasts, whose knowledge and passion for the subject will always continue across social as well as working hours, I wish to acknowledge the help of Peter Simkins, Michael Orr, Stuart Sampson, Kathy Stevenson, Jules Lyne, Bill Philpott, Isabel Swan, John Lee, Leslie Graham, David Filsell and Tony Cowan, among others. I would particularly acknowledge the assiduous and excellent efforts of Joy Thomas in bringing the British Official History to new life with extracts of the detailed German information held therein and which is so often missed or ignored. My special thanks go to Giles Allen for access to his outstanding collection of First World War memorabilia.

In general terms, studies of this great conflict have paid lip-service to the actual conditions for the troops on the other side of no-man's-land while acknowledging the 'mud, blood and horror' of life for the Tommy or the *Poilu* (French soldier). This is by no means the full picture, for tremendous strides *have* been made in considering Germany and the Central Powers as part of the equation – and excellent studies are now available.

What I believe is still missing is a narrative account of all the Kaiser's men, particularly in the main theatre of war between 1914 and 1918 – the Western Front. Though not claiming to be in any way a definitive academic analysis of the German Army in the First World War, I trust that *All the Kaiser's Men* will give a wider readership an insight into the life and death of the German Army at that time to set against their knowledge of the British, Dominion or French experience.

Dr Correlli Barnett and John Terraine (who passed away on 28th December 2003, but whose legacy is a profound one), have been particular inspirations to me across the years, not least because of their outstanding contribution to the BBC's 'Great War' television series and their unwavering determination to inject objectivity into such an emotive subject as the First World War.

My thanks go also to Sutton Publishing for taking me on for a second time and to Jonathan Falconer, Nick Reynolds, Sarah Flight *et al.* for helping to take the manuscript, photographs, maps and diagrams and magically produce the book; a process that still fascinates me at every turn.

Last, but by no means least, I could not have even contemplated this work without the extraordinary forbearance and understanding of Sally, JJ and Eleanor. I hope they will consider the fact that Sutton Publishing has elected to release it in paperback worthwhile also.

PREFACE

Anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.

Count Otto von Bismarck
(Speech to the Reichstag, Berlin, 1867)

The Great War, or First World War, gained such titles from the unprecedented scale on which it was fought from the outset. There had never been so great a concentration of armed force in world history as that which formed the respective blocs ranged against each other in August 1914. Each of the major continental armies, namely those of Germany, France, Austro-Hungary and Russia, had around one million men in the field and millions in reserve when the conflict began.

The only exception, as a key player on the Western Front, was Great Britain, with an Army of less than 500,000 and a mere 120,000 assigned to the British Expeditionary Force, or BEF. But Great Britain was not a continental, but a world power, with an empire that covered over a third of the globe. As an island-nation with imperial interests, its military strength relied on the then unchallenged supremacy of the Royal Navy, rather than a large standing Army.

Although Wellington and Napoleon and their generals had developed strategies and tactics based on the use of thousands of men almost a century before, in 1914 commanders such as Joffre and von Moltke were dealing daily with millions. Furthermore, these were millions armed with weapons more accurate, quick-firing and deadly than ever before. If the strategy and tactics were difficult enough, the logistical implications were a nightmare. But by 1914, the movement of men and *matériel* had also changed beyond all recognition since the last great European conflict of the Napoleonic era.

The sheer scale of the conflict determined the nature of the war itself. Plans drawn up by Germany, France and Russia prior to the hostilities envisaged rapid victory via swift mobilisation and the prompt despatch of the vast armies to the forward battle zone ba train. In short, the nation's rolling stock and railway timetables held the key to success. Once the armies were in place, it was believed that the offensive spirit, eloquently labelled by the French as *l'attaque à l'outrance*, would win the campaign – and the war – in weeks, rather than months or years.

The British provided the only coherent voice of reason at this stage, despite the popular enthusiasm for war that had gripped the people of all the nations that were then tumbling headlong towards Armageddon. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, warned his Cabinet colleagues that this would be no swift, victorious campaign. Rather, it would more likely stretch across a minimum of three years and with concomitant serious loss of life on both sides.

More poignantly, as war was officially announced in Great Britain and the crowds amassed in London and sang 'God Save the King', delighted at the great adventure on which they were about to embark, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had already seen the true apparition of the war about to unfold. Standing in a Foreign Office window with a colleague as the lamps were lit across St James's Park, he remarked sorrowfully: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'

On the other side, where we shall dwell in this book, the enthusiasm and arrogance of a nation that was more certain than any other of its destiny in this war, attitudes were very, very different. On 4 August, when Germany had declared war on Belgium and immediately violated her borders, Britain, under the terms of the Treaty of London of April 1839, ordered general mobilisation and issued an ultimatum. In Berlin, the British Ambassador, Sir Edward Groschen, presented the ultimatum papers to Chancellor Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg. The German Chancellor was incandescent over what he regarded was hypocritical harping on Belgium, which in his opinion was not the reason for Britain's decision to go to war. He stated that:

> England is doing an unthinkable thing in making war on a kindred nation . . . it was like striking a man from behind while he was fighting for his life against two assailants and as a result of this terrible step, England would be responsible for the dreadful events that might follow . . . [and this would be] all from just a word, 'neutrality'. Just for a scrap of paper Great Britain is going to make war on a kindred nation!

The ultimatum was rejected and Britain and Germany were at war.

But this time, the historical precedent of English and Prussian alliance against France had been turned on its head. The spirit of Wellington and Blücher was forgotten and Britain and Germany were enemies that were by now politically polarised. By the end of August their young men, many of whom had family and friends in the other country and whose cultural heritages were so closely tied, would be fighting each other in the land that had been so often the land of their mutual enemy, France.

It was ironic that in his invective against 'England', Bethmann-Hollweg had unwittingly used the phrase, 'like striking a man from behind while he was fighting for his life'. Four years later, German agitators would attempt to explain away Germany's final defeat by accusing Socialist and Jewish politicians of 'stabbing Germany in the back' when she was fighting for her life. Neither accusation was true, of course, but

each had a palliative effect for those who were leading Germany into a dark and terribly bloody place.

By 5 August, Britain was transformed into Germany's most hated enemy. '*Gott strafe England*' ('God punish England') was on the lips of almost every German soldier, woman and child, convinced that they had been betrayed by an old friend. Crowds pelted the British Embassy in Berlin with stones and enraged Berliners described this betrayal as '*Rassen verrat*', or 'racial treason'. Many Germans sincerely believed that they were about to fight a 'defensive' war, convinced that they were surrounded by hostile neighbours, all with evil intent.

Now even Britain had joined in the conspiracy as far as they were concerned. Many had not conceived such a thing, having witnessed a Britain in decline on their visits to friends and family there in recent years. They had believed that social unrest was rife, authority diminished and that with a small, though professional army, Britain would have no stomach for a fight against Germany as the great new military and industrial power in Europe. They were to be proved so wrong.

But as the drama over Britain's entry into war and the reaction to it was played out, the Kaiser was predicting triumph, and quickly, to the delirious crowds in Berlin. Confident that his divine destiny was to lead Germany to the promised land of European – and then global – supremacy, he exhorted his troops as they departed for the front in early August with the imperial prophecy that:

> You will be home before the [autumn] leaves have fallen . . . The only countries that have made progress and become great were warring nations; those which have not been ambitious and gone to war have amounted to nothing.

Sadly, the only German troops to return home before the leaves fell across Germany in the autumn of 1914 would be the thousands of wounded men who had become the first few of millions who would suffer the same fate – crippled, blinded or mentally afflicted by the horrors of a war that Germany had been so confident of winning at the outset.

As to being a successful warring nation, Germany would need two wars to finally come to terms with the fact that the noble Prussian military tradition on which she was founded as a nation state in 1871 was, for all its strengths, the very architect of its nemesis in both 1918 and 1945.

Let there be no further illusions about the whys and the wherefores, the point, pointlessness, or apparent futility of the First World War between 1914 and 1918. The why, the point and the justification for the conflict were, and remain, rooted in containing the over-weaning ambition of what was a militaristic Germany.

The nation state of Germany was the prize for crushing the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Otto von Bismarck, the 'Iron Chancellor', brilliantly, but all too briefly, guided this fledgling nation. But goodwill and good intentions were

blatantly tossed aside under the misguided leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Germany, the 'new kid on the block' in Europe, rapidly became the 'new bully on the block'.

In August 1914, the US Ambassador to the Court of St James in London, Walter Hines Page, wrote: 'German militarism, which is the crime of the last fifty years, has been working towards [war] for twenty-five years. It is the logical result of their spirit and enterprise and doctrine. It had to come.'

Page had summed it up perfectly; the First World War was the inevitable result of German economic and industrial progress, coupled with an avowed militarism.

It is no coincidence that the German term for the period 1914 to 1918 was always *Weltkrieg*, or 'World War', whereas in Britain it was principally known as the Great War, rather than the First World War or World War One and in France, *I.a Grande Guerre* was preferred to *La Première Guerre Mondiale*.

When Bismarck was forced out of office in 1890, his steady hand on the tiller was lost and the military leaders, enthusiastically encouraged by the ambitious Kaiser, gradually, yet inexorably, tore the fabric of democracy apart. Ultimately, the Kaiser saw the 'Prussian military tradition' as the one and only true symbol of Germany's rise to European and global influence.

Coupled with this psychological export of Germany's symbolic military power between 1871 and 1914, Germany's industrial and technological progress in the same period was astonishing. Naturally, it suited the Kaiser and his generals that this progress was hitched strongly to the burgeoning power of the armed forces.

But with rapid industrial and technological advances came equally swift social change. An overwhelmingly rural population was transformed into an increasingly urban one, as well as a population that had expanded from 11 million in 1871 to almost 40 million by 1914.

Sweeping educational reforms, which emphasised higher and technical education, led to Germany's claim on some of the most prominent and brilliant chemists, engineers and pioneers in the electrical and communications industries, as well as the 'third dimension' of aviation, in which Count Graf von Zeppelin led the world.

The rapid increase in the strength of the German Navy was more than matched by that of merchant shipping and German trade, which was becoming truly global by the turn of the century. Industrial expansion was underlined by the astounding increase in coal and steel production – the very foundation of the modern state at that time.

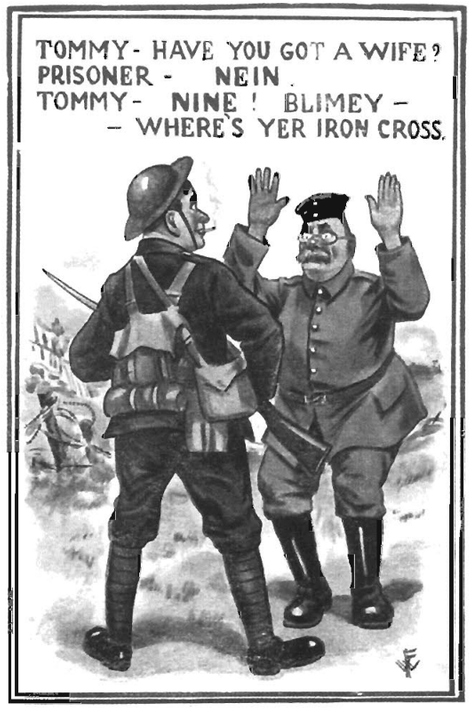
All in all, by 1914 Germany had come from nowhere as a nation and impressed the world. But this collective achievement in only four decades between 1871 and 1914 had sinister undertones. In the minds of the Kaiser and the military hierarchy, Germany's social, industrial and economic evolution was not only proof-positive that Germany was becoming a great nation, but also that she now possessed the infrastructure, manpower and resources for a victorious and glorious war.

Lord Haldane, statesman and British Minister for War between 1906 and 1911, knew Germany well and understood the origin of the First World War more clearly than most. He wrote:

> The reason [for war] appears to have been at some period in 1913 the German Government finally lost the reins on the necks of men whom up to then it had held in restraint. The decision appears to have been allowed at this point to pass from civilians to soldiers . . . It is not their business to have the last word in deciding between peace and war.

Germany was unquestionably at the heart of the bloody conflicts that marked the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, Germany must be the place to go to fully understand the context, rather than the myth, of the First World War.

It is a journey worth taking.



INTRODUCTION

The reader will appreciate that *All the Kaiser's Men* is a title that is not accurate for the 'purist', as the book deliberately concentrates on the German experience of the First World War on the Western front, the main theatre of war throughout the momentous events of 1914 to 1918. Nevertheless, with the collapse of Russia in 1917 and the transfer of a million-or-so German troops from that theatre to the west and the German offensive/defensive campaigns on the Western front throughout 1918, the vast majority of the troops of the German Army were fated to serve on the Western front at one stage or another of the war. I hope that the book will be read with this in mind and that the narrative will be both accessible and fascinating.

References and research sources from German archives can be a mixed blessing, as much that was published from 1933 onwards would have had the 'dead hand' of the National Socialist regime's Propaganda Ministry scrawled across it if it did not conform to the myths and blatant untruths that were peddled about the origins and conduct of the First World War. Nevertheless, providing the reader is reasonably well-versed in the history of that era and is prepared to keep an open mind, the sources dating from 1933 can, and should, still be regarded as important documents.

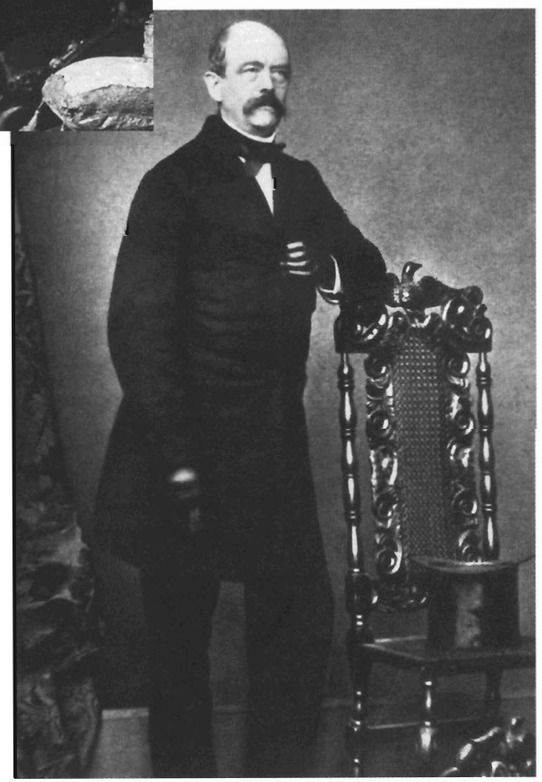
I have attempted to ensure that all abbreviations are used in full initially throughout the text and include most where appropriate in the glossary also. Where relevant, I have included translations of phrases and all of the poetry included in the book, and of many of the principal documents referred to either in the end notes or the bibliography.

Place names corrupted by soldiers on both sides, such as 'Wipers' for the Belgian town of Ypres, are included in their original and 'corrupted' manner and where German place names differ from either the French or Belgian original, e.g. *Ypern* for Ieper or Ypres, they are shown in italics.

The study has drawn heavily on both the German official history *Weltkrieg* (with the 'Government Health Warning' given in these notes), *Ypern 1914* and the extraordinary alternative *Weltkrieg* by Rudolf Stratz, which reflects the true nature of 'spin' on behalf of the National Socialist regime, as well as diaries and memoirs that range widely from

those of personalities such as von Falkenhagn, Ludendorff, von Hindenburg and Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria to those of prominent soldiers like Ernst Jünger and ordinary men such as Edwin Valentine Kühns, Alois and Albert Mühmelt and Herbert Sulzbach. These have been an endless source of revelation and fascination in my research. I would also recommend the *British Official History*, which has a wealth of translated information on German actions, attitudes and leadership issues in its voluminous footnotes and special sections on the German experience of a particular battle or campaign throughout, much of which has not been tapped by readers hitherto. Naturally, many other primary and secondary sources were used, as the text and bibliography will reflect. Where possible, maps are of German origin also.

Kaiser Wilhelm II.
(Bundesarchiv)



Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.
(Camera Press, London)

CHAPTER 1

ROOTS OF CONFLICT: 1871–1914

'Where the army marches,
all Germany marches too.'

In 1887, Friedrich Engels predicted, that beyond the German victory in the Franco-Prussian war, the next major conflict, (namely the First World War), would be fought on a scale and in conditions without precedent. It would lead to nothing less than the destruction of empires, monarchies and the notion of divine right for hereditary rulers:

> . . . [This fledgling state] – Prussia-Germany – can no longer fight any war but a world war; and a world war of hitherto unknown dimensions and ferocity. Eight to ten million soldiers will strangle each other and in the process decimate Europe . . . The ravages of the Thirty Years War telescoped into three or four years and extended to the entire European continent. It will lead to famine, pestilence and the general barbarization of both the armies and peoples of the competing nations. It will end in general bankruptcy and the collapse of the old state and traditional statecraft . . .[1]

But despite the huge political and social upheavals, as well as the enormous sacrifice for most of the nations embroiled in the First World War, the nature of the war's end and of the Treaty of Versailles would sow the seeds of another even greater worldwide conflict a mere generation later.

For Germany, with almost two million dead and approximately seven and a half million wounded, maimed, crippled and destitute soldiers returning to a country half-starved by the Allied blockade and deliberated by woeful military and political mismanagement between 1914 and 1918, it looked as if it would be impossible for the German people to contemplate another major conflict.

And it seemed to be unthinkable that Germany would use military force again once it entered an era of democracy – the Weimar Republic – and despite the serious economic difficulties that were to beset it and the rest of the world in the 1920s and early 1930s.

But the impossible and the unthinkable happened. The real tragedy was that its roots were firmly embedded in Germany's experience of the First World War and a national psyche that accepted authority and believed the notion that Germany was destined for greatness and the leading role on the world stage.

Germany's fate throughout the first half of the twentieth century was fixed by her evolution as a nation state following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. The fulcrum was the First World War – where German plans for European and global dominance, combined with military arrogance, dictatorship and a flawed strategy led only to political and military collapse in the summer and autumn of 1918. It is a historical fact that sadly, the German Army was not forced to surrender unconditionally and the hard-won Allied military victory was then undermined by the subsequent political failure of the Versailles Treaty. In short, the Allied Military success was undermined by political failure at Versailles.

In 1872 the German socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht had explained to a baffled British visitor: '[To understand] Germany, you must first grasp the fact that this new nation is like an inverted pyramid. Its apex, firmly embedded in the ground, is the spike on the top of the Prussian soldier's helmet. Everything rests on that.'

The Army, principally represented and led by Prussian influence, was unencumbered by constitutional restraints. The Chancellor and mentor of a unified Germany and the 'Second Reich' was Count Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor. He set about making the newly ascendant and confident Germany the strongest economic power in Europe, granting generous concessions to industry and creating a stable currency.

For the years after 1871, Bismarck enjoyed the support of a compliant Kaiser, namely Wilhelm I. When he died in March 1888, he was succeeded by his 57-year-old son Friedrich III, the husband of Queen Victoria's eldest and favourite daughter 'Vicky'.

Friedrich was a great admirer of British parliamentary institutions and envisioned a democratic Germany. Indeed, during the Franco-Prussian War, he had noted in his diary:

> I maintain even today that Germany could have conquered morally, without 'blood and iron' [in Bismarck's phrase] . . . It will be our noble but immensely difficult task in the future to free the dear German Fatherland from the unfounded suspicions with which the World looks upon it today. We must show that our newly-acquired power is not a danger, but a boon to humanity.

But it was not to be. Friedrich was Kaiser for a mere 99 days and died of throat cancer on 15 June 1888.

His 29-year-old son became Kaiser Wilhelm II. The difference between 'Kaiser Bill' and his predecessors could not have been more stark, for he immediately set about dashing any hope of a benign democracy within Germany. He hated constitutionalism and the power of political parties and he despised his father's 'liberal' thinking.

Above all, he resented Bismarck's well-established authority and the personal respect that he enjoyed throughout Germany. Wilhelm refused to subordinate himself to the aging chancellor. Bismarck, on the other hand, remarked that: 'The new Kaiser is like a balloon. If you don't keep hold of the string, you will never know where he will be off to.' It was the beginning of a stormy, brief and ultimately fatal power struggle between Bismarck and the Kaiser.

Matters came to a head in 1890 when Bismarck unearthed an old decree, signed by Wilhelm IV in 1852, obliging Prussian ministers to consult with the prime minister before approaching the king. The chancellor, in attempting to limit the younger Wilhelm's exposure to the ideas of others, infuriated him. The Kaiser ordered Bismarck to repeal the decree or resign. Bismarck, embittered and totally frustrated by Wilhelm's hubris, chose to resign.

As soon as he was unfettered by this political control, Wilhelm II swiftly shifted the focus of foreign policy and set course for confrontation rather than mediation with other nation states that would have dire consequences for the Hohenzollern dynasty and Germany. Not content with becoming a dominant force on the European continent, Wilhelm was determined to transform Germany into a global power with a colonial empire and a powerful Navy that would more than match that of Britain in particular.

In fact, this new emphasis did suit the muscle-flexing mood of the day. Germany was enjoying an era of unprecedented growth, and most Germans saw in the Kaiser's *Weltpolitik*, or global policy, an outlet for their energy and desire to ensure Germany's greatness as the 'new kid on the block' on the world stage. Coupled with the public support for the Kaiser's initiative was the resurgence of a virulent form of racist nationalism, epitomised by the *Alldeutsche Verband*, or Pan-German League.

Founded in 1890, the league embraced the notion that pure-blooded Teutons were the creators and bearers of civilisation and thus responsible for all worldly progress. Jews and 'socialists', on the other hand, were a corrupting, negative force – a dogma popularised by Houston Stewart-Chamberlain, the Anglo-German author and son-in-law of the composer Richard Wagner. Beyond this extreme simplification of European affairs, the Pan-German League's professed goal was to gather all the countries considered to be 'German' in origin, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austro-Hungary, Poland, Rumania and Serbia. From this enlarged Reich, the pan-Germans intended nothing less than to rule the world.

This notion was fuelled by this diabolical theory and by the outpourings of such writers as Heinrich von Trietschke, who popularised the glorification of war as a means to achieve greatness, and predicted that a new German empire would replace the old British empire and utterly subjugate the Slavs of central Europe. Buoyed by these ideas, the Kaiser drove a wedge between moderation and extremist views in the Fatherland.

The conflict that was to actually erupt in 1914 was preordained. It is my view that the touch paper for a European conflagration had been lit in the 1890s. Trietschke, greatly admired by Wilhelm II, wrote in 1892: 'Those who propose a foolish notion of

peace show their ignorance of the international life of the Aryan race.' Democracies were dismissed as corrupt and, beneath the surface, ripe for domination by the emergent militaristic nation of Germany, with the Kaiser at its head.

By the turn of the century, Wilhelm's penchant for bombast and the radical views coming from Germany sharpened a growing worldwide fear of a policy that appeared to advocate German military aggression. The Kaiser peppered his speeches with phrases such as 'a place in the sun', Germany's 'mailed fist' and a 'glistening coat of [chain] mail', to make this policy plain to all who cared to listen. When Herbert Asquith engaged Wilhelm in a discussion on the balance of power in Europe, he retorted: 'There is no balance of power but me; me and my 25 [Army] Corps.'

Worse, the ship-building programme masterminded by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz was designed to match the Royal Navy ship for ship – a red rag to the British bulldog. It engendered a rivalry that became a principal factor in Britain's decision to seek an entente with her traditional enemy, France.

As a continental power, Germany's great strength lay with its army. But circumstances and ambitions beyond the continent arguably weakened that might as a result of Wilhelm II's desire for global influence and Tirpitz's ambition to rule the waves in place of the Royal Navy. Tirpitz had unequivocal faith in sea power and was equally convinced that Britain was determined to prevent Germany from striving to become the world influence that he believed was her destiny. In 1897, he affirmed in a secret memorandum that England was Germany's most dangerous naval enemy; and in that 'enemy's' mind, the Tirpitz factor was one of profound menace too:

> Sea-power played no part in the making of modern Germany, and that was irrelevant to Germany's home defence. It was sought deliberately as an engine of conquest and as the only effective weapon with which Germany could win power abroad and above all dispute British supremacy.[2]

In 1898, Tirpitz introduced the Navy Law, which was explicit in confirming such British fears. The Imperial German Navy was to expand dramatically and become an instrument of challenge and coercion, rather than directly confront the Royal Navy, at least for a number of years. In 1900 Tirpitz put forward the infamous 'Risk Theory', a policy by which Germany could build a modern maritime force to match the Royal Navy and threaten Britain's fleets protecting the empire abroad.

What's more, the public demonstration of Germany's naval expansion led to patriotic fervour and convinced the Kaiser that the Fatherland's future lay 'on the water'. By 1912, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg declared that: 'The fleet was the favourite child of Germany.'[3]

Tirpitz's aggressive policy led to inevitable reaction, not least by Britain. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, introduced the naval reforms as a direct response. Germany was careering towards isolation and enmity from the world's greatest sea

power in addition to the opposition she had already brought upon herself from Russia and France. In 1904, it was a significant factor in the bilateral agreeement that led to the 'Entente Cordiale' between Great Britain and France. By 1907, Britain, France and Russia had formed the Triple Entente. Germany had brought this upon herself, primarily because of Tirpitz, whose 'Risk Theory' had begun to turn towards a dark reality for Germany's future.

One by one, Germany had forfeited friendships and old alliances. In 1909, German Chancellor Bethman-Hollweg summed up the Kaiser's policy when he wrote: 'Challenge everybody, get in everyone's way and, in the course of it all, weaken nobody.'

The Bismarckian balance of power, based on firm government and a pragmatic foreign policy, was now a long-abandoned dream, for first Wilhelm II and then the military powers in Germany had torn it to shreds, strip by strip. Tirpitz and Count Alfred von Schlieffen had become the architects of Germany's destiny. Schlieffen, as Chief of the Army General Staff, had drawn up a plan of 'preventative war' to pre-empt any growing threat of attacks by France on one side and Russia on the other. The threats were tenuous, but the perception in Germany held sway.

By 1914 the German Army's thirst for war had gathered widespread support. By then, the control of economic and foreign policy had all but passed to the military General Staff anyway.

After the assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo on 28 June, Germany became engaged in a race that was wholly driven by the military hierarchy in order to conform with the Schlieffen Plan. When the Russians began to mobilise on 29 July and the French followed suit on 1 August, the pressure on the Kaiser to kowtow to the Army was overwhelming. Simply, if he failed to order general mobilisation, the Schlieffen Plan would be jeopardised. He had little choice but to acquiesce.

The very size of the German Army forced a decision. From some 250,000 men in 1870 it had grown to over two million strong – almost one million of whom had to be moved by a strict timetable immediately. Any delay was intolerable and could be fatal, according to the General Staff. The chickens were now flocking home to roost – the Kaiser's arrogance and bombast since his accession had led Germany to the brink of war and he was now forced to make a decision by those to whom he had originally sought to give power without losing supreme control himself.

As the conflagration in Europe was about to ignite he realised too late that he had unwittingly handed over the reins of power – the conduct of the war and Germany's leadership – to a military High Command that would ultimately bring Germany to ruin and the Kaiser to exile.

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 Prussia, allied with Bavaria and other German states, defeated the French. In January 1871 the North German Federation was dissolved, giving way to the German Empire or *Reich*, with King Wilhelm the First of Prussia as its first emperor.

The father of the new army was Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800–91). An avid

student of the theories of Clausewitz and Gneisenau, he devoted himself to the formation, instruction, and evolution of the German General Staff and the Army, both of which were to become renowned for their skill and professionalism in the art of modern warfare.

When war came in August 1914, the German Army was under the command of General Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. His officers and the troops that they led were confident that the great German Army would sweep any opposition off the battlefield in the west before turning its attention in force to the Eastern front. After all, they were about to implement the indomitable Schlieffen Plan.

This strategic initiative, conceived by Moltke the Elder, and subsequently developed by Count Alfred von Schlieffen when he eventually succeeded Moltke as Chief of the German General Staff, envisaged a war on two fronts. But it would still win a war within months, not years. He declared that, 'In a two-front war, the whole of Germany must throw itself upon one enemy; the strongest, most powerful, most dangerous enemy and that can only be France.'[4]

Count Alfred von Schlieffen. *(IWM: HU 1777)*

The main German force was to attack France, striking through Belgium, move quickly into the department of Champagne, smash the French in one great battle, isolate Paris, then roll the remains of the French Army up to the Swiss border. Schlieffen was adamant that the right wing of this vast sweeping movement must be strong and seamless, reaching as far west as Lille to make the envelopment of the French Army complete. Schlieffen wanted 'the last man on the right of the right wing to brush the Channel with his sleeve' when the Kaiser's men marched stridently in to violate and conquer French territory.

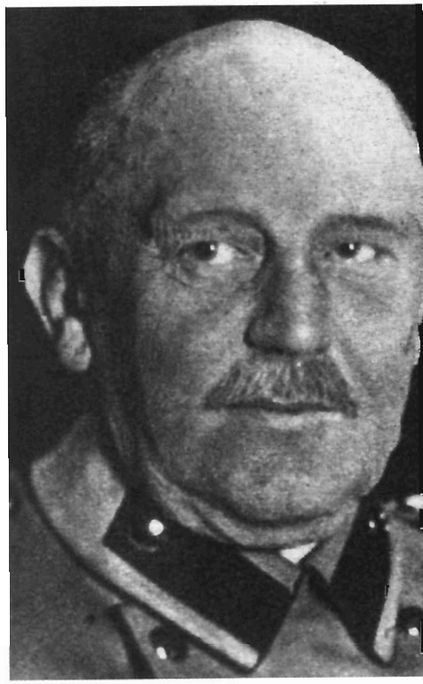
Behind this massive advance by first-rate Active Army Corps through Belgium, reserve formations would rush to the Channel ports to cut off any British reinforcement of the French Army. This would leave one army, the Eighth, to secure East Prussia so as to contain any initial Russian advance and to cooperate with the Austrians, who were to attack Russian forces through Poland. Austria was to withdraw some troops from her front with Serbia to develop a strike at Russia through Galicia.

This was the plan, and it was accepted by the Kaiser, the government and the German High Command, as well as the General Staff. The power and influence of the German General Staff were so strong that the plan was endorsed without any debate on its moral or political implications. The violation of Belgian neutrality was hardly a major factor to most, for few influential German politicians or military men believed in its neutrality anyway. More dangerous, however, was the hubris and unquestioned authority of the General Staff and its head, Count Alfred von Schlieffen. The German foreign ministry was informed that:

> If the Chief of the General Staff, particularly such a pre-eminent strategical authority as Schlieffen, considers such a measure [violating Belgium] is necessary, then it is the duty of diplomacy to concur in it and to facilitate it in every possible manner.[5]

The Schlieffen Plan apparently provided the template for guaranteed success. When the test came, its architect was already in *Valhalla* and his successor, Helmuth von Moltke, ('the Younger') was not cut of the same cloth as either his mentor or his renowned uncle. Moltke was a pessimist, who lacked Schlieffen's drive and zeal for the concept of concentrating his forces and most of his strength in one bold manoeuvre. If Schlieffen's motto was 'Be bold, be bold', then Moltke's was 'Be bold, but not too bold.'

He worried constantly about the weakness of his left wing, rather than the strength of his right wing, in the west; and he had nagging doubts about the capability of his Eighth Army in East Prussia to contain any Russian aggression. Schlieffen had estimated that the vast army that was known as the 'Russian steamroller', largely because of the sheer weight of its numbers, would be slow to mobilise and therefore the Eighth Army's role would be merely to screen and contain the Eastern Front alongside its Austro-Hungarian allies while the war in the West was swiftly settled. Then, the concentration of force would be entirely at the East's disposal.



Generol Helmuth von Moltke ('the Younger'), Chief of the Germon Generol Staff until his failure on the Marne in September 1914. *(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg.*

But what if the momentum of the western offensive was stalled; and what if the 'Russian steamroller' moved forward more quickly than Schlieffen had predicted? Moltke wrestled with such 'worst case scenarios' and he made a few adjustments along the way, a little tinkering here and there, and hoped for the best. The test of Germany's master strategy and the man who was fated to bear the responsibility for implementing it was looming. It would be quite a test.

Owing to the efficient system of universal conscription, Germany was able to field a large professionally-trained army within days of war being declared in July/August 1914. In peacetime, every German male from the age of seventeen to forty-five was liable for some form of military service.

Although not eligible for service in the Standing Army until his twentieth birthday, every man on reaching seventeen became automatically liable to serve with the *Landsturm*, or Home Guard. On his twentieth birthday, he began to serve a two-year period, or three years in the case of cavalry or artillery, with the Standing Army, followed by successive periods of seven years with reserve forces – the *Landwehr* – and then back to the *Landsturm* for the final seven years of service. This system meant that each year saw a constant entry from one

form of service to another – up to age forty-five. This was the principal reason for the large pool of manpower at the onset of hostilities. In wartime men could be called up and sent to the front before reaching the age of twenty and were not automatically released from further service until their forty-fifth birthday.

There were three more categories: the *Restanten Liste* (reserved occupations, but eligible for military service *in extremis*), the *Einjahrige Freiwilligen* (one-year volunteers) and the *Kriegsfreiwilligen* (War Volunteers). The latter were men between 17 and 20 who were allowed to volunteer for active service before their official call-up date. Thousands of young men opted for this option in the heady days of July and August 1914.

Not surprisingly, the Reserve and *Landsturm* were practically all absorbed into the expansion of the Army in 1914. The *Landsturm* in particular was extensively drawn on to make up the huge losses of the autumn and winter campaigns of that year. By the end of 1915 this had exhausted most of these reinforcements. As a result, men training within the normal categories were called to the front earlier than planned.

Significantly, the situation became so dire by the beginning of 1917 that training drafts that expected to have been called to the colours in 1919 were drafted into service on the Eastern front two years early. This was to allow seasoned and experienced men to be transferred to the Western Front to replace the enormous losses there. It was abundantly clear from Germany's manpower situation alone that by the beginning of 1917 her Army was on the 'back foot' on the Western Front. The roots of this crisis were to be firmly embedded in the twin German catastrophes at Verdun and especially on the Somme in the previous year, as we shall see.

Between 1914 and 1918, the German Army was to prove time and time again that it had the capacity to remain standing after what appeared to have been knockout blows. This endurance against extraordinary odds came from the resourcefulness and courage of the ordinary '*Fritzie Schmidt*' (an allusion to 'Tommy Atkins' as the archetypal British soldier) and the leadership of junior officers and the stalwart senior and junior NCOs. On the face of it, these were similar characteristics of the Western allies. But there were marked differences, so often neglected by studies of the First World War.

Inevitably, the officer corps was modelled on Prussia, the dominant state prior to and after unification in 1871. Though only 30 per cent of the officers in the German Army of 1914 were aristocrats, they held most of the important command roles and staff appointments. This imbalance did not reflect German society, where the inspiration and drive of modernisation had been largely with the middle classes. This was demonstrated by the fact that in the more technical corps, such as the artillery and engineers, middle-class officers predominated. But few progressed to the higher levels of command.

Therefore, as *Materialschlacht*, or the 'war of material' dependent on modern technology, evolved between 1914 and 1918, the German High Command struggled to handle it. It was an inherent weakness, obvious not at regimental level and in the trenches where the day-to-day fighting went on, but at the senior levels where the fate of the

German Army rested. It would lead to dogmatic, rather than pragmatic, doctrine and become a source of failure in 1918.

Halfway through the First World War, as the Somme campaign erupted, this weakness was explicitly identified by the Germans themselves. On 4 July 1916, Admiral Georg Müller, a senior aide to the Kaiser, discussed the state of German military leadership with General Ludwig von Lauter, the largely unheralded but crucially important Ordnance General for Heavy Artillery at *OHL*, the German Supreme HQ. Lauter was responsible for the logistical provision of this vital asset and understood the nature of modern warfare and the reality of *Materialschlacht*. Georg Müller recorded Lauter's uncomplimentary comments about the German military leadership in his diary:

'Fräulein Feldgrau', the German soldier's pin-up in 1914.
(Allen Collection)

> It was a war, he said, 'of young leaders and junior officers on the General Staff and in the field, a war that was dangerously undermining the authority of the Army commanders . . . ' Lauter warned the Staff [on this] emphatically in December before the Verdun offensive. When he expressed his opinion to von Falkenhayn later, the latter replied: 'Well, the French are being bled white, too. Moreover, if things go badly, we can break off and say that we only intended taking the forward [French] positions.' When I [Müller] asked von Lauter whether General Falkenhayn enjoyed great respect in the Army, he replied: 'Certainly not, and if the war ever ends there will be some interesting literature on the subject of the [German] war leadership.'[6]

After Falkenhayn's dismissal in August 1916, the 'duumvirate' leadership of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff agreed that in the West they had succeeded to 'an evil inheritance.' In the context of the dreadful events unfolding for the German troops at Verdun and on the Somme, this view was entirely apposite. But it could just as easily have described the insidious inheritance that Germany had now chained herself to with a military dictatorship that was soon to become absolute. The worst part was that from August 1916 Hindenburg, the 'Hero of Tannenberg' and a military legend of the Franco-Prussian War to boot, gave

Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles: Germans were convinced that their much vaunted Army would win a swift and glorious victory – 1914 postcard. *(Allen Collection)*

Ludendorff a legitimacy and status that would prove fatal for the Fatherland. By early 1917, the Kaiser became a political and military irrelevance and Ludendorff had a free reign to lead the charge to Germany's first twentieth-century nemesis.

The real strength of the German Army lay at the tactical level and rested on the shoulders of junior officers and the NCOs. The popular myth and tales of 'Lions led by Donkeys' in the British Army during the First World War could be more accurately applied to the German Army. German junior officers and NCOs were given more responsibility in their rank than their Allied equivalents, so that an *Oberleutnant* might well command an infantry company of 150 men and a sergeant or *Feldwebel* a platoon of around 40.

Germany's modernisation since 1871, which included universal education and a high proportion of well-educated men and women, worked to her advantage in war. Senior and junior NCOs were generally better educated than their Allied equivalents and they were trusted to use their initiative and play more important roles at the tactical level. These '100,000 men' were truly the backbone of the German Army, maintaining the highest standards of training and discipline, as well as inspiring their men to acts of courage and endurance that were the hallmark of the Kaiser's men throughout this war and would be when their sons went to war twenty-one years later.

The German Army in 1914 had an active strength of eight armies, with one, the Eighth, in East Prussia. Within these armies were a total of 25 Corps, with 50 infantry and 11 cavalry divisions. Behind these came 32 Reserve divisions, 7 *Ersatz* (supplementary Reserve) divisions and 16 *Landwehr* Brigades. The field Army was around 850,000 and the High Command was determined to use maximum and concentrated force in the West.[7]

The railways were soon sending the vast majority of these men and their weapons and other *matériel* towards the West for death or glory, while the remainder headed for the borders of East Prussia.[8]

CHAPTER 2
THE SCENT OF VICTORY, DISASTER ON THE MARNE
AUGUST–SEPTEMBER 1914

Abschied

Vorm Sterben mache ich noch mein Gedicht.
Still, Kameraden, stört mich nicht.
Wir ziehn zum Krieg. Der Tod ist unser Kitt.
O, heulte mir doch die Geliebte nit.
Was liegt an mir? Ich gehe gerne ein.
Meine Mutter weint; Man muß aus Eisen sein.
Die Sonne fällt zum Horizont hinab.
Bald wirft man mich ins milde Massengrab.
Am Himmel brennt das brave Abendrot;
Vielleicht bin ich in dreizehn Tage tot.

Alfred Lichtenstein, 1889–1914
(Killed in action at Vermandovillers, Somme, September 1914)

'Departure' or Leaving for the Front

Before dying I must write my poem.
Quiet, comrades, don't disturb me.
We are off to war [and] death is our bond.
Oh, if only my girlfriend would stop howling!
What do I care? I am happy to go.
My mother's crying; one needs to be made of iron.
The sun falls to the horizon;
Soon they'll be throwing me into a nice mass-grave.
In the sky the good old sun is glowing red;
[And] in thirteen days I shall probably be dead.

At the beginning of August 1914 there was an unmistakable mood of optimism across Europe. Throughout the continent, peace gave way to an explosion of patriotic enthusiasm for war. The tensions within each country – unrest and fear of civil disobedience, civil war and social upheaval brought on by poverty and the sheer drabness of most people's lives – were blown away like a cobweb on a fresh wind. The fresh wind was 'the cause' – a singular belief in each country of duty, honour, glory and victory in the name of the Kaiser, King, Tsar or Emperor.

Within weeks of Archduke Ferdinand's assassination it was utterly irrelevant that it was Austria's *casus belli*, for it was, in irredeemable fact, Germany's war. The German Army attacked first – principally to knock out France in the west.

At 5 a.m. on 4 August, the German vanguard crossed the Belgian frontier. On the same day, the Kaiser, already more certain of victory than any other European leader at that time, addressed a packed Reichstag: 'I no longer know of [political] parties. I know only Germans and therefore I ask all of you to give me your hands.'

It was a stirring and convincing speech, which re-ignited the flames of nationalism and the inculcated belief in Germany's destiny to be the principal actor on first the European and then the world stage. All seemed possible in this Berlin theatre of dreams on that day. To underscore the Kaiser's rhetoric, Imperial Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg stepped forward next to ask the Reichstag assembly to endorse his request for a staggering war credit of £265 million. It was granted, unanimously.

By the end of that momentous day, with the Kaiser now at war with Great Britain and her imperial forces as well as France and Belgium in the west, Germany was inextricably on course for 'death or glory'. Her appetite for glorious war and sweeping victory grew by the hour – and Belgium was to be the *hors d'oeuvre*.

Belgium was the springboard for the much-vaunted Schlieffen Plan, as she provided the best route for the German Army to strike at the heart of France without having to bludgeon its way through the line of French frontier fortresses that ran from Verdun in the north to Belfort in the south.

The Great Adventure Begins I: Off to the Front.
(Allen Collection)

The Western Front 1914–1918.

The Great Adventure Begins II:
Tea for the troops.
(Allen Collection)

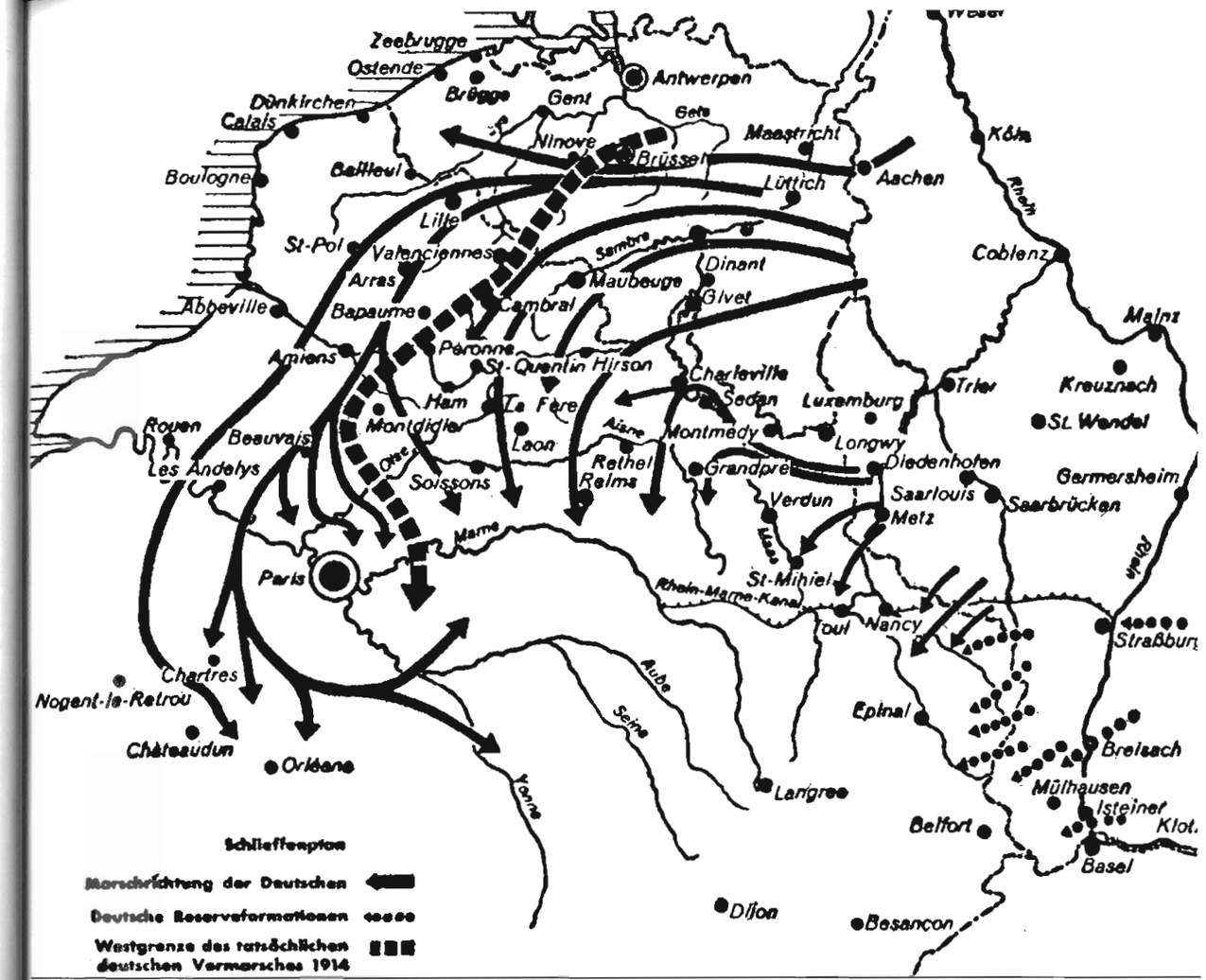
The Great Adventure Begins III:
Friends cheer a German cavalryman off to war.
(Bundesarchiv)

The Schlieffen Plan was brilliant in its simplicity. While the German Eighth Army contained any Russian threat on the Eastern Front, five armies would smash through Belgium and, once Brussels fell, swing west and south into France via Lille and then, with its right wing brushing the Channel, cut through the Somme region and Amiens and pass round behind Paris before taking the mass of bewildered French *poilus* and their commanders from behind. The consequence? A stunning victory that would surpass even the brilliant achievement of 1871. But this time it was expected to take a mere forty days from start to finish.

The reality, however, was as predictable as the failure of plans drawn up by Staff Officers predicting 'sweeping success' by using 'big hands on small maps', in military parlance. On paper, using 'staff tables' to calculate the rate of advance, rate of fire, casualty rates and logistical requirements to sustain such offensives, and on the 'campaign map', the plan appeared sound.

But the campaign map and staff tables used to devise the Schlieffen Plan made one overriding assumption as its vital ingredient: speed was of the essence. Nothing was to hinder the German juggernaut's progress through Belgium, France and then the victory parade along the Champs Elysées. Belgium was simply a corridor through which the German forces would pass. Little resistance was expected, for her army was weak and ill-trained when compared with the might of its adversary. Or so the Germans thought.

The first real blow would fall on Liège, where fortresses acted as sentinels over the River Meuse and all routes to Brussels and then into France. Its garrison, led by the



The Schlieffen Plan: Theory and Reality. The map shows the planned advance of the German armies (bold lines) and the western flank of the actual German advance to the Marne, August to September 1914.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

redoubtable General Gérard Leman, was expected to capitulate after only a token struggle.

As the leading German divisions closed on Liège, most expected that the defenders would be simply swept aside and barely check their stride. They had good reason to think that at the beginning of August 1914. In theory the German war machine was overwhelming and unstoppable. It was commonly believed that

> Wer Unglück will im Kriege han,
> Der binde mit dem Deutschen an.
> ('If anyone wants a disastrous war,
> then let him pick a quarrel with a German.')[1]

The Belgian Army faced the most powerful, well-trained and well-equipped armed forces the world had ever seen. They were the mirror to the world of the image of the new Germany: a young, expanding, industrialised and confident nation with expansive ambitions for European and global leadership. The soldier was Germany and Germany's sons served her with pride, and were admired by her people. Where the Army marched, all Germany marched too.

With a peacetime conscripted army of almost 900,000 men and four million trained reserves, Germany had the potential to more than double that – a combined total of ten million. The backbone was the infantry, comprising 78 divisions, and at the centre of the German army's excellence was its 110,000 superbly trained junior officers and non-commissioned officers, or NCOs. Their status was firmly established elsewhere. Lt James L. Jack of the 1st Cameronians wrote in his diary on 12 August 1914:

> Of our Adversaries: The Austrians are gentlemen rather than soldiers. Germany, however, is very highly organised for a European war. Her armies have a tremendous reputation, and have smashed all enemies quite easily in the past fifty years . . . A Staff College friend . . . told me quite recently that the German infantry must be considered equal to ours notwithstanding their short service . . . compared with our long-service men, many of whom have seen a campaign . . . Perhaps we are a little better at musketry.[2]

The cavalry comprised a little over 100,000 men, its elite status reflected by the Kaiser's special patronage and the fact that his son, Crown Prince Wilhelm, elected to

German infantry 'Advance to Contact' in France, August 1914.
(IWM: Q53446)

join the Death's Head (*Totenkopf*) Hussars. Alongside the Hussars were the Dragoons, Cuirassiers and Uhlans, among others, all with characteristically flamboyant dress and styles. Before the growing influence of German aces of the air war such as Max Immelmann, Oswald Boelke and Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, the cavalry were the most revered of the Kaiser's warriors.

Less glamorous, though infinitely more deadly, the German artillery was about to pitch this conflict into a new era of man's diabolical ingenuity and war's more distant slaughter.

In August 1914 the German field artillery was poor in comparison with the British 18-pounder and especially the outstanding French 75mm, '*soixante-quinze*'. But the 3,000-plus medium and heavy guns were awesome in both range and destructive power. From the outset, Germany had guns and mortars with calibres of 150mm, 210mm, 305mm, even 420mm, which were efficiently supplied with excellent ammunition and primed to rip both the men and the soil of France and Belgium apart.

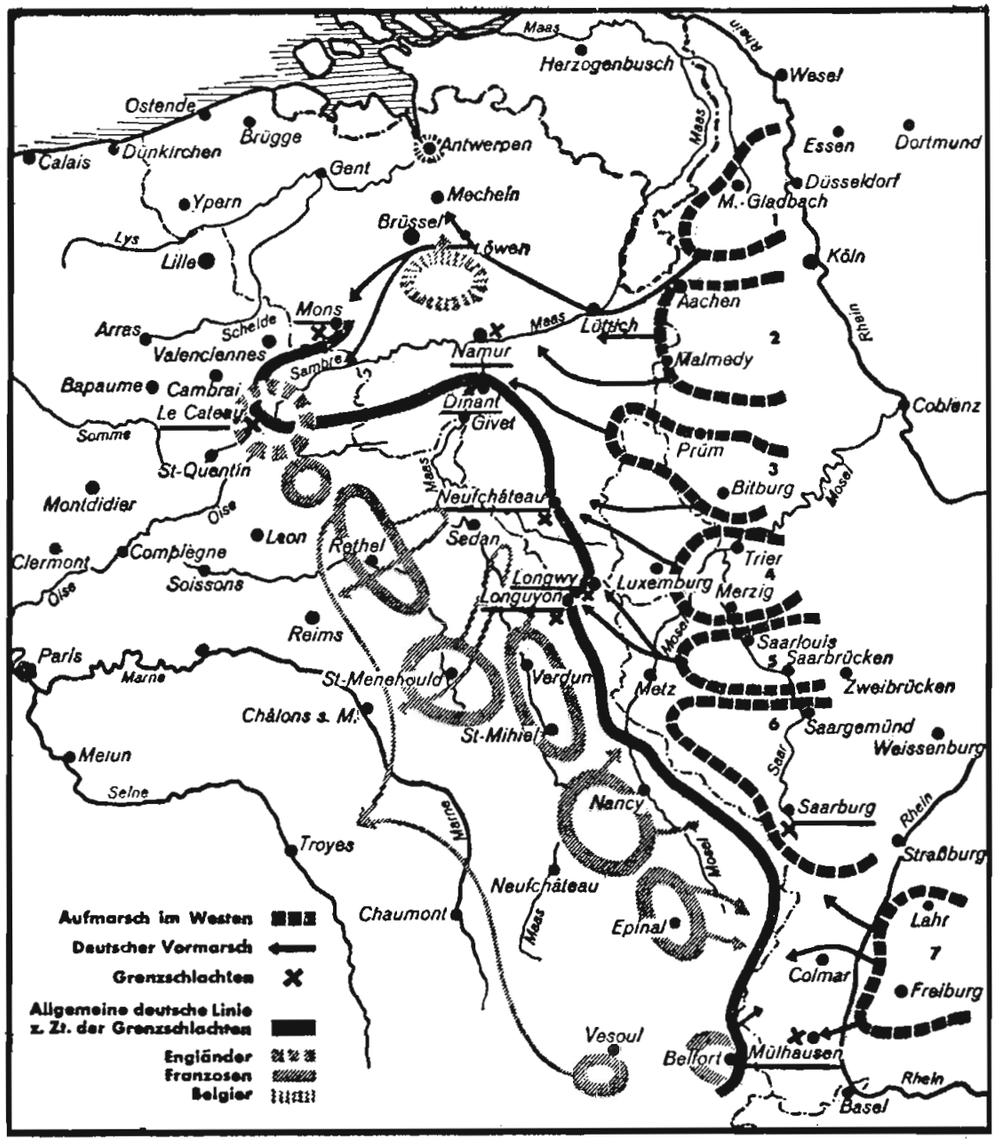
With all these resources behind them and with an arrogant spring in their step, the first waves of assaulting German infantry swept towards the Liège defences. They were repulsed at great cost. At first, the apparently irresistible force of German military power crashed uselessly against the immovable object of Liège's forts and the plucky Belgian garrison within.

Even the capture of the citadel by the then little-known Major General Erich Ludendorff did not unhinge the fortress defences, so ably controlled by General Gérard Leman. This heroic defiance not only briefly shocked and checked the swaggering advance of the Kaiser's men, but also inspired the world to stop the German tidal wave. The phrase 'gallant little Belgium' was born and a myriad of cartoons appeared depicting caricatures of Belgium bullied but unbowed by Germany.

Inevitably, courageous and determined resistance would have to give way to the flexing muscle of German military power – the guns and mortars. Leman's men were brought to their knees by the 'heavies', including the Krupp 420mm and the Austrian-supplied Skoda 305mm pieces. The Liège forts were mercilessly pounded and crushed by the weight and concentration of such monstrous guns. The gallant General Leman was buried under the debris, but lived alongside many of his men to be captured by admiring and incredulous German troops.

But with the fall of Liège, the way became clear for the Schlieffen Plan to unfold rapidly once more. Brussels and the French border were the next items on the menu – and the Belgian Army had not the slightest hope of checking its pace again. That task had now to fall to Belgium's allies in France and Great Britain.

The French Army had mobilised and rushed to defend its borders in a tidy fashion while the rape of Belgium proceeded. France, like Germany, had drawn up a scheme to outflank its enemy and win a swift victory: Plan XVII, which would also conveniently reclaim Alsace-Lorraine, lost to Germany as a result of the Franco-Prussian War, and a constant thorn in the side since.



The German advance in the West: The 'Vormarsch' through Belgium and the 'Clash on the Frontiers', showing the German front line at the time of the border battles, August 1914.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

Plan XVII was more straightforward than the Schlieffen Plan. The problem was that Plan XVII was less based on staff tables and campaign maps than it was on the firm, though naïve belief that French élan and the spirit of the offensive – *l'attaque à l'outrance* – would be enough to turn the German tide. The operational order for Plan XVII stated: 'Whatever the circumstances, it is the Commander-in-Chiefs' intention to advance, all forces united, to the attack of the German armies.'

So the *poilus* of the French Army headed into the breach entirely convinced that their élan would see them through. As in Germany, the French people had total faith in their Army; it had been their pride and constant in more recent troubled political times. Moreover, France had been itching for revenge after the ignominy of 1871. It was her eternal flame, which would re-ignite French passion to fulfil her destiny and make Germany pay for that previous humiliation. Now the moment had come and the flames of passion were burning high.

Yet the French Army differed from its German counterpart in two fundamental and almost fatal ways in August 1914. It was equipped for colonial or, in many cases, Napoleonic warfare, in stark contrast to its foe. Cuirassiers rode to war as if to Waterloo almost 100 years before and infantry divisions wore blue tunics and red trousers.

Many French officers regarded it as unfashionable not to wear white gloves and brandish a sword rather than an oily and inconvenient revolver when going into an attack. Above all, the French Army lacked then what their enemy had in abundance: medium and heavy artillery.

The crunch soon came and tested Plan XVII, and both élan and the French Cuirassiers' breastplates against *Herr Krupp's* abundant hot steel. As Liège was being reduced to rubble in the north, the French struck in the south towards Alsace. Early success was illusory and soon ruthlessly reversed by German counter-attacks and the devastating use of artillery. Whole regiments of infantry and cavalry vanished in the smoke and the fire, only to re-emerge as lines of dead and dying men and horses.

By the third week in August 1914, despite uplifting 'morale-boosting' reports in the newspapers back home, it had become clear that the respective French and German plans had 'not quite lived up to expectations'. The French and German High Commands had begun to live with the stark reality of war plans that were now unfolding for real, rather than in respective staff exercises.

It was a time of uncertainty and a time for steady nerves at the very top on both sides. Not for the first time in this 'Great War' when steady nerves were needed at the very top, Germany was to be at a disadvantage.

The Army's Commander-in-Chief, General Helmuth von Moltke 'the younger', was an honourable and conscientious man, but a very pale shadow of his heroic and illustrious uncle. Above all he was a man of unsteady nerve and uncertain authority. Cowed by the forceful personalities of his leading Army commanders such as Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria (Sixth Army) and Colonel-Generals Alexander von Klück (First Army) and Karl von Bülow (Second Army), he vacillated and became daily

more distant from the action in hand. Moltke's weakness was to have terrible consequences for the Kaiser's men.

Ironically, it seemed that Germany had least to fear at this stage. During this hot and bloody August, it had become apparent that French tactics owed more to the days of Napoleon than the here and now. Peacetime French Directives stated that success in battle depended only on knowing where the enemy were and then deciding what to do. What the enemy intended to do was of no importance, apparently.

In Alsace-Lorraine, the French Second Army commander General Edouard de Castelnau had exhorted his men to pursue the Germans, who were apparently retiring on his front, 'with the utmost vigour and rapidity'. This they did – and met Crown Prince Rupprecht's Sixth Army head-on as they, in turn, were actually counter-attacking rather than retiring.

Suddenly it was desperately important for the French troops to know what the enemy intended to do. But it was already too late. The results were catastrophic, as the attacking lines of French infantry and cavalry had no time to even waver before being stopped dead in their tracks by German artillery and machine guns.

A French officer recalled later that they were shot down like rabbits because for the Germans they were such easy targets in their blue tunics and red trousers. Those who were not cut down immediately had no chance to do anything other than fall back.

German infantry assault an enemy position, August 1914.

(Allen Collection)

The remnants of the French Second Army were forced to withdraw in what was a near rout. Crown Prince Rupprecht may well have recalled the Duke of Wellington's comment almost a century before that the French 'came on in the same old way and we stopped them, in the same old way'.

The French High Command began to grasp the message that élan and breastplates had become obsolete; but not before the 'Clash of the Frontiers' had claimed almost 300,000 French casualties.

On 20 August, General von Klück's First Army entered Brussels. It was an almost endless stream of swaggering field-grey topped by *Pickelhaubes*, horse-drawn supply wagons and heavy calibre guns.

Klück was back on course, and the Schlieffen plan was now rolling through the Belgian capital while General von Bülow's Second Army to the south was giving Namur the same destructive treatment with the heavy artillery. The unstoppable force was on the move once more – the scythe-like thrust of the German armies began to swing left towards the French frontier as planned.

At last, after a series of terrible hammerings, the scales were falling from French eyes. The fantasy of easy victory with élan leading the charge was giving way to nothing less than the nightmare that this was a grim and bloody struggle against a terrifyingly well-equipped, well-led and deadly enemy.

The deadly enemy were also showing signs of a more bestial intent – that of atrocity against the hapless Belgian population. A German soldier recalled that his infantry company had stopped in a village for their evening meal when they came under fire from the surrounding houses, 'but when we stormed the buildings from where the firing started, we found only innocent-looking Belgian civilians at first – and then infantry rifles still hot from the firing'.[3]

The German solution to the problem of these '*francs tireurs*' – snipers, guerrillas, or innocent bystanders – was to root them out and carry out instant retribution. One of the worst examples of this German ruthlessness was at Dinant, where over 600 men, women and children, were rounded up and gunned down. Those German officers and men who protested or questioned how such atrocities could possibly be explained – and many did – were told that such incidents would be forgotten when Germany, as the victors, wrote its 'official' history.

At the time, the moral argument was an ambivalent one. After all, as Erich von Ludendorff wrote:

> It is true that innocent persons may have had to suffer, but the stories of 'Belgian Atrocities' are nothing but clever, elaborate and widely-advertised legends and the Belgian Government can alone be held responsible. For my part, I had taken to the field with chivalrous and humane conceptions of war. This guerrilla war was bound to disgust any decent soldier. My soldierly spirit suffered bitter disillusion.[4]

PEACE REIGNS AT DINANT. L'ORDRE RÈGNE A DINANT!

'Satisfaction: Peace Begins at Dinant' – a contemporary postcard recalls German atrocities. *(Allen Collection)*

The massacre at Dinant.
(Contemporary Postcard, Allen Collection)

The ordinary soldiers insisted also that the atrocities were committed on both sides. One captured soldier, Hugo Lagershausen, 1st *Ersatz* Company of a Reserve Infantry Division, interviewed during the official investigation, declared:

> About noon on 6th August I came to a dressing station set up on a farm . . . In the house I found about fifteen severely wounded German soldiers, of whom four or five had been horribly mutilated . . . their eyes had been gouged out and some had had several fingers cut off . . . The men were still living and groaning . . .

Another, *Landwehrmann* Alwin Chaton, of 78th Reserve Infantry Regiment, added that:

> In the course of the street fighting in Charleroi . . . I saw . . . a German Dragoon lying in the street about fifty or sixty paces in front of me. Three civilians were near him, of whom one was bending over the soldier, who still kicked with his legs. I shot among them . . . one fell [and] the others fled. When I approached I saw the shot civilian had a knife, covered with blood, in his hand. The right eye of the German Dragoon was gouged out.[5]

Naturally, Allied investigators suggested that these troops were merely trying to save their own skins, perhaps, despite reasonable treatment as prisoners of war. The truth almost certainly lies

somewhere in between, although there is no doubt that the scale of atrocity weighed heavily on the side of the advancing German armies in the west.

To the cultured German mind, the worst atrocity admitted at the time was the desecration of the fifteenth-century library in the ancient university city of Louvain on 25 August. Two hundred and thirty thousand volumes, including irreplaceable medieval manuscripts and some of the earliest books ever printed, were burned to a cinder in an act of wanton, insane destruction. Similar things would happen in Germany herself only two decades later.[6]

Still the inexorable drive of the German war machine continued and only the French Fifth Army under General Charles Lanrezac and a newly despatched British Expeditionary Force, or BEF, would stand in its way.

The BEF had begun to form up in France on 7 August. As a small, though superbly trained and led volunteer force with wide experience of recent colonial wars, its men expected to play a significant role in pushing the marauding Germans back. Its commander, the irascible Field Marshal Sir John French, would first have to deal with the prickly Lanrezac in the spirit of Anglo-French cooperation. Sir John was more Francophobe than Francophile and it soon showed. It did not bode well for the 'entente cordiale'.

By 22 August the Germans were swarming towards Mons, while Field Marshal French had resolved to advance north towards Brussels. Lanrezac had other ideas. In his opinion, the German threat was now so great that the only course open was to withdraw. On 23 August the BEF was ordered to 'dig in' and hold a line between Maubeuge and Valenciennes, its tip just south of Mons.

It did so, waited for the advancing German infantry and then meted out a terrible punishment. Klück's First Army was checked, its leading units devastated by the accuracy, speed and steadiness of the British fire that ripped into them. Then, reluctantly, the BEF skilfully withdrew under fire. One German officer who witnessed the events wrote: 'Up to all the tricks of the trade from their experience of small wars, the English veterans brilliantly understood how to slip off at the last moment.'[7]

The retreat from Mons had begun. The BEF, scarcely in the war, appeared to be in imminent danger of losing it. The Entente Cordiale was perilously close to unravelling within days of the BEF's arrival and all the advantages were now with Germany. The Schlieffen Plan was apparently going like clockwork.

In the last week of August the French were everywhere in confusion and falling back against the irrepressible German advance. The three armies of the German right wing, over half-a-million strong, were swinging towards Paris. With 'Schlieffen' on course in the west, news reached the advancing German troops on the Western Front that the plan had already stood the test in the east. The Russian First and Second Armies had been crushed at Tannenberg and the threat to Germany's eastern borders was over. Now the real test had to be proved in France.

A German motorised convoy wrecked by artillery fire (Villers-Cotterets Forest). *(Postcard, 1914, Allen Collection)*

As the French and reluctant British withdrew towards the River Marne, the Allied commander, General Georges 'Papa' Joffre, decided to strengthen his left wing, where Klück's First Army threatened to outflank the BEF and French Fourth and Fifth Armies. The British 2nd Corps under Gen Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien was already holding the line tenaciously at Le Cateau and buying time for Joffre's plan to bear fruit.

The allied withdrawal continued and both French and British troops were dog-tired by now under the relentless German pursuit. But the men of the German armies heading towards Paris and on the trail of the retreating Allies were as weary as their enemy. They were unwittingly demonstrating that Schlieffen's plan had failed to take into account the fact that even the most robust soldier needed rest, as well as food, water and ammunition, to remain effective. They had been on the go since Liège and were footsore and desperate for respite.

Their commanders and staffs were tired too, and fatigue invites error. A monumental error was about to lay its dead hand on the German Army. A gap had appeared between Klück and Bülow's armies, exploited by a French counter move around Guise and St Quentin.

Bülow was alarmed by the gap that had appeared and signalled Klück that he needed help. In turn, Klück halted his advance to the southwest between Amiens and St Quentin and turned inwards towards Paris and the River Marne. Paris may have now appeared threatened but Klück's action was the first major twist of the knife into the body of the Schlieffen Plan.

The soldiers were becoming disillusioned and bitter. They advanced on and on, staggering forward and marching at times as if sleepwalking in unison to the beat of the drum and the rhythm of the martial music:

> Zehn tausend Mann, die zogen ins Manöver . . .
> (Ten thousand men,
> Went off on manoeuvres. . .)

Only the thought of imminent victory and just reward for their achievement kept them going:

> Der Bauer hat
> eine wunderschöne Tochter. . .
> (The farmer had
> a beautiful daughter. . .)

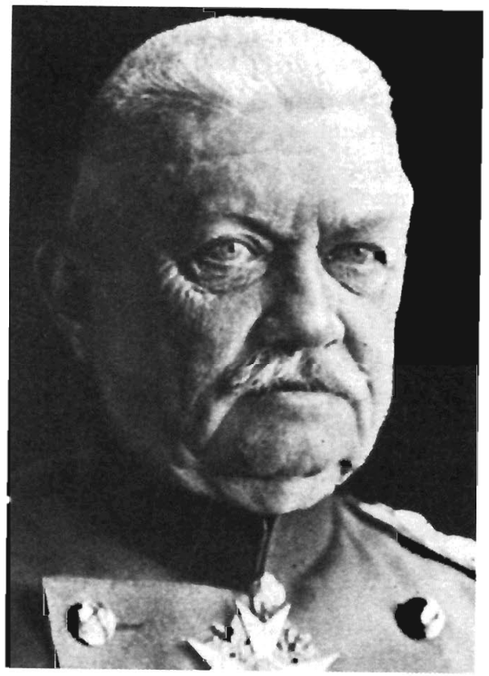
In the first fateful week of September it seemed that everyone was on the move, including thousands of refugees, and everyone appeared to be heading in the same direction: towards Paris. In so many ways it was now the Allies' darkest hour. Moltke's armies were still on course to fulfil the Schlieffen prophecy that within forty days France would fall and Britain would lose an Army.

But the Allies' darkest hour was to herald hope and a deadly false dawn for Moltke and the Kaiser's men. By now Klück's First Army had not only changed its thrust from southwest to south, but also begun to swing virtually southeast between Clermont (to the west) and Compiègne (east) towards Bülow's Second Army and the River Marne. This manoeuvre now exposed the men of Klück's right flank like ducks in a shooting gallery to General Maunory's newly formed Sixth Army's front line.

Worse, Klück's actions had been carried out without reference to his commander-in-chief Moltke. When Klück did inform Moltke of his *fait accompli* and that the First Army was now passing east, not west, of Paris, Moltke meekly acquiesced. The German 'supremo' was by now hopelessly out of touch with events and losing any grip on his Army commanders that he may once have possessed.

The situation was not lost on the Staff Officers, signallers and clerks of GHQ. By the end of the first week of September, it was noted:

> Watching him closely, some of his colleagues are beginning to notice a change in von Moltke. The man's vitality seems impaired; his moral fibre snapped, or at least impaired . . . [After midnight] on September 8th . . . von Moltke . . . is still seated at his table, beginning a letter to his wife, to whom he writes almost daily. To picture Moltke's state of mind, we need only look over his shoulder as he sits alone in his office, writing . . . 'I cannot find words to describe the crushing



Above: General-Oberst Alexander von Klück, commanding German First Army 1914.
Below: General-Oberst Karl von Bülow, commanding German Second Army 1914.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

burden of responsibility that . . . weighs upon me today. The appalling difficulties of our present situation hang before me like a dark curtain through which I can see nothing. The whole world is in league against us; it would seem that every country is bent on destroying Germany, once and for all.'[8]

In such a state of mind, Moltke was not only losing control of his commanders, but also trusting to the judgement of subordinates. Here and now, the curse of the German General Staff was about to rear its ugly head. Moltke passed much of his command responsibility to *Oberst Leutnant* Richard Hentsch and he was despatched to 'clarify' the situation concerning the movements of Klück's First and Bülow's Second Armies. Within days Hentsch, as Moltke's representative, would single-handedly change the course of history.

On the other hand, as Klück turned to the east of Paris and the Schlieffen Plan began to unravel before Moltke's transfixed eyes, the French commander saw opportunity knock. Defeat could, at this late hour, be turned into victory. It was as though Joffre could suddenly see the light. Lt Edward Spears, BEF liaison officer at the French GHQ, witnessed the extraordinary events of Papa Joffre's reaction:

> I actually saw him on the afternoon that he decided on the Battle of the Marne . . . Very few people have ever seen anyone with such a burden

> placed on his shoulders with nobody to help . . . Just weighing the pros and cons of this movement and that movement, what orders to issue . . . It lasted perhaps a couple of hours. But when he got up, his decision was taken and the orders went out that night.[9]

In one of those curious moments of juxtaposition in life, when Joffre had pondered, then decided that the Marne was to be a decisive battlefield, the armies on either side of Joffre's front line, whether in retreat or apparently heading for swaggering success, had paused. Too exhausted to be either pursued or continue with that pursuit, friend and foe took a brief time out from battle.

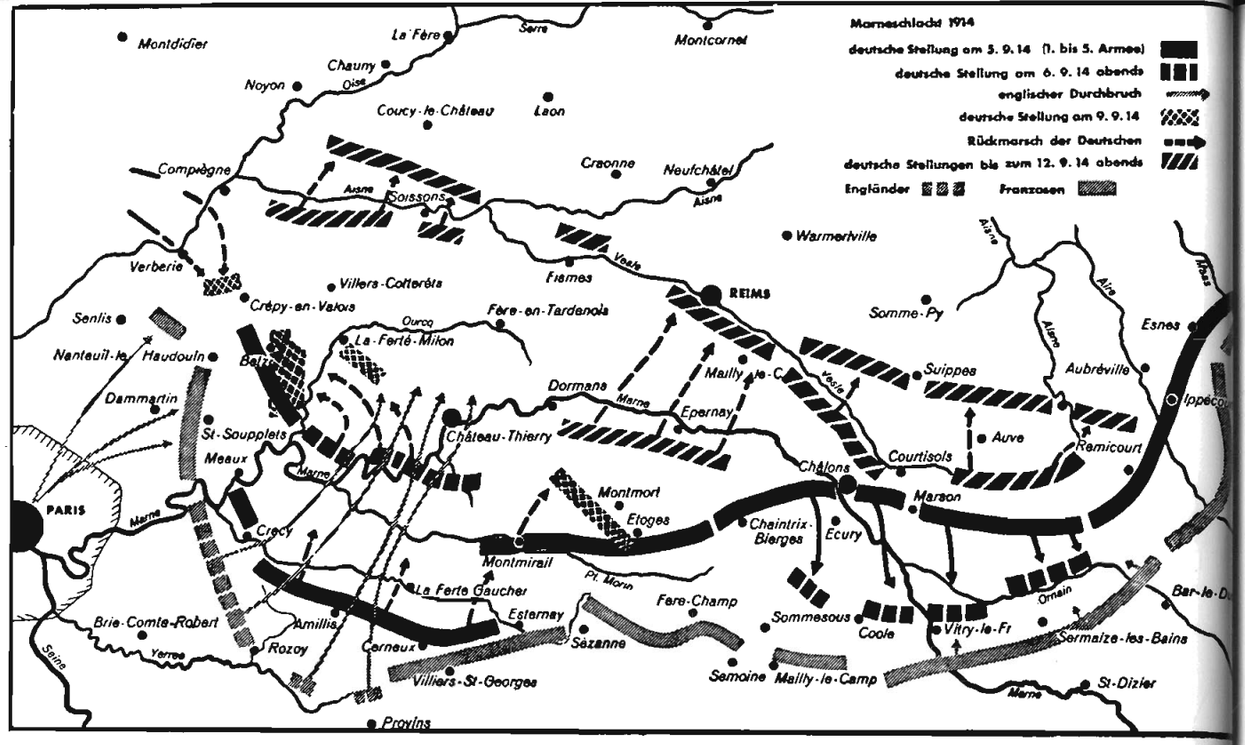
For Joffre, the moment of decision had been reached; now that decision was translated into action and Klück and Bülow's troops would be afflicted by one of the most dramatic and decisive operations of the entire war. By 8 September, Paris was a mere 20 miles away, perhaps a little closer for some. The Kaiser's men thought that this well-earned respite was merely an opportunity to rest, regroup, replenish and prepare for the final sweep into the French capital. Joffre and Field Marshal Sir John French, commanding the BEF, had other ideas. After a fortnight in retreat, this lull for the French and British soldiers was to provide time to prepare once again for the offensive: *à l'outrance* at last.

The British in particular, so frustrated by the continuous order to fall back when they were more inclined to fight back as at Mons and Le Cateau, were to be given the chance to do just that. On the other side, Klück's left wheel to the south, which put the German right wing to the east of Paris and not, as Schlieffen had planned, to the west, gave Joffre a golden opportunity. It was one that he had no intention of missing. He noted that: 'The situation was impressive. Our front formed the arc of a vast circle encircling the enemy.'

With this picture in mind, he planned to hold his right flank firm to contain the German left wing while attacking Klück's First Army with his Sixth. Simultaneously, he would push the BEF and French Fifth Army through the yawning gap that now existed between Klück and Bülow. Field Marshal French, moved by Joffre's plea for British help, had no hesitation in providing it. Over the next twenty-four hours, the French and the BEF regrouped, issued fresh orders to turn about and advance once more and were on the move.

The first counter-punch would be thrown on 6 September. Joffre issued an order of the day; an order that could not have been more clear:

> The moment has passed for looking to the rear. All our efforts must be directed towards attacking and driving back the enemy. Troops who can advance no further must, at any price, hold onto the ground that they have conquered rather than give way. Under the circumstances which face us, no act of weakness can be tolerated.[10]



Marneschlacht (the Battle of the Marne) September 1914: the German positions on 5 September (First to Fifth Armies); British (and French) breakthrough; German positions on the 9th and withdrawal; German positions on 12 September.
(Rudolph Stotz, Weltkrieg)

But on this first day the French Sixth Army was checked by dogged German resistance and General Gallieni responded with an extraordinary expedient: he reinforced the hard-pressed attackers with a legion of Parisian taxis that careered out of the city crammed with troops and drove straight into the fight. In the centre, a weaker German opposition was swept aside by the French Fifth Army and the BEF, who cut a swathe across the Marne and severed any chance of further collaboration between Klück and Bülow.[11]

Between 6 and 11 September a miracle unfolded for one side, while a numbing disaster inflicted the other. By 11 September, the German First and Second Armies had fallen back and Moltke's tenure at the head of all the Kaiser's men would be dramatically cut short. Germany's scent of victory now resembled the foul odour of defeat.

The Marne demonstrated a feature of apparently uncharacteristic German indiscipline that was to occur again most prominently during the spring 1918 offensives, as described by a British officer:

> The Germans made themselves very comfortable – perhaps even drunk – at the villages occupied by them. The ground in their neighbourhood is often literally covered with wine bottles, besides equipment, abandoned wagons, carts and

> exhausted horses. The [locals] are furious at the wanton damage done to their property by their late 'guests', described heatedly as 'Huns', 'Bosches', 'barbarians', . . . The woods on the routes of the BEF are full of bewildered German stragglers [and] our captures of prisoners and transport are . . . very large.[12]

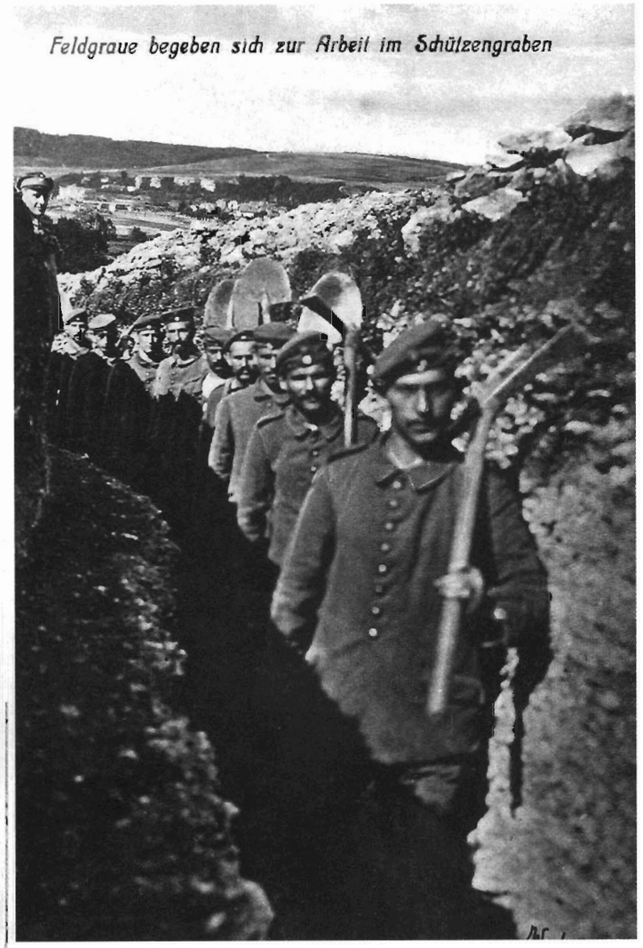
A vital factor in the German Army's disintegration was the authority vested in *Oberst Leutnant* Hentsch by Moltke. On 9 September, as a worried Bülow ordered Second Army's withdrawal, Hentsch met Klück's chief of staff Hermann von Kuhl at First Army HQ. Klück, the Army commander, was not present.

By the end of the meeting, in which Hentsch effectively ordered the withdrawal of the First Army also, Kuhl was preparing the draft reply for Klück to send to the beleaguered Moltke at GHQ. When it arrived, allegedly underwritten by the head of First Army, it was endorsed by Moltke. Hentsch had won the day, but the German Army were about to lose not only the battle on the Marne, but any chance of victory in the west in 1914.

By dawn on 12 September it was evident that the Schlieffen master plan had disintegrated; and there was no 'Plan B'. The Kaiser's men in the West were exhausted, wasted shadows of those who had so recently imagined beating a triumphant path to Paris 'before the leaves fell', as their Kaiser had promised. Now they had been thrown back from Paris and the Marne, stunned by their first defeat and left with the growing fear that victory had slipped from their grasp, perhaps forever.

For a brief period it seemed as though the German Army was on the verge of a humiliating retreat worse even than the Allied trek between Mons and the Marne. It

German dead await mass burial, Marne, 1914.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)



Troops set to work on their trench: postcard sent by a soldier of 6th Bavarian Infantry Division to his fiancée.
(Allen Collection)

was possible that its troops could be standing with their backs against the River Rhine and facing invasion themselves. There was a general mood in the Allied camp that a complete victory was within their sights, providing there was a due sense of urgency. For a moment, winning the war by Christmas was a tantalising thought.

But now a pattern of events began to unfold that would become depressingly familiar on the Western Front. Pursuit of the demoralised German armies was slow, over-cautious, and curbed by bridge demolitions and gutsy delaying actions by German rearguards.

On 13 September Gen Douglas Haig's British Ist Corps reached the River Aisne, overlooked by the 'Chemin des Dames' ridge. The German *Korps* had beaten the British to it, but only after a forced march of 40 miles in 24 hours. The German units took up positions on the Chemin des Dames and began to dig in. From rudimentary trenches they were able to hold off any British attempt to dislodge them. Then the British men dug in too.

Thereafter, both German and Allied attempts to outflank each other moved inexorably and bloodily north from the River Aisne to the River Somme, towards Arras, the Douai plain and beyond. Each manoeuvre ended with deadlock, further digging-in and a no-man's-land between the respective trench lines.

This period became known as the 'Race to the Sea'; a misnomer, in fact, as it was neither a race nor an attempt to reach the Channel ports. Rather, the ensuing clashes were little more than a series of slow-motion dances of death northwards as the Germans and Western Allies instinctively edged right or left respectively to open or close fleeting outflanking opportunities.

CHAPTER 3

DANCE OF DEATH, FIRST YPRES AND A WINTER OF DISCONTENT

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 1914

The 'dance of death' had reached Flanders by 8 October 1914. As the Allied pursuit began, General von Falkenhayn took stock. Having succeeded the exhausted and utterly dispirited Moltke, he knew full well that he had a daunting task ahead of him.

Falkenhayn was fifty-three years old and was Prussian Minister of War when the war erupted. For a time he would retain this office as well as that of Chief of the General Staff. A firm favourite of the Kaiser, Falkenhayn was ruthless, enigmatic and deeply unpopular with most of the senior German military figures. Though this clash of personalities would have dire consequences later, Falkenhayn did have the nerve and authority that Moltke lacked.

The Allied success may have ended in a grim slogging match, but it not only stemmed the flow of the German haemorrhage across the majority of Belgium and much of France, but also left German plans for any really coherent further advance in tatters.

On 1 October, as the BEF began to redeploy orders from the Aisne to Flanders to protect their vital line of communication and resupply, the German war machine on both the Eastern and the Western Front was geared up one more time in an attempt to deal a knockout blow. It was another dreadfully uneasy time for the Allied commanders and their hard-pressed, dog-tired men.

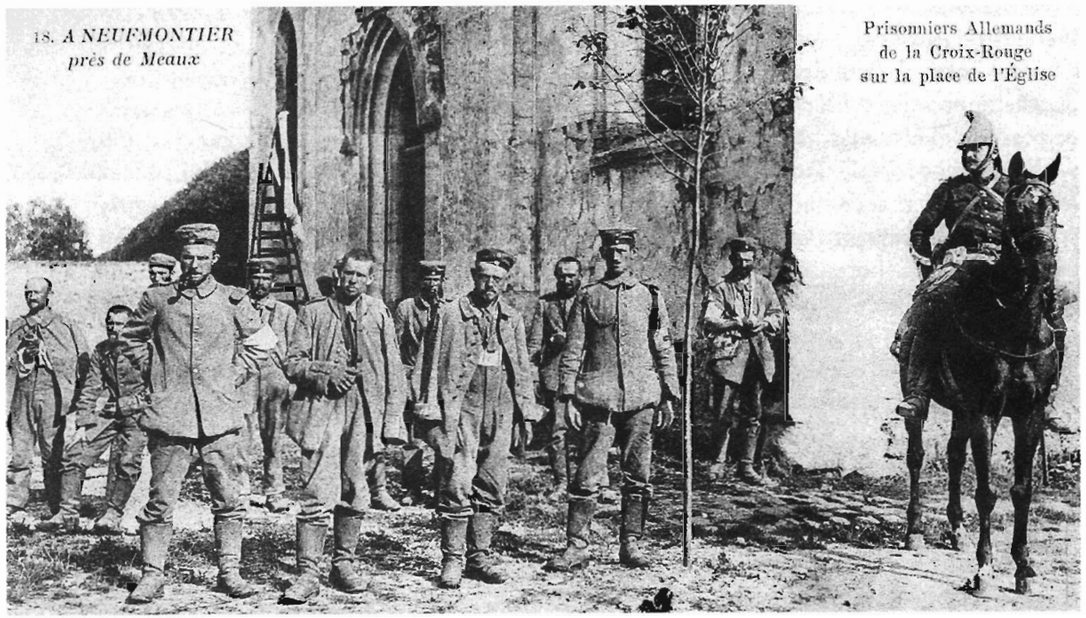
In the East, Field Marshal Hindenburg and General Ludendorff, who had crushed the Russian armies at Tannenberg a little over a month before, launched a sweeping advance towards Warsaw. But the Russians evaded the net cast wide to trap them near Warsaw and outflanked the Germans.

General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, September 1914 to August 1916.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

Simultaneously, on the Western Front, Antwerp was pummelled by the giant howitzers that bombarded Namur and Liège. The French along the Aisne under General Edouard de Curière de Castelnau faced mounting pressure from renewed German assaults, and the progress of each corps of the BEF into Flanders was hampered by an increasingly strong German presence. De Castelnau held on and the BEF pressed on to Ypres so that each corps managed to arrive in the Ypres area just in time to meet the new German onslaught.

Falkenhayn acknowledged that this would be the final throw of the dice for 1914 and only now emphasised that a breakthrough in Flanders, and against the British in particular, would not only threaten their continued will to resist, but also physically cut them off from the Channel ports and therefore any hope of resupply and reinforcement.

German prisoners in the autumn of 1914.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)



'The Great Europeon War' – a German gun and limber wrecked by a French 'soixante-quinze' 75mm quick-firing field gun, September 1914.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)

He declared:

> The Allied threat to the German right wing must be eliminated. If this is not done, then the drastic action against England and her sea traffic with U-boats, aircraft and zeppelins, which was being prepared in reply to England's war of starvation [the Allied Naval blockade against Germany], was impossible. It was also questionable whether the occupied territory in northern France and Western Belgium could be held . . . The prize is worth the stake.[1]

The stake at Ypres and in Flanders was practically everything that both sides could spare. This, then, was the stage for the final theatre of dreams of German victory in 1914 for the Kaiser, Falkenhayn and those exhausted German soldiers who had so far fought and survived the opening months of the war in the West.

By the beginning of October, the Belgians had established a front line along the River Yser from Nieuport on the coast to Bixschoote. To the south, the French had extended their line as far as Armentières. French territorial infantry divisions, a cavalry corps and the BEF now moved into the gap between the Belgian and French lines in Flanders. Their mission was to find and then turn Falkenhayn's right flank.

Simultaneously, the huge German Fourth Army under Duke Albrecht of Württemberg was heading for the gap and the Channel ports. The first encounter came on 10 October just west of the town of La Bassée when II Corps halted a German drive

towards it. Despite heavy losses, III Corps reached Armentières, securing the bridges over the River Lys in that area. General Edmund 'Bull' Allenby's Cavalry Corps advanced on their left to support the proposed flanking attack to turn the German force. At this stage, the Germans in their path rapidly established blocking positions while Albrecht's Fourth Army struck out towards the Belgian line in the north.

Herzog (Duke) Albrecht of Württemberg, commanding the German Fourth Army at Ypres, October–November 1914. *(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)*

Albrecht's plans were thwarted on 21 October when the Belgian High Command made the painful but vital decision to open the Yser flood barriers, inundating a vast area from the Nieuport to Dixmude. The Fourth Army therefore turned south and from 22 October its full weight was thrown against the rump of unoccupied Belgium.

Herbert Sulzbach, a gunner from Frankfurt-am-Main who had volunteered for military service as war was declared, was now about to witness the conflict at first hand as the Fourth and Sixth Armies geared up for the onslaught on Ypres. On 20 October at Lille, his unit, the 77th Field Artillery Regiment, received its warning order to move north into the cauldron that was to be the First Battle of Ypres. On 21 October, he wrote:

> Change of position. We pull forward, get our first glimpse of this battlefield, and have to get used to the terrible scenes and impressions: corpses, corpses and more corpses, rubble and the remains of a [captured] village . . . Trenches hastily dug by the British are full of bodies. We get driven out of this position . . . by infantry and artillery fire. We stand beside the guns with the horses [and] a dreadful night comes down on us. We have seen too many horrible things all at once . . . [they] make a very strong impression on us, barely twenty years old as we are, but these things also harden us up for what is going to come.[2]

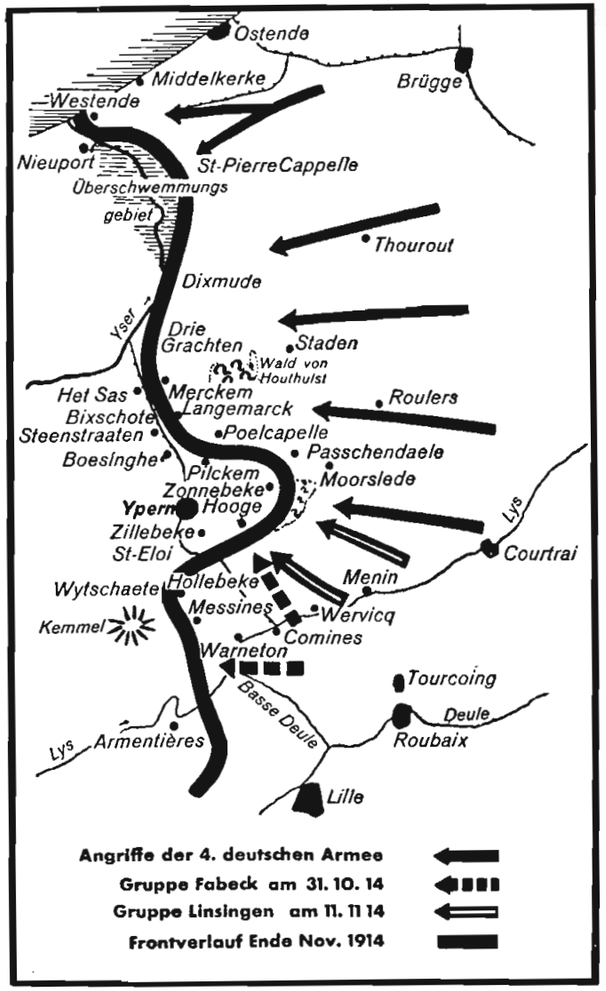
While this German drive was under way, French and Belgian units either side of the BEF were driven back and General Haig's British I Corps found itself exposed in a salient around Ypres. French General de Mitry's Cavalry Corps and the French IX Corps took over the defence of the northern sector of the salient between 22 and 24 October as heavy assaults were launched by elements of both Albrecht's Fourth

Army and Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria's Sixth Army from north and south respectively.

From 24 October, the battle for this 'Ypres salient' was a bloody, continuous and desperate contest. The sustained intensity of the fight, by day and night, was matched by the horrendous conditions of mud and bitter wintry weather.

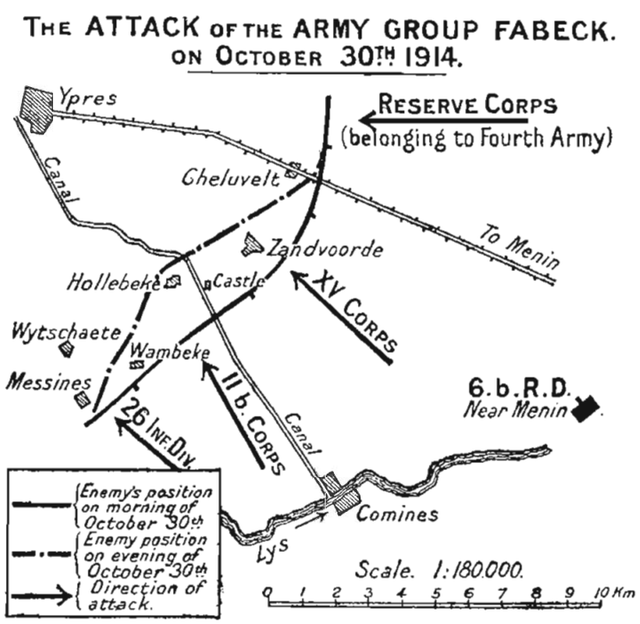
While the battles in Flanders raged, rumours abounded in Germany as well as England about the enemy's atrocities. In many cases they were hysterically inaccurate and both macabre and unbelievable to the more discerning observer. In October, popular myths came thick and fast:

> The Germans declare that not only are black troops being sent against them (elements of the Indian Corps at Wytschaete), but also that English convicts are being set loose on them, that they recognise them by the 'blue convict band' on their arms. If I tell them that the English do not brand their convicts and these are only



Ypern 1914 (First Ypres): the attack of the German Fourth Army. Gruppe Fabeck on 31 October and Gruppe Linsingen on 11 November highlighted. *(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)*

A 'goulash cannon' and crew on hour before departing for the front, somewhere in France, 1915. *(Postcard, Allen Collection)*



The attack of Army Group/Gruppe Fabeck on 30 October 1914.
(German General Staff, Ypern 1914)

tattoo marks, they won't believe me. Also, they assert that many of the British soldiers carry knives with a special twist in them, meant to scoop out the eyes of the wounded Germans.[3]

The reality of war was, of course, somewhat different. Bloody hard fighting it was, but that was all. There was little time or inclination for atrocity; the mounting losses on both sides were enough. Flanders fields were now the killing fields.

From 27 to 31 October, six fresh German divisions formed a new 'Army Group Fabeck' commanded by General von Fabeck, whose Chief of Staff was the redoubtable Lt Col (later General) Fritz von Lossberg. 'Army Group Fabeck' comprised XIII, XV and II Bavarian Corps. The XXIV Reserve Corps was also attached to 'Army Group Fabeck', but formed a *Kampfgruppe*, or Battle Group 'Gerok', which had I & II Cavalry Corps (four cavalry divisions), as well as a Bavarian cavalry division.

Army Group Fabeck then deployed into the gap that had existed between Fourth Army in the north and Sixth Army in the south and became the spearhead of Falkenhayn's renewed offensive from 30 October to 4 November. Supported by the usual concentration of heavy artillery, it was thrown against the British line between Ploegsteert Wood and the Menin Road, with its main effort centred on the capture of the southern high ground of the Ypres salient: the Messines-Wytschaete ridge:

> We now come to the most vital point of the battle, which was who was to be the victor in the fight for the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge.
>
> (Official German monograph, *Ypern 1914*)

On 30 October the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division worked its way forward towards Wytschaete during the day, but checked by the ferocity of enemy artillery fire. Nevertheless, it was ordered to capture the village on the night of 31 October. The plan was now for the 17th Reserve Infantry Regiment to attack from the east, while the 21st Reserve Infantry Regiment would simultaneously assault Wytschaete from the south.

Preparations were thorough, despite the lack of time prior to the attack. All assaulting troops wore white armbands to distinguish them from the enemy during any

close-quarter fighting in the darkness; water bottles and bayonet scabbards were packed away in haversacks, rifles checked and bayonets fixed.

The assault would rely on surprise. However, that night there was strong moonlight and this, combined with the constant stream of star shells fired by the defenders of the ridge, made it impossible to advance close to the enemy positions without being seen.

However, at 2 a.m. on 1 November the Bavarian assault began, against stiff enemy artillery and rifle fire, the general direction of the onrush being the remains of the Wytschaete windmill, which was prominently silhouetted as the Bavarians attacked. In the north, the 17th Reserve Infantry Regiment, under the command of Colonel Fritz Hofmann, swept up the ridge and pressed home the attack, rapidly dislodging the defenders and taking this northern sector swiftly.

Surprise had been achieved because of the speed of Hofmann's advance and the excellent use of dead ground by men of the leading waves of the assault. Some of the enemy held out in isolated pockets of resistance in buildings or makeshift strongpoints, until they were overrun and killed or taken prisoner. It had been a short, sharp battle, but the Bavarians had triumphed.

At 6 a.m. Hofmann decided to withdraw his forces into a tighter local defence of the captured sector of Wytschaete as his troops had been continually shelled since taking this part of the village. A few minutes later, as Hofmann's reorganisation phase was under way, the leading troops of the 21st Regiment began to emerge from the southern part of the village, their advance having been delayed by heavy enfilade fire from the south-west. As the approaching men of 21st Regiment moved forward they saw troops in the dim light of early dawn scurrying through the ruins to their north and opened fire. It was a tragic mistake, as their targets were Hofmann's men and dozens were either killed or wounded as a result. After his personal intervention, the 'friendly fire' ceased and both regiments set to the task of improving their defences, expecting the inevitable counter-attack. They did not have to wait long.

At around 9 a.m. Wytschaete was heavily shelled and then assaulted by French regiments that had been rushed to the Flanders area as reinforcements. The remnants of both Hofmann's 17th and the 21st Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiments were eventually forced to withdraw from the high ground.

To the south of Wytschaete, at Messines, an equally severe and bloody drama had unfolded during Halloween. On 30 October, the 26th (Württemburg) Infantry Division under Duke Wilhelm of Urach had already pushed reconnaissance patrols as far as the edge of the village – and these patrols provided valuable information on the state of the 'English' defences. As a result, it was decided to attack only after thorough artillery preparation, especially on enemy positions on the ridgeline north of Messines.

The plan was for 122nd Fusilier Regiment to attack the ridgeline north of Messines and provide the right-flank protection for the 125th Infantry Regiment while it attempted to assault and capture Messines itself. At the same time, 119th Grenadier

Regiment would attack the enemy defences south of the village and also provide vital left-flank protection for the 125th Regiment.

At 6 a.m. on 31 October, the German howitzers, medium and field artillery batteries began a heavy bombardment of the Messines defence lines. Two hours later the artillery preparation was strengthened by trench mortar fire. Zero Hour was at 10.30 a.m. and as the artillery bombardment fell, the assaulting Württemburg troops of 122nd Fusilier, 125th Infantry and 119th Grenadier Regiments moved into their jump-off positions.

At Zero Hour, the leading assault waves rose to begin the onslaught on Messines. But this was no attack by lines of field-grey uniformed men standing shoulder-to-shoulder and inviting wholesale slaughter by British rifle fire. They attacked in small groups, using short rushes, protected by the covering fire of other troops in the assault. They also utilised the natural contours and cover ('dead ground') of the slopes of Messines ridge to infiltrate the enemy defences.

By 11 a.m. the Stuttgarters of 125th Regiment had taken the north-east corner of Messines, but elsewhere the assault on the village itself rapidly devolved into a grim struggle for every barricade and building. German *Pionere* (Sappers) supported the assault by 125th Regiment. Their task was to destroy the smaller strongpoints established by the English defenders from the 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards and later the King's Own Scottish Borderers.

But most of the houses in Messines remained intact and the defenders caused the German advance to grind to a gory halt in the centre of the village. The greatest obstacle was the convent, protected as it was by walls a yard thick and strong towers from which the English defenders were firing rifles and machine guns and directing their artillery. It was a bloody struggle; reminiscent of the desperate attacks against La Haye Sainte or Hougomont during the Battle of Waterloo.

But this time the attackers prevailed. *Hauptmann* Heinrich's Württemburg battery of the 65th Field Artillery Regiment was brought forward, the men dragging the guns and lugging the ammunition through the debris of the village, and bombarded the convent. Soon after, the convent was in flames and many of its defenders were entombed beneath its ruins.

Leutnant Mösner and men of his company from the 125th Regiment managed to find a narrow footpath out of sight of the enemy, which led to the village centre and he was the first to enter the market-square at around midday.

After an abortive attempt to storm the square, he withdrew to a large house on the eastern edge of the square and decided to hold onto this foothold before reinforcement. The battle for the square became an epic. Mösner and his ever-dwindling group of infantry and engineers defended his strongpoint until evening against all the odds.

The position was reinforced and held by fresh troops of 125th Regiment and further fighting for the square ensued as darkness fell, but the bloody battle continued overnight and it had cost the German attackers dear – over 50 per cent casualties since the attack had begun.

To the north, 122nd Regiment had assaulted the ridgeline between Messines and Wytschaete and its left flank battalion had been ordered into the struggle for Messines itself because of the increasingly desperate and costly street fighting that Mösner and 125th Regiment were engaged in.

North of the village the left wing of 122nd Regiment established itself on the Wytschaete to Messines road after considerable resistance from the enemy – in particular the London Scottish Regiment. But the right wing of the 122nd was forced to go to ground short of the ridgeline itself. Once again, sporadic fighting continued throughout the night and casualties mounted without any further progress.

On the left flank, the 119th Grenadier Regiment were severely mauled by a determined and ferocious enemy. With casualties again in excess of 50 per cent, the remnants of the assaulting units had to dig in and continue the fight to simply secure the left flank of the German assault.

On the morning of 1 November, the German attackers, reinforced by units from the 3rd Division, had an unexpected respite, as a thick mist enshrouded the battlefield. By mid-morning, the mist had cleared and the attack was renewed across a 12-mile front.

The German attacks were pressed home, but the struggle for the Messines ridge continued for a total of four days. Wytschaete was won, lost, then won again by Fabeck's battalions in some of the most chaotic and bloody actions of the whole 'Ypern 1914' campaign. Eventually, Fabeck's men prevailed against a determined enemy. Allenby's cavalry, British infantry and the French 32nd Division (part of French XIV Corps) were forced to give way under the incessant pressure of Fabeck's infantry and the grinding attrition of the German guns.

By the end of 4 November, Army Group Fabeck held the ridge, but still faced a dented, though virtually unbroken Allied defence line. The French 32nd Division had been rushed in to support the beleaguered but resolute British defenders and Army Group Fabeck had failed to take its principal objective of Mount Kemmel.

As the Messines ridge was battered, the centre of the Ypres salient was also under heavy and sustained attack by Group Linsingen, which was hell-bent on taking the important high ground along the Menin Road centred on the village of Gheluvelt. The battle raged either side of the Menin Road and on the afternoon of 31 October, it appeared that the German troops had taken the high ground.

But after an attack comes the inevitable reorganisation and tired men expect some respite. This crucial factor gave General Haig's troops the opportunity to steal back the newly won territory from under the enemy's nose. The Germans were ousted by a truly spectacular counter-attack by just one BEF battalion, the 2nd Worcesters. Gheluvelt became a place of legend for the British but a scene of lost opportunity for the German army.

Meanwhile, the Fourth Army had been ordered to crush Allied resistance in the northern part of the salient and then sweep through to take Ypres. Albrecht flung in not only his well-trained divisions, but also those units of the inexperienced Reserve,

Landsturm and Freiwillige (Volunteer) on the basis that quantity had a quality all of its own. Against the now battle-hardened Regulars of the BEF, quantity merely meant a larger massed target. Falkenhayn was prepared to sacrifice thousands of the best of German youth, the Student Volunteers, who were wildly patriotic, enthusiastic and unswerving in their loyalty, but who were barely trained.

Around Langemarck in late October they were cut down by the steady, accurate fire of the British infantrymen before most could utter their cries of 'Vorwärts zum Sieg'. Wave after wave rose to begin their assaults singing *Wacht am Rhein*. It was a magnificent sight, but a most pitiful slaughter. Soldier-writer *Leutnant* Rudolf Binding wrote at the end of October that:

> . . . these young fellows we have, only just trained, are too helpless, particularly when their officers are killed. Our light infantry battalion, almost all Marburg students . . . have suffered terribly from shellfire. In the next division, just such young souls, the intellectual flower of Germany, went singing into an attack on Langemarck, just as vain and just as costly.[4]

The bodies were piled high after each assault ended under the withering British fire. One platoon alone of the Gordon Highlanders in this area counted 240 German dead in front of their position. It was a common sight at First Ypres and here it had been nothing less than the *Kindermord von Ypern*: the Massacre of the Innocents at Ypres. The German Fourth Army had been ordered by Falkenhayn to do nothing more than win the war. As it happened, thousands did nothing more than die. The Fourth Army had divisions that consisted of middle- and upper-class students and professional men all determined to help fulfil Falkenhayn's wishes, but:

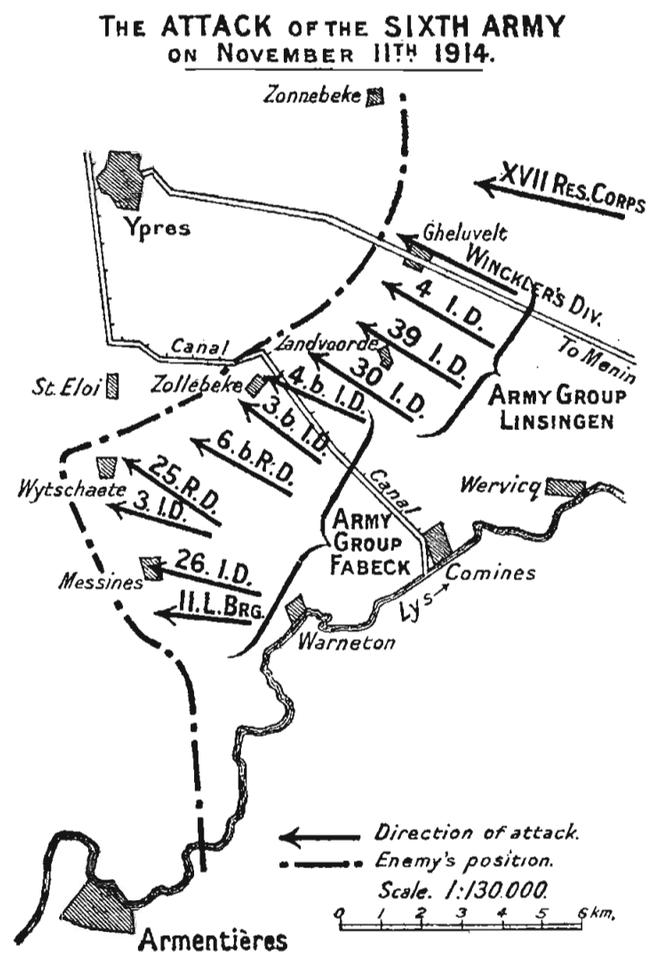
> They had little power of manoeuvre because their training had been so scanty, but they were absolutely determined to win or fall. For the most part they fell.[5]

The German trauma around what was rapidly becoming this notorious Ypres salient was not confined to the student lambs to the slaughter. 'Veteran' units went the same way, the élite Prussian Guard Divisions among them. Falkenhayn's last throw of the dice had begun with abortive attacks against the French lines around Dixmude in the north on 10 November. But the final act came on 11 November. A renewed attack against the British line around Gheluvelt and the Menin Road by Group Linsingen was spearheaded by General Winkler's 4th Guards Division. A major victory suddenly appeared possible as the Prussian Guardsmen broke through the wafer-thin defensive line.

But defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory by a combination of confusion and uncertainty about what to do next. The situation was recorded in the Regimental histories:

> Among the garden enclosures the leaderless lines abandoned the forward movement and drifted to the right . . . As no reinforcements could be got forward to the attackers, the assault came to a standstill at the third of the British lines.[6]

There was no third British line. By now there was barely a first line of defence in certain parts of the Allied front around Ypres. Only when it was too late, and the Prussians had been thrown back by a determined counter-attack, did the magnitude of their failure appear. A captured German officer on that day asked where the British reserves were deployed. The answer given was a tired wave by his captor towards the British guns rattling away against enemy targets at almost point-blank range. 'What is there behind?' he enquired. 'Divisional Headquarters', came the reply. 'God Almighty!' he exclaimed.[7]



The attack of the Sixth Army.
(German General Staff, Ypern, 1914)

The day ended with further British counter-attacks to restore and consolidate the line. Falkenhayn and every type of German unit from Freiwillige to Prussian Guard had failed to break the line and soul of the Allied defence of Ypres. 'They had little else except heavy casualties to show for their final and desperate attempt to break through', as the *British Official History* states.

First Ypres was over, with over 130,000 German casualties, 60,000 British and around 45,000 French. Out of it came the German acceptance that Allied actions were both aggressive and deadly.

The danger had been averted, but for a high price, and Germany faced a bleak winter of discontent, as did the Allies, on the Western Front. In the wider context, the numerically superior French Army to the south had frustrated all German attempts to break through their line, but their own attacks had also failed.

Deadlock had become the norm across the whole of the Western Front. Rudolf Binding wrote that:

> The war has got stuck into a gigantic siege on both sides. The whole front is one endless fortified trench. Neither side has the force to make a decisive push . . . Everyone seems settled on a winter campaign, [but] as far as I can judge; there is no possibility of an early finish . . . We are still stuck here for perfectly good reasons; one might as well say for perfectly bad reasons . . . This business may last for a long time.[8]

The official German account of the battle, *Ypern, 1914*, noted:

> As the November storms passed and frost and icy winds heralded to the mild climate of Flanders the approach of winter, the unbroken defensive lines on both sides were being slowly strengthened. The effect of artillery fire compelled them to make cover in good trenches and behind thick breast works . . . [We] had only been trained in the principles of attack . . . [But] the high sense of duty in each [German soldier] was of assistance and the methods of defensive warfare were quickly learnt.[9]

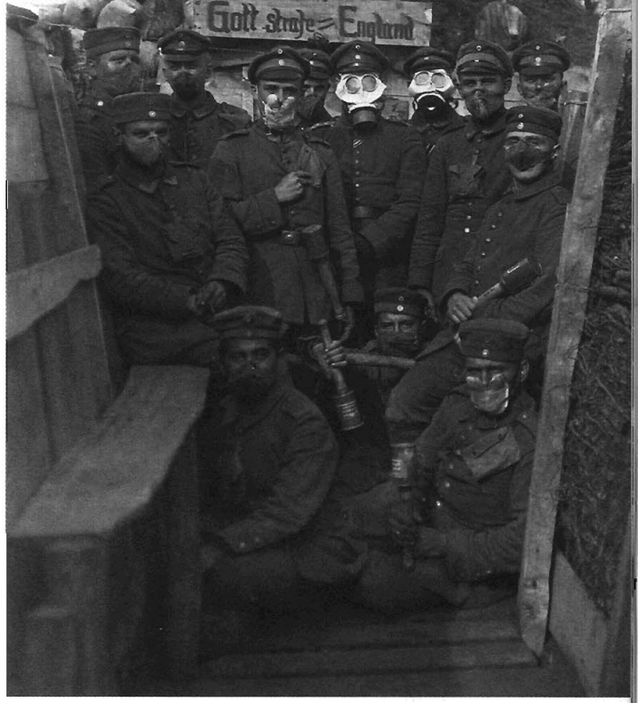
Trench warfare, no matter how 'quickly learnt', was often a foul experience, even as it began and even in the German trenches. One observer noted in November 1914 that:

> The dangers of trench life may be realised when I say that [often] neither the dead nor wounded can be removed. If you put up as much as a little finger above the edge of the trench, the bullets come whizzing round immediately. The dead bodies must therefore be allowed to remain in the trench; that is to say, the dead man is got rid of by digging a grave for him in the floor of the trench. A few days ago . . . a soldier was so badly hit by a shell that he was cut in two . . . [His shattered body] could not be removed without risk to the survivors and was therefore allowed to remain. But presently he gave rise to a horrible stench and whatever they did the men could not get away from the mutilated, blackened features. Sometimes arms and legs torn away from the body are allowed to lie about the bottom of the trench until somebody can [bury] them. One gets hardened in time . . .[10]

Defensive lines were protected in no-man's-land by ever thickening belts of barbed wire, and the space between German and British or French units varied from a few yards (normally just beyond grenade-throwing range), to almost half a mile. At first, the lines were haphazard, as trenches were dug where the encounter battle had ended. But these lines were adjusted to suit a position that was to the German's advantage. The reason for this benefit was simple enough: the German Army adapted to the conditions of trench warfare more quickly than the Western Allies because necessity has always been the mother of invention.

By the end of 1914, Falkenhayn's armies held most of Belgium and a good proportion of northern France; and they had the luxury of choosing the best defensive ground, digging in and obliging the French and British to winkle them out. Therefore, the Germans could afford to consolidate their defences, while the Allies were under different pressures. As the French C-in-C General Joffre wrote at the time:

> The best and largest portions of the German army was on our soil and with its line of battle jutting out a mere five day's march from the heart of France. This situation made it clear to every Frenchman that our task consisted in defeating the enemy, and driving him out of our country.[11]



'Flanders' – German troops in the front line near Warneton, wearing gas masks, which would become indispensable after spring 1915. A placard on the trench wall declares: 'Gott Strafe England' ('God Strike England'). *(Allen Collection)*

More locally, First Ypres had begun a four-year period of agonising restlessness and sacrifice on both sides in the macabre theatre that was the 'Ypres salient' and Flanders. By November 1918, no less than five major battles would have been fought here and 'the Salient' would hold a combination of notorious memory and compelling fascination for British, French and German soldiers alike. To the German soldier:

> Flanders! The word is heard by everyone in the German Fatherland with a silent shudder, but also with just and intense pride. It was here that the British were made to realise that German heroism was not to be vanquished . . . Let us only hold the hope that the seeds of [German] blood sown in Flanders will bring forth rich and splendid fruit for the German Fatherland.[12]

On 20 December, units of the BEF's Indian Corps deployed in the Givenchy sector south of Ypres were attacked in a new and horrific way. At precisely 9.00 a.m. the peace was shattered when the Germans blew ten small mines beneath the Allied trenches: the simultaneous explosions killed many Indian troops instantly. German infantry then swarmed across no-man's-land and quickly overwhelmed the stunned survivors, bombing their way to La Quinque Rue. Within hours, the Germans had captured trenches either side of Givenchy and made a 300-yard pocket east of Festubert. Although the German success was short-lived and they were driven back, the attack had signalled the beginning of a new type of conflict – the war underground.

As in many cases throughout the First World War, the German Army introduced a novel tactic or method, e.g. mining and tunnelling, gas, and flame warfare, only for the British and French to adopt and become very much more proficient at it. The prospect of being blown sky-high by explosives placed directly below the trenches was terrifyingly real in notorious locations such as Vauqouis, Vimy Ridge, Hill 60, Hooge, St-Elooi and the like for much of the remainder of the war.

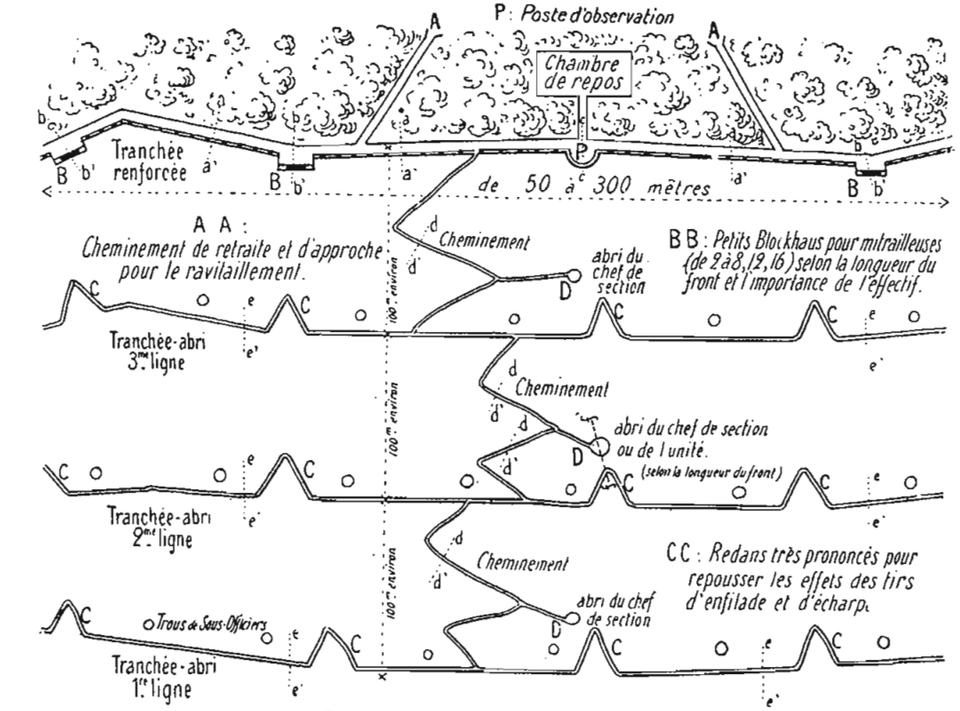
By Christmas 1914, from Nieuport to Belfort the 'Dance of Death' had ended in stalemate. On the Eastern Front it was the same story. At home it was already abundantly clear that this was the first of more than one bitter winter at war. Soldiers on both sides of no-man's-land were issued with extra cigarettes, pipe tobacco, chocolate – and much-needed Christmas presents and mail from home. But it seemed that the 'killing fields' would remain open for business across the traditional Christmas season. In most places they did. But in Flanders, something quite remarkable happened.

Christmas Eve was a grim one indeed. Trenches and dugouts were so waterlogged that they became known as the 'waterworks'; communication trenches were glutinous and mud-filled, snow had fallen and it was bitterly, bitterly cold. In one place the BEF had 19th Infantry Brigade facing the 19th Saxon Corps. That night, the dam of a local stream burst, washing out men in both sets of trenches. By next morning, all either side could hope to do until major repairs could be done, was to crouch, half-frozen on the remains of the parapet behind makeshift barricades of empty ammunition boxes and sandbags.

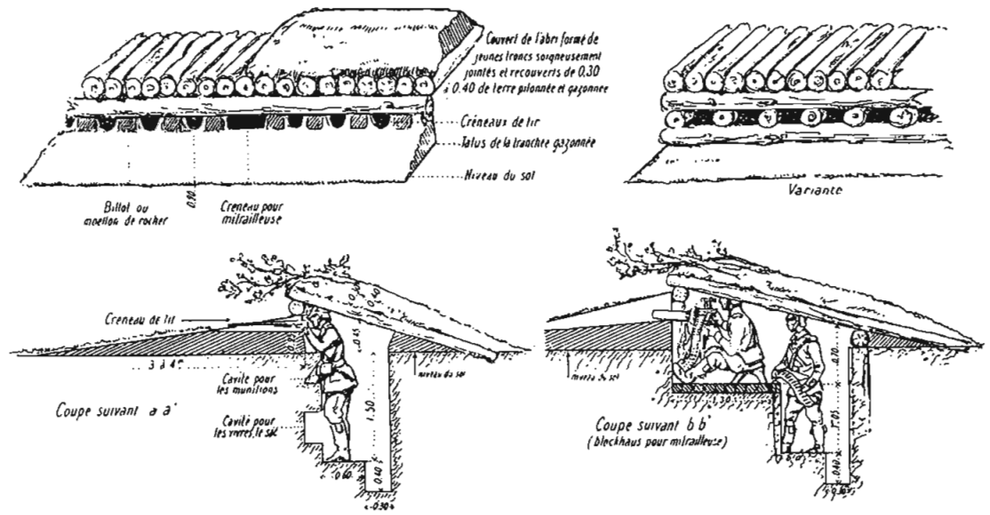
At dawn it seemed that it could only be a matter of time before the sniping and shelling started. Nothing happened. Then, realising that this was Christmas Day, the Saxon troops began singing carols, the British responded in kind and for some hours peace broke out to mark the day.

Near Messines, a British artillery officer recorded on Christmas Eve that the Germans in their trenches began singing carols, at which many of the British troops cheered and sang along when they could. Someone in the German 'choir' called: 'You English, why don't you come out?' The response, bearing in mind that many Germans had worked as bar staff in England before the war, was predictable: 'Waiter!' But, as the carolling continued, one or two, then three or four, soldiers on either side put their heads above the trench. Soon there were fires and candles burning brightly along the parapets. Of course, in Germany now, as then, the main Christmas celebrations would normally take place on Christmas Eve, with family gathered around the traditional *Tannenbaum*, or Christmas tree. So for those British troops involved in this historic event, Christmas came a little earlier than planned.

On Christmas Day, sentries were posted, breastworks consolidated and German and British working parties shared tools to shore up respective defences against the ever-present threat of flooding. Gifts and souvenirs were exchanged, gossip flourished about home and family life in Germany or Great Britain, and both German and



Dispositif de tranchées allemandes.



A French drawing showing German trench building, dated 31 October 1914.
(French Military Manual 1914)

British soldiers posed for informal photographs. Above all, most wondered why the hell they were fighting against each other when they had so much in common.

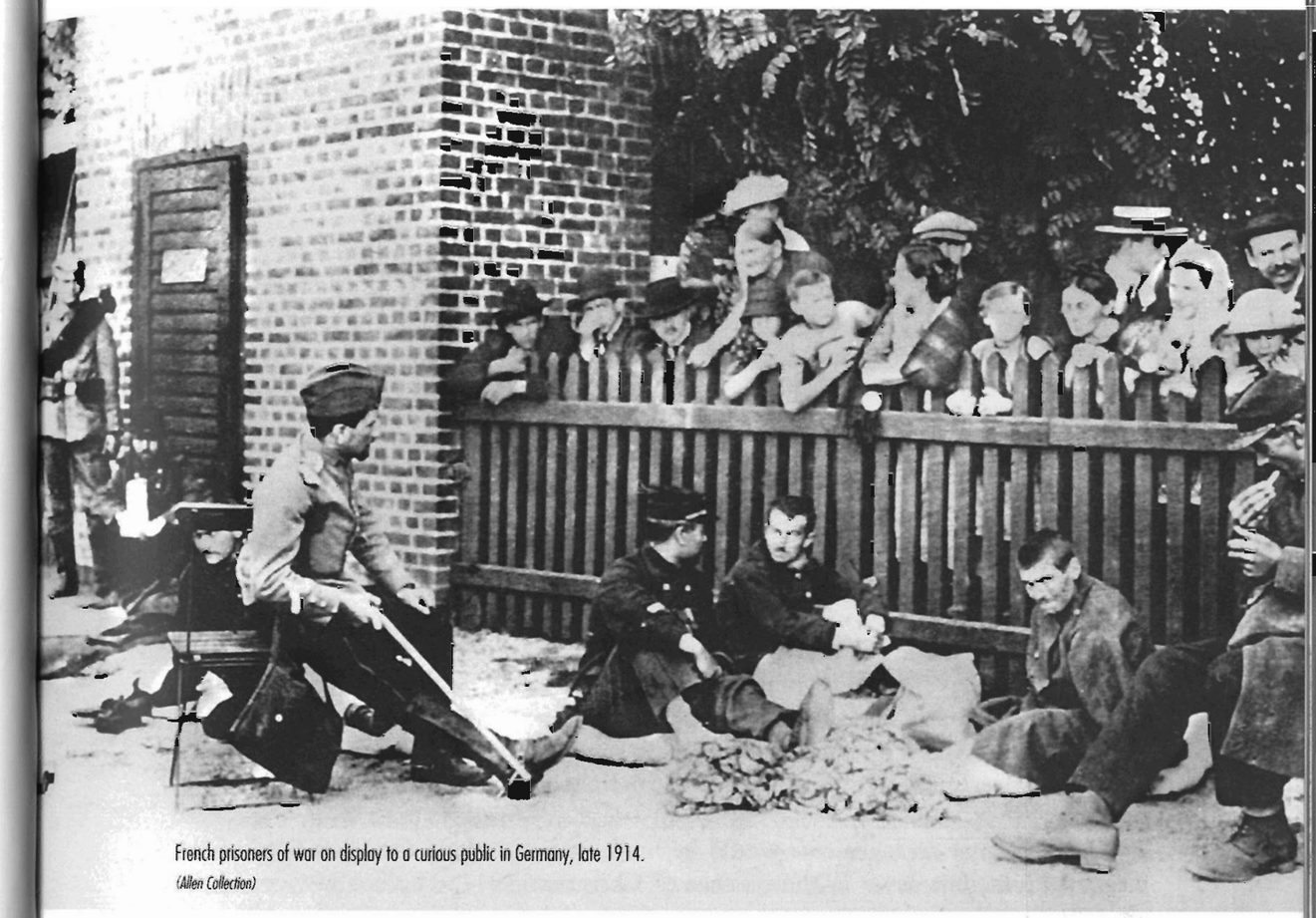
The common bond and enjoyment of the occasion was tempered by the fact that this informal truce allowed both sides also to collect and bury their dead. The British chaplain in the sector read prayers for the dead in both English and German. A German officer took the opportunity of the truce to pass over a message and personal effects of a British officer mortally wounded in a previous raid. The German explained that he had found him badly wounded and groping for something in his pocket. He bent down to assist him and discovered a note and photograph of his wife. He held the photograph before the dying officer's eyes. The German officer explained: 'Communion with her portrait was his last sacrament. Tell her he died like that.' The chaplain promised that he would do so.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria who was highly regarded by friend and foe, commanded Sixth Army in 1914 and 1915, then his own Group of Armies until the end of the war.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

On a lighter note, there was the odd game of football also. In one, Scots associated with Clydebank and Partick Thistle played against Saxons who had played for a Leipzig team that had played in Glasgow in spring 1914. It is said that the final score was 3–2 to the Saxons.

It is no coincidence that Saxon troops played the most prominent role in the Christmas truce. Saxon troops had a strong empathy with their historical allies and friends across the wire and in many sectors where Saxon divisions held the line a situation of 'live and let live' prevailed. Little love was lost between the Saxons and their 'comrades-in-arms', the Prussians.

On the subject of Prussians, soldiers on both sides were witness to Saxon humour. Boards were apparently raised declaring: 'Do not fire on us – we are Saxons; wait until we are relieved by the Prussians.' Later, as the war correspondent Philip Gibbs



French prisoners of war on display to a curious public in Germany, late 1914.
(Allen Collection)

reported, a German unit facing a British battalion produced a board on which was painted: 'The English are fools.' It was shot to pieces by rifle fire. Soon afterwards, another board appeared, which read: 'The French are fools.' Once again it was immediately cut to ribbons with a volley of fire. Finally, a third board appeared: 'We are all fools. Let's all go home.'[13]

The war had to be prosecuted, but there were ways, and ways, of doing so. Throughout both world wars it was acknowledged that the Germans had excellent snipers. But 'live and let live' sometimes affected the practice of such men. Captain Ian Hay, an infantry officer of the 9th (Scottish) Division, was astonished to witness such an incident when a working party went out into no-man's-land one evening. He observed:

> No one was hit, which was remarkable, when you consider what an artist a German sniper is . . . Possibly, there is some truth in the general rumour that the Saxons, who hold this part of the line . . . conduct their offensive operations with a tactful blend of constant firing and bad shooting, which, while it satisfies the Prussians, causes no serious inconvenience to Thomas Atkins.[14]

Herbert Sulzbach, who had been in the thick of the action since the beginning of First Ypres, still held the German soldiers' common views that God was indeed on their side and that theirs was a just war. In October, he had noted in his diary that: 'We certainly did not want this war! We were only defending ourselves and our Germany against a world of enemies who have banded together against us.'[15] Furthermore, he had more reason than many to celebrate Christmas: 'The Regiment gave me a most splendid Christmas present: I was promoted to *Gefreiter*, lance-bombardier, and it did me good to be picked out like this after so short a time.'[16]

It was all rather too good to be true for those who wished for the informal truce to be extended. German and British troops could not fraternise like this. After all, according to the senior commanders on either side, it would be bad for morale. After the Christmas sojourn, German Army Order of the Day on 29 December declared that any further fraternising would be punished as a treasonable offence.

British reactions were similarly harsh, as commanding officers and units involved in the Christmas events were made examples of, being sacked, moved to more demanding sectors of the line, or disciplined in some other punitive way. The BEF also issued an Army Routine Order, which made it abundantly clear that British soldiers 'were in France [and Belgium] to fight and not to fraternize with the enemy.'[17]

Other informal arrangements would be made at times along the front lines of the Western Front, but never in the manner of Christmas 1914. The last vestiges of the innocence and sense of adventure that had infected the soldiers of every nation in August were finally snuffed out with the candles when Christmas Day 1914 passed and the nightmare of war returned.

Straight away, misunderstanding over the informal arrangements made to end the truce was typical of the dark auguries for the future. In one sector, a British sergeant was sent across no-man's-land with a note to the effect that the truce would end at 10 a.m. the next day. As the hour approached, warnings were shouted to German troops to take cover, but they did not. Soon after 10 a.m., a British subaltern was ordered to lob a jam-pot bomb near a German working party, just to scare them.

Unfortunately, the subaltern's throw was too accurate and the explosion wounded one of them in the leg. The poor wretch went down and writhed in agony as the others scuttled for cover. A single shot from the German lines hit the subaltern in the head, killing him outright, and moments later, machine gun and rifle fire erupted from both trench lines. All hell broke loose, and it was 'business as usual' once more.[18]

An example of artillery 'Drumfire' and illuminating flare bombardment at night: landscape on a contemporary postcard, Western Front, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

By the end of 1914, Falkenhayn had reluctantly conceded that the demands of the Eastern Front would compel him to take a defensive stance in the West. But at this time, despite the fact that vital manpower and resources, particularly artillery, had been diverted to the second front, he was convinced that the West was where the war was to be won. But both the Kaiser and Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, deferred to the victors of Tannenberg, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who urged that the Eastern Front should be given the priority in 1915.

It was a costly error. Rather than concentrate his available strength to exploit the exhaustion and weakness of the French and British in the West, Falkenhayn inadvertently gave them desperately needed time to regroup, reinforce and train new troops for the coming year. Worse, the respite gave more time for the hitherto tenuous trench systems on either side of no-man's-land to become more solid, especially on the German side, making it more difficult to crack the problem of deadlock.

For the Allies, Joffre was eager to at least straighten the line before the new year and thus launched offensives in December against the German defences in the Artois and Champagne regions. The Artois assaults by the Tenth Army began on 17 December against the high ground of Vimy Ridge and Notre Dame de Lorette (Loretto to the

Germans) just north of Arras. The French effort was bloodily stalled by a lethal combination of poor artillery support, thick fog, freezing rain and impassable, slippery mud for the infantry to attack across. Within a fortnight the French had lost 18,000 men for negligible gains. In Champagne, the French Fourth Army's onslaught began on 20 December, but was frustrated in much the same way. Joffre, undeterred, decided to try again a month or so later.

Ironically, the French offensives had merely served to strengthen the German defences still more. The consequences would be dire for Joffre's renewed attempts to crack the German defensive nut with both French and British offensives throughout 1915.

At first, social distinctions and antagonisms in Germany were obliterated as aristocrats, the middle class and workers joined ranks in the face of the common enemy. But as we have seen, the 1914 German Army on the Western Front was plunged into near-destruction at the Marne and beyond. The aristocratic, middle-class and working-class soldiers of that Army soon found that enemy artillery, machine guns and rifle fire obliterated social distinctions more effectively than any patriotic fervour could do; but literally.

As a result, by the end of 1914 German casualties included almost 120,000 dead (i.e. four times the number of fatalities for the whole of the Franco-Prussian War) and a further 400,000 wounded or prisoners of war. By Christmas the glorious adventure was over and the Western Front had frozen into the stalemate that was to endure in the main until 1918.

Despite the frustration of the early months of the war, however, the German people were encouraged to hold out against the increasing hardship of their own war on the Home Front in the successive years with the promise of ultimate victory.

In 1915, the German High Command's claim was that victory would come on the Eastern Front.

CHAPTER 4

1915: DEADLOCK, FALSE HOPES AND PROMISES

By January 1915, the rapid victory imagined by not only Germany and her allies, but also the Western Allies and Russia was but a distant and hazy dream. In the West, a linear siege warfare had begun, a virtually unbroken line of trenches either side of no-man's-land, running for almost 400 miles from the Channel ports to the Swiss border. On the Eastern Front, deadlock was rather more temporary and both Germany/Austria and Russia would look to 'finishing the job' within the next twelve months.

At sea, the German High Seas Fleet remained strong but largely impotent, as it had no intention of drawing the Royal Navy into a major maritime clash at this stage. Germany had another ace in the hole, however – U-boats – and fully intended to use them.

The quiescent nature of Germany's surface fleet did not deter Falkenhayn from seeking an alternative approach. He sought an end to the deadlock indirectly via a blockade of the British Isles, with the U-boat as his main weapon.

The plan was to starve Britain by cutting her off from her overseas trade, forcing a withdrawal from France and Belgium and leaving both countries to their inevitable fate without British support. It was estimated that 200 U-boats would do the job, in a role that was far removed from that employed until 1915, principally as auxiliary vessels for the surface fleet.

Unfortunately, two major problems diminished the proposed strategy. First, there were nowhere near 200 U-boats; only 28 were in service in August 1914, and their limited range, coupled with the Royal Navy's complete control of the Dover Straits, made the strategy impractical for 1915 at least.

The second obstacle was one that would have profound implications later in the war and help to bring the United States to the Allies' aid on mainland Europe. U-boat warfare was a clandestine affair, so Allied vessels would be sunk with little or no warning. Successful U-boat attacks gave considerable support to the Allied propaganda image of German barbarism. The loss of the SS *Lusitania* in May 1915, which caused American fury, and the limited effect of U-boat attempts to blockade Britain, led to a temporary halt in U-boat operations by the summer.

The prospects for Germany as 1915 dawned were not healthy. The great Schlieffen punch, designed to knock out France and the BEF with one blow, had failed. Subsequent assaults during the 'Dance of Death', Antwerp and especially First Ypres, simply guaranteed stalemate, but at huge cost on both sides. On the second front in the East, limited German forces still faced an enemy with a bottomless manpower barrel and, despite the terrible experience of Tannenberg a mere three weeks into the war, an extraordinary ability to endure and come back for more. Within weeks, Russia would threaten East Prussia and Galicia once more.

Furthermore, the German troops in the East knew that they were also propping up a sick and ailing Austro-Hungarian Army. Germany was, in the words of an infuriated staff officer in autumn 1914, 'shackled to [the Austrian] corpse'. The only bright spot was Turkey's entry into the war at the end of 1914 on the Kaiser's side, which meant that British, French and Russian resources could be stretched in southern Europe at little material cost to Germany.

Falkenhayn had redrawn the strategic map. Germany would consolidate in the West and concentrate her offensive resources and those of Austria-Hungary for a decisive blow against Russia. He reasoned that such a strategy would not only relieve the hard-pressed Austrian armies, but also deter Italy and the neutral Balkan states from siding with the Entente. Of course, he hoped that 'success [in the East] would be big enough to check the enemy for a long time', and still privately dreamed of resuming the main offensive in the West.[1] It was to remain a source of great resentment and frustration among the German commanders in the East, most notably Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Falkenhayn's dream would raise a spectre that would come back to haunt him in 1916.

The strategy in the Allied camp for 1915 was that centred on the great debate between the 'Westerners' and the 'Easterners'. For the 'Westerners', Field Marshal Georges Joffre and the French High Command, as well as British commanders such as General Douglas Haig of the British First Army, believed that a decisive victory could only come on the Western Front against Germany, the main theatre of war and the main enemy. The 'Easterners', who included Lord Kitchener, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, argued that Germany could be beaten without the enormous concomitant loss of life already characteristic of the Western Front by knocking Turkey out of the war. Germany's 'prop' in the region would cause the edifice to crumble and she would be defeated through the 'back door', or via this 'soft underbelly' of Europe.

Theory and practice often drift apart and this debate could only have one outcome, although it would take a very painful lesson to prove the point – at Gallipoli. The fundamental problem from the outset was that the 'Easterners' had flawed ideas, not the least of which was the notion that Turkey was 'propping up' Germany. Not only did Germany provide the backbone to Turkey's feeble military leadership, she also 'propped up' the other Central Powers, including Austria-Hungary.

Gallipoli, the great Dardanelles adventure, was to become a legend of notorious and costly failure on one hand, but extraordinary courage and sacrifice on the other. Ironically, the Allied withdrawal, arguably the most difficult operation of war, was brilliantly executed under the noses of the Turkish defenders without a single casualty in December 1915.

Joffre continued to focus on the Western Front and a series of offensives was planned throughout the year. Italy did join the Allied cause, fought four battles of the Isonzo and marked the end of the year with stalemate as rock-hard as that on the Western Front and almost 175,000 casualties.

The East–West debate widened the war to the Caucasus, the Middle East, Mesopotamia and Salonika, as well as Italy and the Dardanelles, while Germany remained as strong in the West as ever by the end of 1915.

In August 1914, the German people had accepted that unemployment – which reached 21 per cent that autumn – was a necessary side effect of mobilisation. Patriotic fervour and the sense of *Gemeinschaft*, or unity, within the nation were enough to steel them for temporary discomfort. Besides, food supplies had been abundant after a bumper harvest that summer and industries were given free rein to produce the tools of war. Finances were ignored because the German leadership believed that they would foot the bill through reparations against their vanquished enemies.

It seemed to most German people that even if the war had not been won within weeks as the Kaiser had predicted, Germany would easily overcome potential deficiencies because she was self-sufficient. But the myths, deceptions and lies of war had already begun. For example, the Government stressed in autumn 1914 that German farmers produced 90 per cent of the nation's food supplies. But it omitted to point out that they did so only with the help of over two million tons of imported phosphate and nitrogenous fertilisers, six million tons of hard fodder, such as barley, corn and oats, and with the labour of over one million foreign seasonal workers. Without these, domestic production soon fell by over 20 per cent.[2]

The first food shortages appeared at home as 1914 drew to a close. But the German Army continued to procure what it needed without regard for civilian requirements and food prices soared as supplies dwindled. The government quickly imposed maximum prices on a host of food items, especially potatoes and sugar.

Berlin took steps to ward off labour unrest by nationalising wheat, and rationed bread at 5lb per person per week in January 1915, and then established maximum prices and production quotas on butter, fish, milk, pork, fruit and vegetables by November of that year.[3]

The Allied naval blockade was by no means the only reason for the poor conditions for the citizens of Germany. Their Government and military were exacerbating the problem. It was a problem that would only become worse.

Millions of words have been printed and spoken on television, radio and film about the virtually impregnable defences built by the German Army in the First World War. It

is true that German engineering skills and ingenuity, together with abundant defensive stores in the early years of the war, provided the Kaiser's men on the Western Front with a formidable defensive capability. Falkenhayn's strategy for 1915 meant that Germany would have a clear advantage in this technique of warfare by year's end. This advantage would be severely tested in the summer of 1916 and beyond, but for most of 1915, trench warfare would favour the German Army in the West.

German units were well drilled in defensive tactics, and their 'sappers' strengthened the trench lines, communication trenches and dugouts. It was not long before the infantry and artillery units were relatively comfortable in their semi-permanent 'homes', despite the harsh winter of 1914/1915. In that period, field-artilleryman Herbert Sulzbach was able to record that:

> The snow . . . has turned the plains of Flanders into a winter landscape. [But] . . . mail arrives in the evening, and among other things, I get a parcel as a present from my old school. Then we read the newspapers out loud to each other. At the battery meanwhile they have made themselves much more cosy. The dugouts have tables and stoves and one even has a piano in it . . . Now we have been [two] months in this position. We exchange greetings with the British every day in the shape of shells; everything is gradually becoming a habit . . . We are preparing more and more for a static campaign. The infantry positions have been surrounded with strong barbed-wire entanglements.[4]

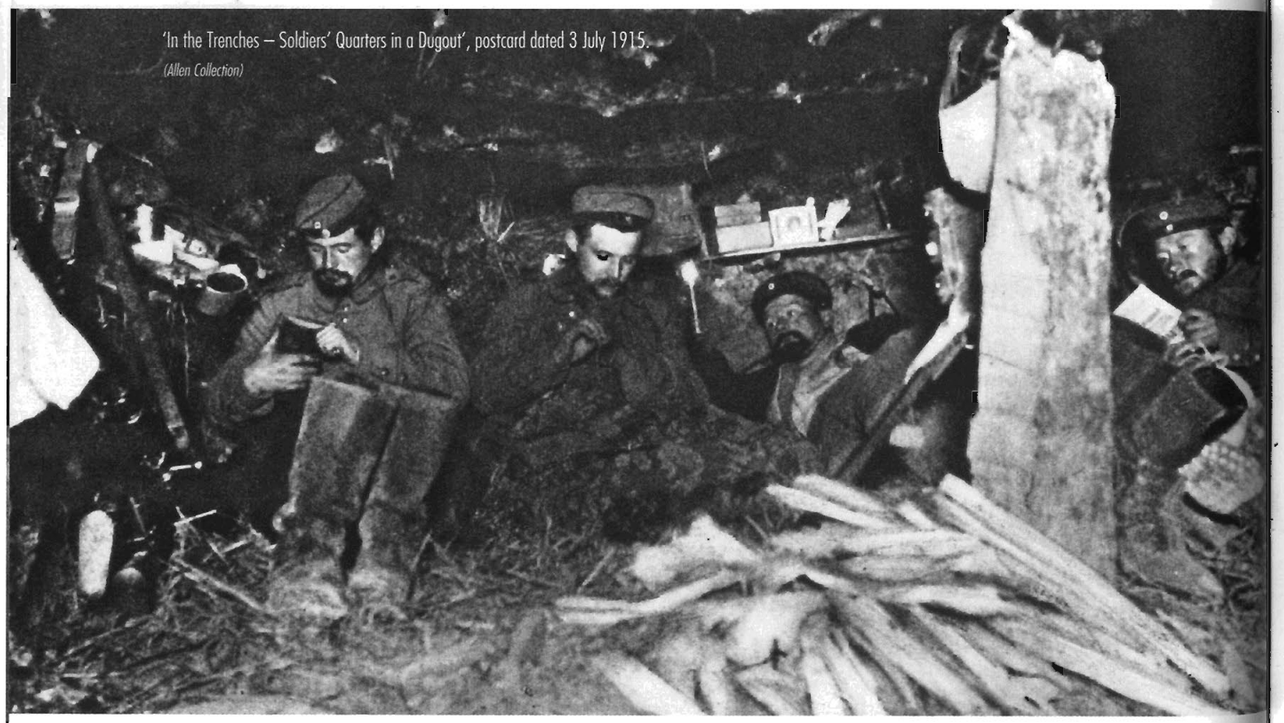
'Sanitäts-Unterstand': medical dugout, France, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

German trench system in the Champagne/Chemin des Dames sector, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

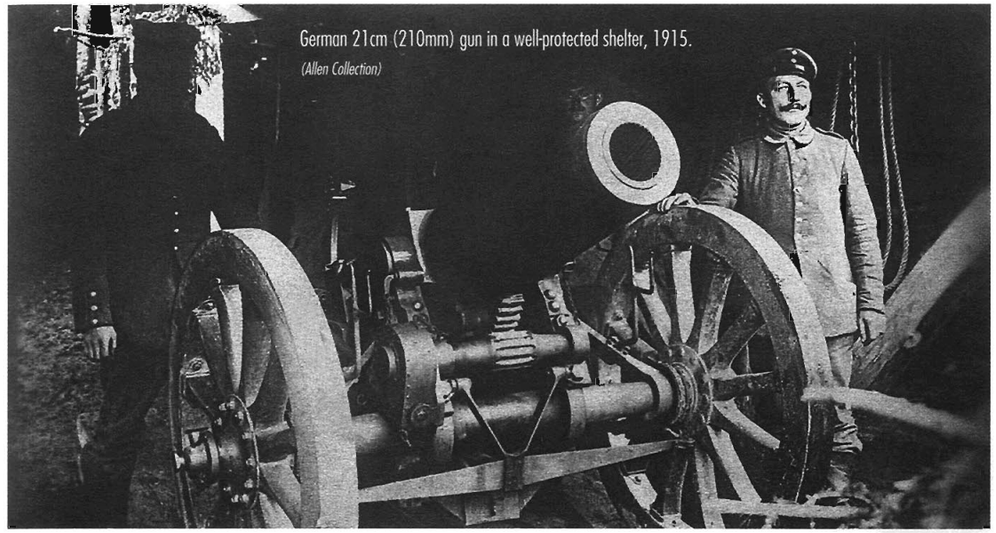
So it had come to this: the most enduring symbol of the First World War. Trench warfare was soon the fact of life on the Western Front, and most soldiers on each side of no-man's-land learned to deal with it, aware that their lot as infantrymen was roughly equal. For the majority of the war, that lot would be admirably summed up by the French writer Marie-Paul Rimbault who declared that:

> There's nothing so like a German soldier in his trench than a French (or British) soldier in his. They are both poor sods and that's all there is to it.[5]

The trench systems (*Schutzengräben*) that now took shape on either side of the wire began to reflect the nature of the Allied or German cause. There were fundamental similarities in their general structure, such as a front line supported by second line and reserve trenches, all of which were connected by communication trenches. Each front line trench system had a parapet (*Brustwehr*) and fire-step (*Schützenauftritt*) on the enemy side facing no-man's-land (*Niemandsland*) and a parados (*Rückenwehr*) to the rear, where spoil from the digging was deposited and which gave added protection from shellfire. The trench was reinforced with sandbags, timber, wattle, pickets, wire, and corrugated iron and, in many German positions, reinforced concrete.



'In the Trenches – Soldiers' Quarters in a Dugout', postcard dated 3 July 1915.
(Allen Collection)



German 21cm (210mm) gun in a well-protected shelter, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

Unless dug immediately before an attack, trench lines soon lost their purely linear appearance in favour of the more familiar 'zig-zag' or 'dog's tooth' appearance. This added further protection from the blast effect of shells, mortar bombs or grenades and prevented an enemy from devastating the trench with flanking fire. The straight section facing the enemy was known as the fire bay (*Schützenbank*) and each of the links left and right to the next fire bays was a traverse (*Quergang*).

A series of sentry posts were established by day and night within the fire bays and 'saps' were dug to extend cover from direct fire out into no-man's-land for listening and observation posts (OPs), as well as specific operations, such as trench raids. In front of the forward positions lay belts of barbed wire (*Drahtverhau*), which became the curse of assaulting troops on both sides. Held in place by iron pickets, it was rapidly laid and provided an obstacle that could be 100 yards deep. The trenches were further protected by machine gun positions, which provided interlocking arcs of fire across the defended sector into no-man's-land.

Despite the popular perception of German soldiers living in comparative luxury, dugouts (*Schützenhöhlen*) were more commonly used for officers and senior NCOs, forward HQs and medical posts. Most junior NCOs and men lived, fed and slept in the trench for the few days that they were assigned to front line duty, protected by rain capes and small hollows dug into the parados side of their trenches.

Nevertheless, the defensive stance of the Kaiser's men on the Western Front for much of the war did give them the luxury of concentrating their engineering effort in improving the sectors where time and terrain allowed. Larger shelters were built for the protection of the infantry in the line and especially the counter-attack (*Eingreif*) units that were crucial to German defensive tactics.

German troops at rest in the trenches, summer 1915.
(Contemporary sketch on postcard, Allen Collection)

The landscape dictated the methods used by the German Army. As a result, labyrinthine redoubts, which were essentially underground strongholds, fortified villages and concreted machine gun and field artillery positions emerged on the chalk land regions of the Somme, Artois/Arras and Champagne, where dugouts could be as much as forty feet deep. It is true that here many German troops had the comforts of electric lighting, piped water supplies and excellent air ventilation systems.

Plundered French household items also gave German officers and SNCOs the opportunity to furnish their dugouts with 'home comforts' such as timber wall panelling, tables and chairs, *objets d'art* and even carpeted floors. But, the idea that this wall-to-wall luxury for German officers and men was universal and remained throughout the war is a deeply flawed one. For example, although these deep defences were often virtually untouched by enemy artillery fire in the early stages of the Somme campaign in 1916, as the campaign evolved they became as much death traps for the troops inside as they had been safe havens.

On the other hand, in Flanders, 'the flooded plain', the wet conditions, low-lying land and clay subsoil made it impossible to dig deep trenches and dugouts. Consequently, both sides more commonly built trenches raised 6 feet or so above ground consisting of breastworks of sandbags, wood and corrugated iron. From mid-1915 onwards the German defences were strengthened considerably with the construction of reinforced concrete bunkers, strongpoints and fortified villages in depth running the length of the Ypres salient between Pilckem and Messines within an

elaborate defensive network: the *Flandern Linie*, or Flanders Line. However, as on the Somme, the Battle of Messines and the 'Passchendaele' campaign in 1917 would prove that these apparently impregnable defences could also be neutralised and that in the mud and blood of Flanders, the Kaiser's men would suffer even more than their British and Dominion opponents.

In common with their adversaries, German infantry units were kept busy, even when in a 'quiet' sector, with the usual operational and administrative tasks that were part and parcel of daily life in the trenches. Top of the list were mail from home and the vital ration run, when hot food and drinks were brought up for the men in the front line. With regular artillery and mortar exchanges, such apparently mundane duties became deadly serious for the front line soldiers. Its arrival was, like the mail, good for morale. If it was lost when a ration party was blown to smithereens, morale dropped drastically; and principally because of the missing food, rather than the casualties among the ration party.

Schütze Max Heinz, after serving for a month or two opposite the French in Artois, summed up this phenomenon, so universal among the armies of the Western Front, and almost as relevant for an infantryman today:

> I also [now] understand the importance given to food, which had seemed such a petty thing to me at first. Food is the only thing [that] the soldier receives in return for his hard service. And the fresh air makes one hungry, as I soon discovered.[6]

Despite the popular myths surrounding the First World War, German troops, in common with their British and French opponents, did not spend four straight years in the trenches, but moved in and out of the front line according to the battalion and regimental duty rosters.

Consequently, there was time to visit the local town and enjoy the bars and cafés, as well as more exotic entertainments. A soldier's typical experience was on an excursion to the French town of Lille:

> I get leave to spend a day in Lille with two friends. Can you people at home imagine how we felt to get out of the mud of battle into a town actually inhabited by civilians and looking almost like peacetime? Shops, restaurants, cafés, civilians and military personnel in clean clothes . . . On the way back, we also sat in a bar at Lomme, where we met several comrades from the 107th Infantry Regiment. They sang patriotic . . . and sentimental songs. Tomorrow they have to go back to lie in a trench: here they forget the situation and also the fact that tomorrow they may be dead.[7]

It had not taken long for most of the patriotic young men who had joined up so willingly to help win the war for the Fatherland by the end of 1914 to feel rather

short-changed by the turn of the year. The wild enthusiasm was replaced by the overriding need to do one's duty and a camaraderie based on a common fate. The average German soldier still had to believe that the great German Army would eventually prevail, although it had become increasingly difficult to see how.

The certainties of easy victory, assured by no less than the Kaiser himself as they marched to war, were already ancient history to the dwindling numbers of those who had been involved from the beginning. But a common bond helped the German servicemen to cope and to preserve each other's sanity. It was a familiar experience for Tommy Atkins and the *Poilu*. One German soldier typically wrote:

> The behaviour of the other men towards me underwent a great change after the [trench] raid. Only now . . . had I become a full-fledged [sic] soldier worthy of being treated as a human being. Closer contact with them and my own experiences of this monotonous trench warfare, with its terrible strain on body and mind, gradually brought me to a better understanding of their characteristics and habits. Most of that which had shocked me in the beginning [was] now quite natural . . . For instance, there was the eternal arguing and cursing about every possible thing, especially the officers. I was soon just as good at it as [anyone] . . . I also understood now the complete absence of enthusiasm for the war. It comes with the first drop of rain on a cold night, or on a forced march, or during a battle when the soldiers hear the shrapnel singing about their ears.[8]

On 27 January, all the Kaiser's men were given the opportunity to mark and celebrate their Emperor's birthday. It cheered some, but the indulgence was a stark reminder that this was his first birthday since the war began and it was unlikely to be the last. Most wondered if they would live to mark their Kaiser's birthday in January 1916. They did not have long to ponder the question, for the Allies were about to test their mettle once more.

The next phase of the French Champagne offensive began on 16 February, but, not surprisingly, the German defences were more solid than ever and the 'French were expected'.

The first attacks showed some promise and the German line was penetrated in places thanks to the terrific 'drum fire' of medium field guns in support and especially the 75mm 'soixante-quinze'. *Gefreiter* Herbert Sulzbach, recently despatched to the Champagne area from Flanders with his artillery unit, was in the van of the German resistance against the waves of French infantry attempting to break through his lines. On 15 February he had noted in his diary that the French assault was imminent. On 18 February, he wrote hastily that:

> On Shrove Tuesday a fearsome enemy artillery fire . . . is laid on our trenches and gun positions: thundering and boiling and banging away . . . The French have

A German 15cm gun fires on French positions, Artois sector, 1915.

(Allen Collection)

> forced their way into our front trenches . . . [Now] the French have taken our main position . . . There is a good deal of confusion, [but] we hold on and quite early on the 17th of February the first of many French who have been taken prisoner come past us. Most of them are severely wounded and cannot hide the pain. Losses have been very high on both sides . . . After the French had forced their way into our main position, we counter-attacked and threw the beggars out again . . . Our infantry . . . are not afraid of anything, [but] though we gunners do get exposed to fire all the time, the infantry have a much worse time of it . . . The fighting continues . . .[9]

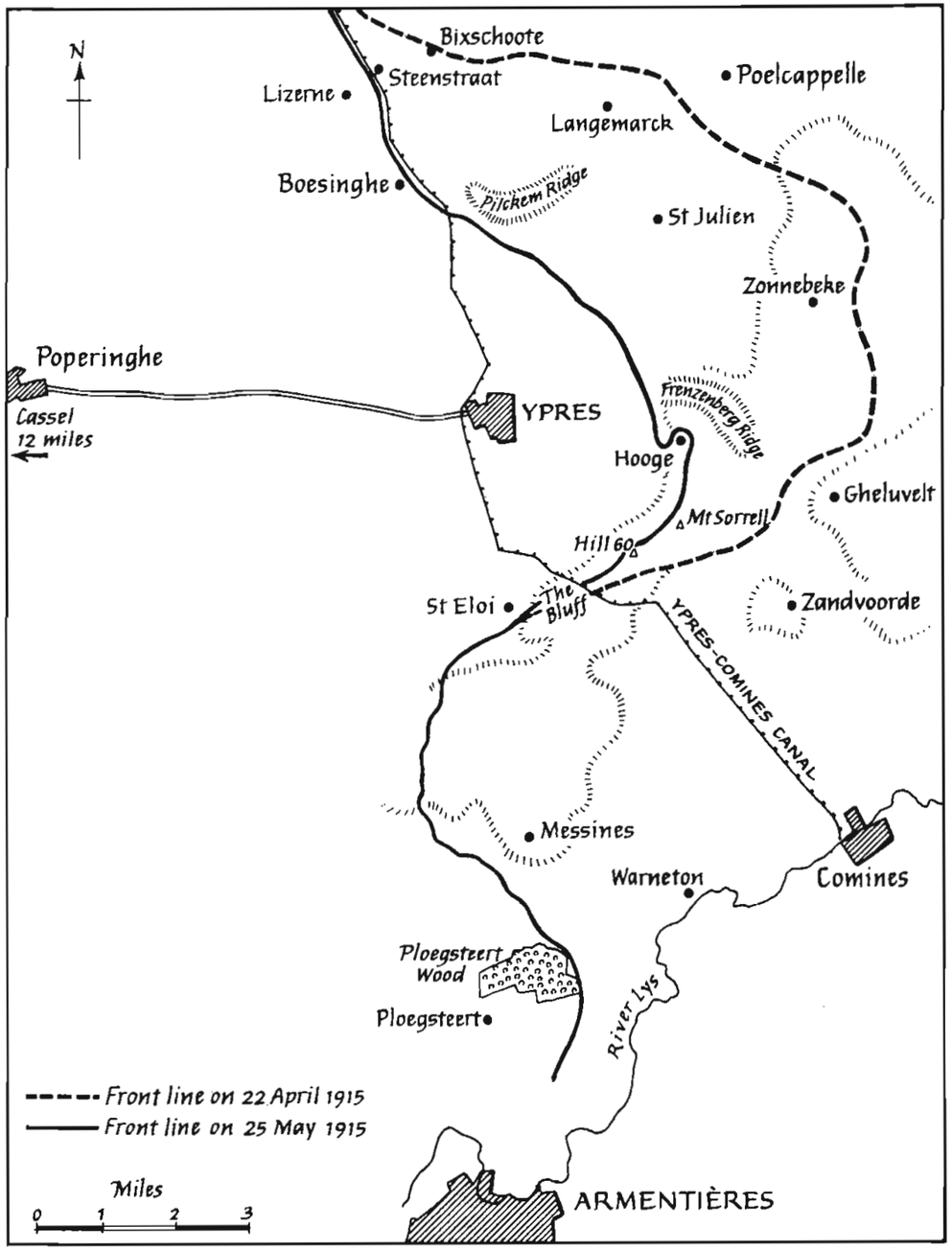
The fighting did continue; until 17 March in the main, and for another fortnight in rather more limited attacks. But, despite the early promise, the French offensive was snuffed out by the strength of the German defences and the ever-improving defensive tactics used by the Kaiser's men. The month long battle had cost the French an estimated 240,000 killed, missing, wounded and prisoners; a little less than half that number on the German side.

Further French attacks in the Aisne sector around Soissons, Meuse-Argonne, and a vicious tussle between mountain-trained French *Chasseurs Alpins* and German *Gebirgsjäger* troops in the Vosges on the southern flank, led to further failure for 'Papa' Joffre.

The German defences held firm virtually everywhere. Where local French success was achieved, German counter-attacks and overwhelming artillery support had thrown the hapless *poilus* back to their start points. The French winter offensives had been a manifest and bloody failure. The only possible 'plus' point on the Allied side was that Joffre had finally realised that the élan and courage of the French infantryman was utterly useless against heavily defended German trenches, strongpoints and well-drilled machine gunners and artillerymen.

The typical German infantryman was reliable and units had a strong 'regimental' *esprit de corps*, which gave each man confidence that if wounded, he would at least return to his own battalion when he was fighting fit once more. But the idea that *Fritzie Schmidt* was an unquestioning, resolutely obedient automaton was far from the truth even during the early months of the war. Most recognised that: 'Germany needs brave soldiers. Nothing else will do. We have to go through with it, however much we condemn the war itself.'[10]

German infantry 'morch off to meet the enemy', postcard dated 7 August 1915.
(Allen Collection)



'Second Ypres'. Summary of the German offensive between 22 April and 25 May 1915, and scene of first major use of poisonous gas.
(Harington, C.H., Plumer of Messines)

The 'brave soldiers' were knocking the Allied offensives flat. Something had to change, and, as the BEF would soon discover to their cost, the vital ingredient was to be the war of the guns – artillery of all calibres – which the Germans had in plentiful supply already.

Falkenhayn's decision to go onto the defensive in the West had given the BEF the chance to make good the 90,000 or so casualties of 1914, most of whom were experienced and professional soldiers of the pre-1914 British Army.

But the BEF could do little to support the French attacks until spring 1915. Field Marshal Sir John French knew that the BEF was under pressure to take action on the Western Front from the French and because of the British political debate about operations elsewhere, such as the Dardanelles, which would divert vital *matériel* and manpower from the BEF.

The decision was made to attack the German line at Neuve Chapelle, capture the dominant feature of Aubers Ridge and thus threaten the important German road and rail junction at Lille.

The assault was to be by General Douglas Haig's First Army and preparations were meticulously made. Accurate and updated trench maps of the German positions were produced with the aid of photographic air reconnaissance by the RFC, the assault units rehearsed their attacks in detail and precise artillery timetables were produced for the first time. The British plan was to use surprise to catch the German garrison defending Neuve Chapelle off guard.

At 7.30 a.m. on 10 March the Germans were stunned by a 'hurricane' bombardment that fell on their front line defences for a mere 35 minutes before lifting the barrage to their second and support lines. As the artillery moved forward, the British and Indian assault troops rushed forward and swept into the German front line.

Within a few hours, and despite increasing German resistance once the defenders had recovered from the initial shock of the short, sharp bombardment, Haig's men had overrun 4,000 yards of the German front line and advanced to a depth of over 1,000 yards of the German defences. They had captured Neuve Chapelle into the bargain. However, German counter-attacks and the lack of British resources to exploit the situation led to a fraught, see-saw contest around Neuve Chapelle for the next three days. On 12 March, the British consolidated their gains and the battle drew to a close.

It was not long before the news reached the Home Fronts. In Germany, a wife wrote:

> Someone just returned from Neuve Chapelle says that the battle there was one of the most ghastly of the whole year . . . [The German] losses during the fight were appalling: 18,000; and the British were 12,000. (In fact, 12,500 German and 13,000 British casualties) . . . [A friend who was there] witnessed a sad sight . . . A man in the trenches had to watch his son dying by inches a few . . . yards away from him (between the trenches) and was powerless to help or reach him. He was his only son, and he saw him fall wounded and then die slowly, with many other wounded, lying there in the open ground.[11]

Although limited in its aims, the British assault on Neuve Chapelle was a jolt to the German belief that their defences were impregnable. But it also set a pattern of British (and French) offensives and German response that was to be so characteristic of Allied and German experience of the Western Front.

With methodical preparation and heavy artillery support, it was generally possible to break into the German first and perhaps second lines. But it became increasingly difficult to sustain an assault if fresh units and field artillery were not brought up quickly to consolidate the gains and limit the German response.

On the German side, the Kaiser's men became more and more adept at dealing with the penetration of their defences through the rapid use of counter-attacks and artillery fire to disrupt British or French attempts to press on.

But the next act of the Western Front drama in 1915 was about to turn such general rules on their head for two reasons. Falkenhayn had decided to go onto the offensive in Flanders once more and he planned to use a new, foul and insidious weapon when he did. Warfare would never be the same again.

Before the Allies could launch their next round of offensives in May 1915, the Germans struck unexpectedly in the Ypres salient. Falkenhayn had wanted to use his strategic reserves to support a great offensive aimed at Flanders, where he had come so close to victory at the end of 1914. But, his decision had been altered on the insistence of the Kaiser and the commanders of the Eastern theatre of war, Hindenburg and Ludendorff.

Nevertheless, he had a cunning but vile plan that he thought might just have the effect of increasing his war fighting capability on the Western Front also: gas. At first, this chemical weapon would consist of chlorine, but mustard and phosgene gases would follow. All were frightful harbingers of more ruthless methods of using technology to foul ends. Chlorine is a heavy gas, a powerful irritant to nose, throat and lungs once inhaled, and a high concentration will either severely and permanently damage the lungs or kill through asphyxiation.

At the beginning of 1915 Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's Fourth Army already had 6,000 chlorine-filled cylinders stockpiled opposite the British, French and Dominion forces defending the Ypres sector. For most of April, they were useless, for the release of the gas from cylinders was a crude method and entirely dependent on wind direction. The wind stubbornly refused to favour the Germans in the first three weeks of April. Even then, there was little enthusiasm on their part to use it. The official history later recorded that:

> Almost throughout our forces engaged, both commanders and troops, regarded with mistrust the still untried attacking method, if they were not wholly inclined against it.[12]

Then the wind changed and Fourth Army prepared to attack the northern sector of the Ypres salient with the new weapon on 22 April. The offensive was preceded by a

sudden and vicious artillery bombardment that had the salient as its target and Ypres as its bull's eye. The medieval town, already damaged by desultory fire since October 1914, was now subjected to systematic destruction.

At 5 p.m. on that day, the bombardment grew, its violence drowning the sound of the hissing of cylinders releasing the chlorine gas towards the British and French front lines. The gas attack was witnessed as:

> . . . two curious greenish-yellow clouds on the ground on either side of Langemarck in front of the German line. These clouds spread laterally, joined up, and moving before a light wind, became a bluish-white mist, such as is seen over water meadows on a frosty night.[13]

The new and deadly vapour swirled slowly towards French colonial troops of the 45th Algerian Division and the French 78th Territorial Division. This time the trenches offered no protection from the enemy weapon heading towards them. The trenches gave some haven from artillery, mortar and machine gun fire but the gas crept into the trenches, hugging the contours of parapet, fire step and trench floor. Then it wafted unhindered into the dugouts. The putrid cloud, seen with curiosity at first as it headed towards the French, led to terror and agony as the first of numerous casualties tore at their throats coughing and barely able to breath.

The German assault troops, who had been packed in their forward trenches waiting for the order to attack all day, were staggered to see the chaos of panicking and fleeing French troops running blindly away from their trenches. When the assault units of the 46th, 51st and 52nd Reserve Divisions of Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's Fourth Army went over the top, the gas had moved on and was already dispersing, but the damage was done. They advanced against virtually no opposition and filled the breach left by the frightened, dead and dying French defenders.

In a short time, a four-mile gap had appeared in the Allied line between the left flank of the British Second Army and the right flank of the Belgian Army to the north. By nightfall the amazed and euphoric German attackers were in an excellent position to exploit their success thanks to this new terror weapon. The assault divisions were then reinforced to consolidate their gains that night. At first, it seemed that Ypres was at their mercy and that the salient would be pinched out as easily as the attack had been launched. But this brilliant opportunity was to be wasted for three reasons: the response of the British Second Army and the 1st Canadian Division in particular, the inaction of the assaulting German divisions, and the lack of German reserves to guarantee German success.

The response to the German attack was pretty swift, given the pandemonium caused at 5 p.m. on 22 April. By daylight on the 23rd, the Canadians had managed to push a number of hard-pressed battalions into the gap facing the German assault troops. The defence line was by no means continuous, but at least it plugged the hole with

something and left the enemy with a new problem. The Canadians counter-attacked, were then hit by another gas attack on 24 April and were finally relieved in the first week of May after losses of over 6,000 officers and men.[14]

The inaction of the assaulting German divisions after their initial success on 22 April was due to the fact that they had no specific orders to do more than dig in on their objectives. As with the first use of tanks by the British in September 1916, no special tactics for the new gas weapon had been thought of, or at least no instructions appeared in the XXVI Korps, which had the principal role, or in its subordinate divisional orders, for this attack.[15]

Even if a concerted attempt to take the salient had ensued in the first crucial days of the offensive, the German supremo Falkenhayn would not have provided sufficient reserves. His main aim at Ypres and on the Western Front at this time was 'to cloak the transportation of troops to 'Galicia' [on the Eastern Front] for the next major offensive'.[16]

From 25 April, 'Second Ypres' became another murderous campaign for even less purpose on the German side than their enemy. Unwittingly, they were to die or be wounded for the sake of an experiment with the new gas weapon and to provide a deception for an offensive in the East. By early May, they had lost 860 officers and 34,073 other ranks, although these 'official' figures would not have accounted for lightly wounded men, an addition of at least 20 per cent on top, so around 42,000 all told. But British losses amounted to 59,000 officers and men.

Perhaps this was the only macabre gain that Falkenhayn could claim after Second Ypres. His new lambs to the slaughter had imposed more British casualties than they had had to endure themselves.

It would not end there, of course. After violent Allied protest about the use of gas as an abominable weapon, they manufactured and used it too. All manner of gas masks, or respirators, were hastily manufactured and introduced on both sides and war became even more uncomfortable than before. Later, its distribution would depend less on wind direction than the range and accuracy of artillery shells.

Chlorine became the first of the few – lachrymatory gas in June 1915; phosgene in December of that year, which had similar effects to chlorine but was more insidious as it was almost invisible; and mustard gas in 1917, a liquid that caused blistering, dreadful pain in the eyes, nose and lungs, but was rarely fatal. By November 1918, no less than 63 different types of poison gas had been used, but the few listed here are those that have epitomised the horrors of this alternative warfare ever since.[17]

April, and then May 1915, proved to be a 'wake-up call' for the British Home Front too. Modern technology brought the fight home by land, sea and air. For the first time in hundreds of years Britain lost her immunity from foreign violation when she was attacked again: from the air. In April, a Zeppelin dropped bombs on East Anglia, which signalled the beginning of an air offensive that would culminate in two attacks on London in September, killing 38 and wounding 124.

U-boats roamed at sea as the game of death grew more dreadful daily on the land of France and Flanders. Though the underwater threat in 1915 had not become as explicit an attempt as it would in 1917 to 'win the war for Germany', it was a distinct problem for Britain and her Allies nevertheless. On 7 May, the civilian liner SS *Lusitania* was sunk by a German U-boat just off the coast of Ireland with the loss of over 1,000 lives.

The fact that the *Lusitania* sailed with a cargo of ammunition, and passengers were specifically warned in US newspapers not to travel on this liner, was of no consequence once the deed was done. The successful detonation of a torpedo caused a huge explosion of anti-German hatred in Britain and America. The reaction was predictable, with shops and family households of those bearing even tenuous German names being attacked and the shops looted by angry crowds.

It led to an equally chilling wind for the Kaiser and within Germany itself. At the Kaiser's court in Pless, a personal aide noted:

> Will [the sinking of the *Lusitania*] mean war with America? Will it endanger the efforts of the Pope to preserve America's neutrality? . . . Discussion with His Majesty on the assurance demanded by Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg to spare neutral shipping in the U-boat war. His Majesty has not the slightest idea of the seriousness of the situation . . .[18]

On the Home Front it was greeted as a portent of worse times to come. Disturbing the sleeping giant across the Atlantic was not a good move, as the Americans living in Germany made abundantly clear:

> May the 8th, 1915 will live vividly in my memory for the shock that we received by the sinking of the *Lusitania*. [Apparently] a great loss of life had been the just punishment, for [it] was carrying munitions to the enemy of Germany. Neutral America was providing these munitions . . . and what sacrifice could be too great for revenging that?! . . . The Americans here . . . had always . . . been cordial and friendly towards the Germans they met . . . But a sudden change now took place. The Americans openly avoided the Germans, almost cutting off their friends of only the day before.[19]

Despite these shocks to British and American communities at home, the moment passed. It would take a while before transatlantic emotions were so stirred again. Meanwhile, the war, and the killing, went on.

Attacks, counter-attacks and stubborn unwillingness to give an inch of ground for political reasons, such as the Allies at Ypres and the German defenders everywhere, had led to yet more high casualty bills as the Second Ypres campaign rumbled on in early May. On 9 May, the French, with General Ferdinand Foch imbuing his *poilus*

Flammenwerfer. German tactics included the use of flame, as well as gas and explosive mining, in the Ypres salient in 1915.
(Allen Collection)

with the traditional offensive spirit, were on the attack again in Artois, supported by a British assault on Aubers Ridge to the north.

Foch attacked with 18 divisions and almost 300 heavy guns against a German defence of less than half the men, but with a marked superiority in guns of all calibres, trench mortars and the ubiquitous machine gun emplacements. The Artois offensive had the dominating high ground of Vimy Ridge and Notre Dame de Lorette just north of Arras at its centre.

Accordingly, the French XXXIII Corps at the centre of Tenth Army's offensive, led by General Henri Philippe Pétain, stormed Vimy Ridge at great cost and the *poilus* managed to claw their way up to the crest of the ridge in places. The speed and success of the first wave of Pétain's attacks had exceeded expectations, but, as a dreadful augur of what was later to come with the BEF at Loos, the French reserve divisions were not prepared or close enough to exploit this opportunity: the nearest reserve infantry division was over 7 miles away.

The German defenders of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Sixth Army were given desperately needed time to recover and then launch fierce counter-attacks and pummel

the beleaguered French troops with all manner of artillery so that they were forced to withdraw from the ground so brilliantly won earlier.

Pétain's success had been fleeting and illusory, for by the time the French offensive had been exhausted in early June, a further 100,000 men had fallen for *la Patrie* and very little else. The German garrison in Artois had also suffered another 60,000 casualties, but their line had not budged.

At Aubers Ridge, the British were confident of success, as they had been boosted by their initial gains at Neuve Chapelle in March. The British commanders of the corps within First Army that were to assault Aubers were certain that they had 'got the measure' of German defensive tactics and could overcome them. They had not reckoned with the German response, which was a thorough review and application of 'lessons learned' from the battles fought earlier in 1915.

In the line between Festubert on the attacking British right flank and Bois Grenier on the left were the 13th, 14th and 6th Bavarian Reserve Divisions of VII Korps. The garrison had been increased from two to three divisions and, as the Bavarians had taken over part of the sector, this released men from the other divisions to strengthen the defences dramatically in the few weeks after Neuve Chapelle.

New dugouts, machine-gun and mortar emplacements were built and conformed with the fact that because of the high water table in this sector, trenches were improved with thick breastwork parapets and parados supported by sandbags and large-mesh wire. The barbed-wire belt in front of the positions was thickened and covered by interlocking, or cross-fire from an increased number of machine guns.

The attack on Aubers Ridge failed, with 11,600 British casualties against half that figure for those in its defence. The German situation reports on the evening of 9 May made little mention of it, as HQ Sixth Army was concentrating on containing the French offensive. It was clear that it was designed to support the French, but it did achieve surprise initially, as the bombardment was short, as at Neuve Chapelle.

However, when the assault began, the German defenders of Aubers Ridge, secure behind their strengthened and intact defences, reacted quickly once the barrage lifted and caused havoc. Against breastworks 12–20ft thick and 7ft high, the British bombardment was wholly inadequate and gave the subsequent attack no chance. The Germans were astonished and critical of the poor British artillery preparation for this attack and another later at Festubert.[20]

The continued French offensive meant that Rupprecht's Sixth Army expected further British attacks in the Aubers/Bois Grenier sector. They were not disappointed. On 15 May, another assault was launched against Festubert, just north of the La Bassée Canal. This time, the preparatory British bombardment lasted sixty hours on a more concentrated stretch of the German line. It was the first use of artillery designed to break down the enemy defences in a deliberate, systematic manner by attrition. The BEF was attempting to wear down the enemy 'by exhaustion and loss until his defence collapses', according to GHQ.

The battle for Festubert lasted for 12 days and resulted in the Germans giving up almost a mile of ground across a 3,000yd front. But once again, they had inflicted much higher casualties than they had sustained. The British losses were 16,000 officers and men killed, wounded or PoWs compared with 5,000 German.

The failed Allied attempts to break the German line in the spring offensive was much to do with their comparative lack of heavy artillery pieces, insufficient ammunition, and faulty tactics against a strong German defence.

As the war progressed it became primarily an artillery war and in the first two years, Germany had the lead in this deadly game. From the early months, it was the medium guns and 'heavies' that caused the real damage and guns such as the 150mm howitzer were respected and feared by French and British troops alike. With typical ironic humour, the Tommies called it a 'coal box', or 'Jack Johnson', after the contemporary Negro heavyweight boxing champion, a hero of his time. British soldiers were equally scathing of 'armchair generals' who had reported back home that the German guns were poor by comparison with Allied artillery:

> People who say that the German artillery fire is no good simply doesn't know what they are talking about. I can only figure it out as being something worse than the mouth of Hell.[21]

The establishment of the British Army was increasing as new troops arrived in France in their thousands, but new regimental and staff officers were scarce and ill-trained. There were similar problems in the French Army too.

For the German part, lessons were rapidly learnt as a result of the Allied attacks on ways to improve their defences, and to apply the tactics most suited to fighting a defensive battle, which they coined *Abwehrschlacht*.

The German General Staff produced an important solution to the growing manpower problem too. German casualties were high, but they made up their deficiencies by their policy of using a cadre of 25 per cent 'veteran' soldiers in each new division. Falkenhayn commented:

> The moral and technical superiority of the German soldier over his opponents [in 1915], which was daily becoming more evident, also offered a way out of this [manpower] difficulty. It turned out to be so great that it was possible to entertain the suggestion of *Oberst* von Wrisberg, to reduce by about 25 per cent the strength of the fighting units, the divisions, without doing any harm to their effectiveness.[22]

Throughout 1915, these methods gave the Kaiser's men a comparative edge against the French and British on the Western Front. Another phase of Allied offensives during the autumn and early winter of 1915 in Artois, Champagne and at Loos would prove the point.

German Defences I: German trench and OP, Champagne sector, which kept the French attacks in 1915 at bay.
(Allen Collection)

The fighting on the Western Front had continued in places throughout the rest of June and into July, the month in which another 'terror' weapon was brought into deadly play at Hooge in the Ypres salient – liquid fire in the form of the German *Flammenwerfer*, the flame thrower. The Germans kept the Western Allies on their toes to mask their main effort on the Eastern Front, where the German and Austrian offensives were rolling back the Russian Army like a steamroller, an ironic analogy given the Russian Army's label in 1914.

But the battles in the West during the summer were dwarfed by the next offensives against Artois, Loos and Champagne, which began in September. French supremo, Papa Joffre, planned an assault on the same scale as that which had turned the German tide on the Marne twelve months before. In the event, after massive preparations throughout August and early September, the offensive was launched on 25 September. In Champagne, 35 French divisions were hurled against solid German defences with the advantage of dominating high ground from which the defenders had excellent fields of fire. In Artois, 18 French divisions attacked alongside 12 British divisions, whose objective was centred on the town of Loos.

There was some confidence that this time the German defence would be breached, for the whole offensive would be preceded by unprecedented artillery bombardments from a total of 2,000 heavy and 3,000 field guns. Joffre exhorted his troops two days before the attacks began by declaring that:

German Defences II: Fortified accommodation for the German defenders of the Chemin des Dames, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

> You will carry all before you. In one bound you will break through the enemy's defences and reach his artillery. Give him neither rest nor pause until victory is gained.[23]

But once again, the preparations, the artillery concentration and the élan and bravery of both French and British infantrymen alike were ultimately to no avail. Initial successes and stunned German defenders yielding ground were soon replaced by furious German counter-attacks against assault troops who were bereft of reserves to reinforce and replace them. The casualties on both sides mounted horribly as the battle went on.

In Champagne, the French gained 3,000 yards and then discovered to their dismay that the main German defensive positions were in the heavily strengthened and manned second line. Between 25 September and 6 October, Joffre's men suffered another 143,567 casualties compared with 85,000 German losses. They had grasped some of their precious land from the enemy, but the cost was damningly high.

In Artois, the French attacks were a total disaster, for whereas in the previous battle their reserves were too far back, this time they were so close that German heavy and medium artillery ripped them apart before they could do a thing. The butcher's bill for absolutely no definable gain was almost 50,000 men, against German losses of around 30,000.

At Loos, the Germans faced the BEF's First Army under General Haig. The British plan for the attack included less heavyweight support from artillery than the French in Artois and Champagne, but this time, 5,000 cylinders of chlorine poison gas were to be used to augment the effects of the artillery bombardment and to gain much needed surprise. Haig imagined that the assault would provide an opportunity to break through the German lines and then capture the ground in the enemy rear as far as the Haute Deule canal. Six divisions of I and IV Corps were ordered to attack, and XI Corps were to be held in reserve on the understanding that its divisions would be rushed forward when the time came. Their availability was crucial, but in an attempt to minimise casualties, Field Marshal French was eager to keep them well back.

The German defences around Loos were held by the 117th and 14th Divisions from IV and VII Korps respectively. Three regiments of the 117th Division and one regiment of the 47th Division formed the main defensive line and each regiment had one battalion forward, one in support, 500 to 1,000 yards behind and the third in rest billets up to five miles behind the front.[24] Although a French deserter in August had disclosed that a great offensive was to take place in September, German commanders in the Loos area were informed by Sixth Army HQ that any British attack would be only 'partial or as a diversion,' to mask the main thrust by the French.

Nevertheless, reserve divisions were stood by to counter any British breakthrough and the infantry defending the Loos sector were well supported by artillery of all calibres. Although the BEF had almost three times the number of artillery pieces, most of it was concentrated on neutralising the front and second German lines rather than heavy counter-battery work. Even so, the German artillery batteries were very well camouflaged.[25]

The preparatory British bombardment began on 21 September and lasted for four days. Then, at 5.15 a.m. on the 25th, the gas attack began; the first use of gas by the BEF in the war, followed by the infantry assault at 5.50 a.m. The gas was more of a hindrance to the infantry attacking on the left and in the centre and in some places it drifted back towards the British lines.

But the 9th Scottish Division captured the heavily defended Hohenzollern Redoubt, Fosse 8 and the feature known as the Dump, sending the German survivors reeling back to the second line. Part of this was also taken by the 'Devils in skirts,' as the Germans nicknamed the Scottish troops. On the right, the 15th Scottish Division took Loos village.

Across the wire, the effects of the gas attack varied wildly. One thing was for certain: the gas took the garrison completely by surprise, much as it had done so devastatingly when first used by the Germans at Ypres the previous April. Infantrymen of the 22nd Reserve Regiment on the German right admitted after their capture that, although they had watched the gas cloud swirling towards their trenches, they did not realise what it was until it hit them. Most were not wearing gas masks and the gas caused the same

effects as in April. Surviving company officers and NCOs found it impossible at first to control the general panic among their men.

At Hohenzollern Redoubt, it had a devastating effect, drifting right through the position and into its dugouts. Most of the defenders of the 157th Regiment abandoned the Redoubt before the main British assault began, because of the gas and also the damage caused by the British 9.2in howitzers. Many were killed by the continuing bombardment as they ran back towards the second line.

An officer of the 26th Regiment in the southernmost sector of the line facing the British later wrote:

> Gas Attack! A yellow white smoke welled from the British trenches at intervals of 15 metres. I ordered: Gas masks on and man the trench . . . The British trenches could no longer be seen . . . In ten minutes it reached the first wire entanglement and was fifteen metres high . . . At 6.25 a.m. (5.25 a.m. for Allied time) . . . I gave the order to 'Fire' and everyone shot into the cloud. The machine guns clattered. All around us was white mist. Breathing was difficult . . . In front of the first platoon the British clambered out of their trenches. Our fire compelled them to return . . . At 7.10 a.m. the cloud lifted and went northwards.[26]

The British assault made good progress in most places and this caused considerable anxiety in the German command in the first few hours of the attack. The troops holding the forward defences had given ground so rapidly in places that serious plans were made to abandon the sector where the gap had appeared between Loos and Auchy. As far back as IV Korps headquarters at Douai by mid-afternoon, 'there were endless convoys of wagons formed up in double lines ready to march away, and the wagons of the Korps HQ were also awaiting the order to move off. It was a sad picture of retreat.'[27]

But as the day wore on, the situation was gradually restored. The dogged German resistance in the centre at Bois Carré and Lone Tree in particular, broke the initial impetus of the British advance. All local reserves were soon brought into the battle and other reserve units were ordered into action in the afternoon and evening. The only external troops available to reinforce this sector came from Sixth Army reserve, namely 8th Division and 2nd Guards Reserve Division, and they were ordered to fill the gap that had appeared between Loos and Auchy.

Even so, the situation remained critical and there was a serious danger that if the BEF's assault divisions were rapidly reinforced then the German position may indeed have become untenable. Once again, as with the French problems of having their reserve divisions either too close, as at the Artois offensive in September, or too far away, which had happened in Artois in the May offensive, the Germans were assisted by their enemy in their defence.

After the initial attacks, General Haig had signalled Field Marshal French that the reserves should be brought forward at 8.45 a.m. The 21st and 24th Divisions were

warned about the task by 9.30 a.m., but the dissemination of orders and then great congestion on the approach roads delayed their arrival until late afternoon.

Thereafter, these divisions were compelled to advance at night across a battleground entirely unfamiliar to them and then attack the largely intact German second line positions at 11 a.m. the next morning. Exhausted from their route marches and without sleep, they attacked with wholly inadequate artillery support and into thick, uncut belts of barbed wire in front of the German positions and against heavy machine-gun and artillery fire. By lunchtime on 26 September, most of the battalions that had been dropped into this cauldron ceased to exist as effective units.

Hill 70 Redoubt was the scene of bitter fighting on 26 September, but even the British Guards Division failed to take it after bitter fighting. The British advance had been stalled by a combination of inexperience and exhaustion, the latter because of the distance that the reserve divisions had been forced to cover before attacking an immensely strong German second line.

German counter-attacks now became the main feature of the remaining battles around Loos, and most of the original British gains were recaptured, including the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

A German corporal (*Obergefreiter*) involved in one of the fierce counter-attacks survived to recall:

> The mad attack begins. No one heeds the bullets, which rain upon us like hell. The enemy hesitates. He sees the frightful terrifying fence of shining bayonets, hears the wild shouts of our fast approaching line . . . Then they [flee] . . . We fire loud volleys into the flying mass. Frightful screams can be heard, drowned by the boisterous cheers of the German soldiers. The ground is covered with dead bodies, the wounded in blood . . . Not [one] enemy escapes the bloodbath.[28]

When the battle was over, the British had lost 50,000 men. The German casualties were almost 26,000 at Loos and 56,000 across the Artois/Loos and Champagne fronts. The autumn battles were now all but over, and the German Army remained as firmly fixed in their defence of conquered French and Belgian soil as ever. Though the madness went on at the Front, loved ones in Germany were receiving the news of the war with heavier and heavier hearts. For some, it had been too much already:

> A poor woman the other day in the train was holding up her hand and counting the fingers on it slowly – one, two, three, four, five, over and over again. The passengers gradually began to smile at her, until at last the man sitting next to her said simply, 'Don't laugh at my wife, ladies and gentlemen. I am taking her to the asylum. Her wits are gone. She has lost her five sons – all killed in action.'[29]

Even though the bloody events of 1914 and 1915 had seen little significant change in offensive and defensive doctrine, they had led to some innovation at tactical level on both sides of the wire. Under the inspiration of *Hauptmann* Rohr, the German Army was organising and training specially selected troops into assault detachments, *Stosstruppen*, or 'storm troops'. The detachments were formed from section-sized squads that were taught to advance independently across no-man's-land and deal with enemy HQs, strongpoints and machine-gun posts through the use of 'infiltration' tactics, rather than attacking in the usual infantry platoon or company waves.

Lightly equipped, though heavily armed, the squads had specialist weapons, including flamethrowers, light trench mortars and carbines, rather than the standard-issue Gewehr rifle. They also carried extra grenades in sandbag 'pouches' slung over each shoulder. Later, they would be issued with the light version of the Maxim machine gun MG 08. The storm troops would come into their own in the opening moves of the Verdun offensive in February 1916, and special units were also used for counter-attack operations on the Somme later that year. Infiltration tactics were successfully employed during the German counter-offensive at Cambrai in November/December 1917. But it would be in the German offensives of 1918 that storm troops would become an enduring image and generate extraordinary myths about their elite status and their true impact on Germany's fate in that catalytic period on the Western Front.

For the Allies, French tactics were influenced in a similar manner to the German innovation through the ideas of a front line infantry officer, Captain André Laffargue, the author of *The Attack in Trench Warfare*. Though the BEF was rebuilding an army almost from scratch after the loss of most of its professional forces of 1914 and novel tactics were still to come, the British were at least introducing more effective infantry weapons such as the Stokes mortar and Mills grenade, as well as increasing their integral firepower with machine guns. By the end of 1915, each infantry battalion of around 1,000 men had an establishment of up to sixteen Lewis light machine guns and in October of that year, the British Army established the Machine Gun Corps, which concentrated the heavier Vickers machine guns into more effective tactical units.

One irksome and deadly method used by both sides from the onset of war was sniping. In one fortnight of trench warfare in December 1915, British troops sustained a total of 3,285 wounds of which almost 25 per cent were to the head or neck. Similar statistics would almost certainly be available from German and French casualty returns, and a fair number of those wounded in the head or neck would have been a result of sniper activity.

The *Scharfschütze*, or sniper, was not as terrifying as the constant threat of artillery or mortar bombardments, but he kept troops on edge and often became singularly responsible for lowering an enemy unit's morale. As a typical example, in the Vermelles sector in September 1916 one officer of the West Yorkshire Regiment put his head above the parapet for a brief look and was hit twice by two different snipers.[30]

As with many of the innovations of trench warfare, the Germans were the first to use snipers in a systematic manner. Soldiers awarded 'marksman' as a result of the routine personal weapons tests common to all infantry units regardless of nationality, were earmarked for special sniper training. German snipers earned the coveted 'oak-leaf' badge, additional pay and privileged status. Many, most prominently *Gefreiter* Walter Schmidt who had over two hundred kills to his name, were regarded by their comrades as 'aces' with the same esteem as air aces such as von Richthofen, Immelmann and Boelcke.

German snipers worked as units, remaining in the same sector for months along with their regiment and were stood down from normal trench duties and fatigues. (It was normal for German units holding the line to remain in the same sector for lengthier periods than their British and French opponents). This way, each sniper acquired an intimate knowledge of the terrain and most likely target areas, such as an exposed trench junction point or vulnerable sap.

Wearing camouflage capes and fresh foliage to break up their outline, snipers usually crept into no-man's-land shortly before dawn and remained there throughout the daylight hours. Snipers were constantly on the move, as he could fire no more than two or three shots from one position before being compromised. Snipers on both sides also used elaborately camouflaged static positions, such as dummy trees, although most were happier taking their chances on the ground in their chosen part of no-man's-land.

In December, the German industrialist Walter Rathenau declared that:

> When . . . England declared war, our country became a beleaguered fortress. Cut off by land and sea, it was made wholly self-dependent. After one year of conflict, we are facing a war the duration, cost, danger and sacrifices of which no one could have foreseen.[31]

The Allied blockade had become a major factor in the deterioration of the German Home Front. But it was by no means the only cause, for the military was an all-consuming beast and only the black market profiteers, industrialists and certain farming communities had benefited. For the ordinary German citizen, life was already tough by Christmas 1915. The lavish food parcels of 1914 were noticeably absent even at the fighting fronts. The only luxury in the trenches was at best a barrel of beer donated by a Commanding Officer or purloined by a wily Quartermaster. But even the soldiers who managed to take home leave were not much better off.

Traditional Christmas fare such as the Christmas tree, cake and fruitcakes were rare or often banned in the cities. Even the stalls of the renowned Christmas market, or *Weinachtsmarkt*, were devoid of the normal fare such as sausages, gingerbread, and chocolates. When the holiday passed, there was only time for universal reflection:

> Well, Christmas is over . . . For weeks past, the city seems to have been enveloped in an impenetrable veil of sadness, grey in grey . . . and which forms a fit setting for the white-faced, black-robed women who glide so sadly through the streets, some bearing their sorrow proudly as a crown to their lives, others bent and broken under a burden too heavy to be borne.[32]

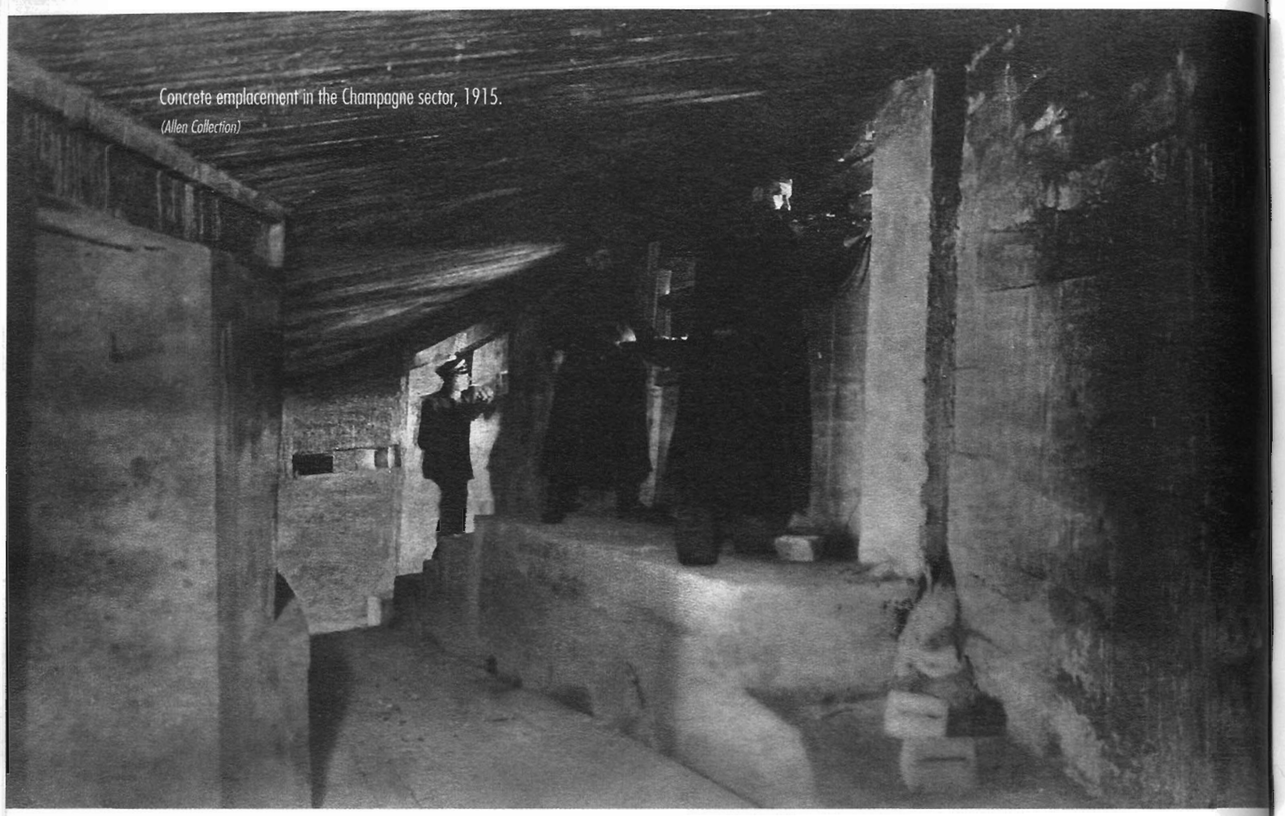
Despite the unrest, shortages, anger and mourning at home, Germany's military balance by the end of 1915 looked better than that of the Allies. Falkenhayn's strategy of defence in the West and offensive operations in the East had frustrated all French and British attempts at a breakthrough on the one hand, and near catastrophe for Russia on the other, while Serbia was effectively marginalised.

But one vital factor had been overlooked. It would come back to haunt Falkenhayn and the German Army in the West. In December 1915 the BEF strength reached one million. Coupled with a change of C-in-C, as General Douglas Haig succeeded Field Marshal Sir John French, it was a clear indication that the British and Dominion contribution to the war on the Western Front was set to become ever greater. Falkenhayn had missed a golden opportunity in 1915, and an opportunity that would not come round again. A decade or so later, the eminent military writer General von Moser noted:

> There is no doubt as to what the proper course should have been in the spring of 1915 . . . The British Army should have been so defeated that it could never have developed into an efficient 'million [man] army'. It should have been like a newly sown field struck by a heavy hailstorm, which never recovers to bear a full crop; the result would have been certain if such storms of hail and battle had been repeated several times in 1915, when their fury would have been intensified by the hatred of the British which justly filled every German heart.[33]

By New Year's Eve 1915, total German losses since August 1914 had reached a staggering 2, 597, 052; no less than 601,751 were dead and a further 242,347 missing, presumed killed.[34] It was a very high price to pay for failure in 1914 and an almost wholly defensive posture on the Western Front throughout 1915. But the New Year promised new opportunities to reverse those fortunes, as German strategy shifted towards an offensive in the West and an attempt to sever the link between the French and British armies by knocking one of them out of the war. The place for the offensive was to be the historic fortress town of Verdun.

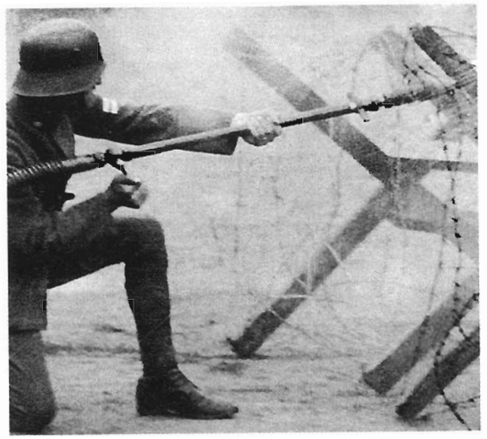
Regardless of the costly and indecisive offensives in Artois, with British support, and Champagne in 1917, French C-in-C Marshal Georges Joffre was encouraged by the increasing size of the BEF, and the fact that General Sir Douglas Haig had replaced Field Marshal Sir John French. Joffre convened an Inter-Allied Military Conference at his HQ in Chantilly from 6–8 December 1915 to seek a more unified Allied strategy.



Concrete emplacement in the Champagne sector, 1915.
(Allen Collection)

Germany had been able to react effectively to events in the West and other theatres because of her excellent rail/internal lines of communication. The main decision of the Allied conference was to reduce Germany's flexibility to switch her forces quickly from one theatre to another by launching simultaneous offensives on the Western, Eastern and Italian fronts. In late December, Joffre wrote to Haig suggesting a main Anglo-French offensive astride the River Somme, where the two Allied armies met. He added in January 1916 that the BEF should be involved in a number of smaller actions, designed to 'wear out' the enemy prior to the major offensive.

Haig, whose preference was a main effort in Flanders, deferred to Joffre in the interests of Allied unity and agreed that the main assault would be in the Somme sector, beginning in July, though the 'smaller actions' would be put on hold. The meeting between Joffre and Haig to confirm the details of the Allied offensives for 1916 took place at Chantilly on 14 February 1916. One week later, Joffre's *poilus* would be fighting for their lives in the defence of Verdun.



CHAPTER 5

'WE SHALL BLEED THE FRENCH WHITE AT VERDUN'

JANUARY–JUNE 1916

An den Tod
Mich aber schone, Tod,
Mir dampft noch Jugend blutstromrot, –
Noch hab ich nicht mein Werk erfüllt,
Noch ist die Zukunft dunstverhüllt –
Drum schone mich, Tod.

Wenn später einst, Tod,
Mein Leben verlebt ist, verloht
Ins Werk – wenn das müde Herz sich neigt,
Wenn die Welt mir schweigt, –
Dann trage mich fort, Tod.'
Gerrit Engelke (1890–12 October 1918)[1]

To Death
But spare me, Death;
I am still in the first flush of youth,
My life's work as yet unfulfilled,
The future remains a mystery, –
So spare me, Death.

Sometime later, Death,
When I've had a full life, when it has burned away
Into my work – [and] when the tired ticker is waning,
When the world has nothing more to say to me,
Then [you can] carry me off, Death.

The German war poet Gerrit Engelke spoke for every German soldier, and probably every French and British one too, with his thoughts in 'An den Tod' ('To Death'). For 1916 was to be the year that remains in popular perception as that most associated with the slaughter and futility of the First World War. On the Western Front, the Germans opened their account with an offensive in February at Verdun, and in July, a combined Anglo-French offensive began on the Somme. Both campaigns would become notorious for certain reasons, but both campaigns would also lead to a dramatic change in Germany's fortunes. The military balance would not favour her by the end of the year.

During 1915 the French and British offensives had ground to a halt every time through lack of reserves and artillery resources to match the German guns, including the notorious 'heavies'. Joffre had dreamt of a real breakthrough, especially before the autumn battles. But they were only dreams and 1915 had ended in a desperate stalemate.

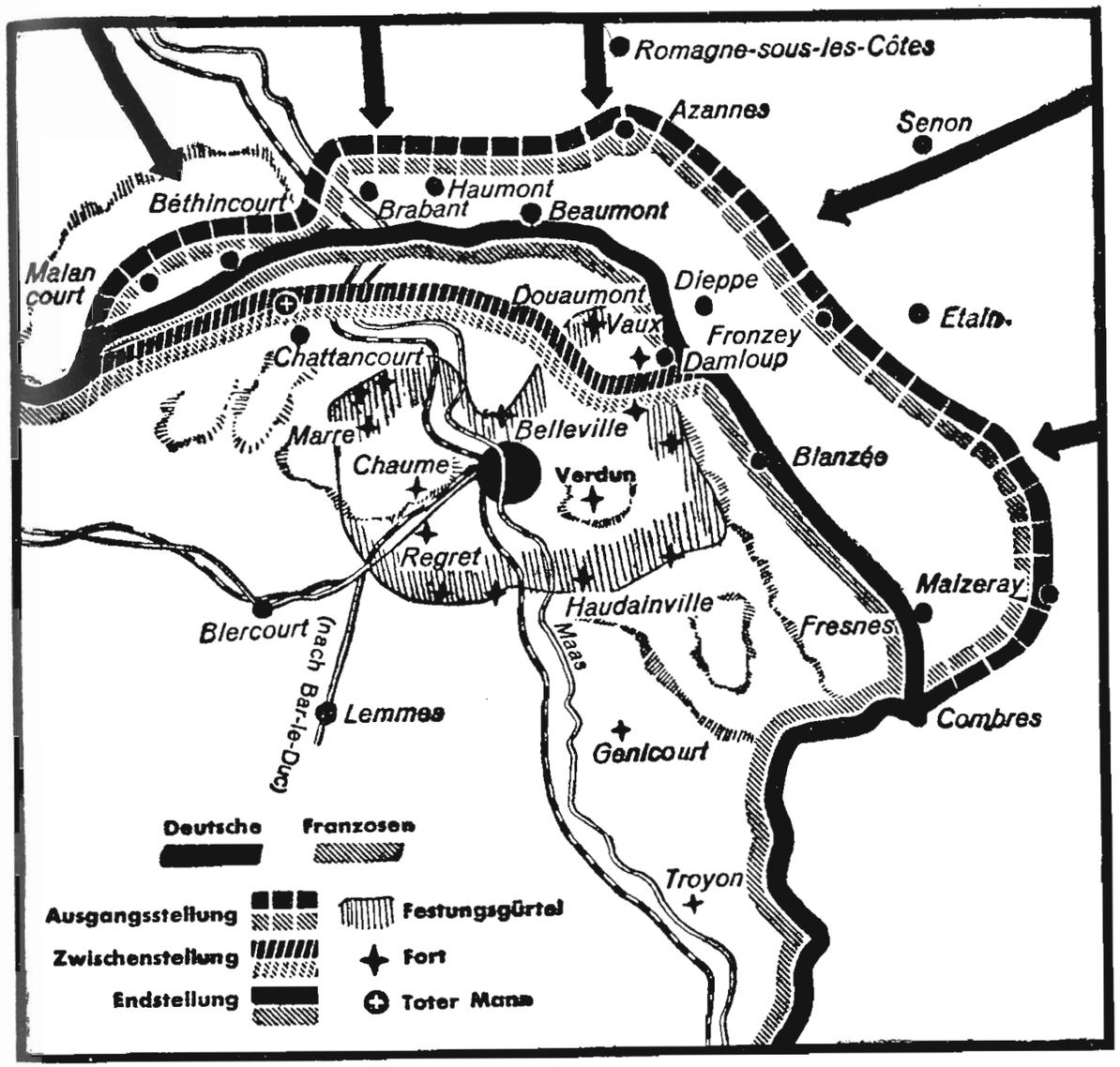
General von Falkenhayn was confident that the strength of the German defences would hold any major Allied attack. But he realised that the Western Front was the decisive theatre of the war, and that a purely defensive strategy would not win that war. The prospects of a breakthrough on the Western Front seemed bleak. First and foremost, he regarded the British as 'the arch-enemy', with France as Britain's 'best sword' on the continent. He needed a method to knock that sword out of Britain's hand.

Falkenhayn saw a way to succeed and put France out of the war without having to attempt a breakthrough, for he believed that the French were close to moral and military collapse. By the beginning of 1916, he concluded that:

> . . . the strain on France has almost reached breaking point, though it is certainly borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeeded in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for, that breaking point would be reached and England's best sword knocked out of her hand.[2]

In January he told the Kaiser that he had noticed: 'the ever dwindling power of the resistance and limited ability of the French people to hold out', and that a massive 'breakthrough' offensive would not be necessary. He added:

> We can probably do enough for our purposes with limited resources. Within our reach behind the French sector of the Western Front, there are objectives for the retention of which, the French . . . would be compelled to throw in every man they have. If they do so the forces of France will bleed to death – as there can be no question of a voluntary withdrawal – whether we reach our goal or not.[3]



Verdun 1916: German and French front lines at the beginning of the German offensive on 21 February 1916; mid-campaign (August) and at the end of the campaign in December. The map also shows the *Festungsgürtel* or ring of forts; the forts and *Toter Mann*, or *Mort Homme*.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

Verdun was such a place. Moreover, Falkenhayn's codeword for the Verdun campaign, Operation *Gericht* had sinister overtones.[4]

A traditional fortress-city, Verdun lies astride the River Meuse, and has long symbolised French national courage and pride. Built under the guidance of King Louis XIV's famous architect Vauban, it had for over 200 years withstood invasion, including a vain German attempt in 1914. Closely protected by outlying forts, Verdun had, since the autumn of 1914, been a relatively quiet sector of the Front. Now it was to be Falkenhayn's 'killing ground', where he would force the French to defend at all costs. Verdun, the heart of France, as the Germans described it, would be squeezed until the French could resist no more.

The Kaiser's son, Crown Prince Wilhelm, and his Fifth Army would carry out the attack. But there was friction from the outset between him, his tough Chief-of-Staff General Knobelsdorf, and Falkenhayn. The Crown Prince saw his main objective as the capture of Verdun itself. He pressed for simultaneous attacks against the weakened French defences on both sides of the River Meuse. Falkenhayn overrode the Crown Prince, insisting on limiting the offensive to the right bank only, a frontage of less than ten miles.

He had a different agenda, which stopped short of a breakthrough strategy but expected to inflict massive French casualties. But he was certain that that this would inevitably result in heavy German casualties also and was reluctant to make this clear to his battlefield commanders. So the German Fifth Army prepared for battle. Troops, ammunition, and guns of every calibre were brought up the line in great secrecy. Zero Day was set for 12 February, although poor weather would eventually delay the opening of the attack until 21 February.

Verdun was surrounded by hills and ridges that provided superb defensive positions. On the heights themselves, three concentric rings of forts were built, their guns placed so as to dislodge all but the strongest of infantry attacks. The forts were considered to be the crowning glory of the French defensive layout.

The strongest of these was Fort Douaumont, which had been designed to resist the heaviest shells. An elaborate telephone system controlled the fort's guns. These were mounted in turrets and consisted of one 155mm, one 75mm and three heavy machine guns. The fort could accommodate a full battalion of one thousand infantrymen. A series of underground passages linked each gun emplacement.

Each of the Verdun forts was designed to hold out for weeks at a time. They lay between five and ten miles from Verdun itself. They were covered by a protective network of trenches, redoubts, and thick belts of barbed wire.

But, since the autumn of 1914, these defences had been badly neglected and many guns removed for use in other more active sectors. The relative inactivity on both sides of the wire had lulled the French garrison into a false sense of security. Many of the forts, including Douaumont, were also undermanned. Overall, the French troops had been allowed to become slack.

Lieutenant Colonel Émile Driant, an infantry regiment commander, was unhappy about the situation. Throughout 1915 he had witnessed the decline in standards of the garrison. He was concerned that Verdun would be defenceless against any sustained German attack and pestered influential friends until the French Defence Ministry took action. They sent a Commission to inspect Verdun, which recommended that urgent steps were taken to improve the defences. But even then, the urgency of those steps was suspect.

By the end of January 1916, the French realised that a German attack was likely, and that Verdun was the main objective. Almost too late, Joffre ordered two French infantry divisions to reinforce the Verdun sector and the defenders of Verdun struggled frantically to improve their positions in a desperate race against time.

Unfortunately, the *poilus* were never great advocates of digging-in. Trained to attack whenever possible, they were even less happy with building elaborate trench and dugout systems around the forts that made up Verdun's defences. Early 1916 was cold and wet and made the life of the French soldiers in the front line at Verdun miserable.

As January 1916 passed into February, the French troops were at last spurred into action, thanks to the warnings of Colonel Driant and the undeniable sign of German preparations for an attack. The reinforcements that Joffre had at last released for Verdun were rushed into the line.

German storm troops practise the use of the flamethrower for the Verdun offensive.
(Allen Collection)

In the meantime, the *poilus* steeled themselves for the inevitable attack. One *poilu* wrote: 'We all pray to God that we are not too late with our preparations to meet the enemy . . . the German storm will soon break.'

But apathy, a universal problem for the French defenders of Verdun, was to have dire consequences. The trenches in the forward zone of the defence were poorly sited and prepared, and most would not withstand a heavy bombardment.

In contrast, the German front line itself curved round Verdun on either side of the River Meuse. Sited on high ground, it overlooked the city and its forts. With customary thoroughness, the German defences were both well-sited and formidable. Falkenhayn's men had reinforced concrete bunkers and bomb-proof underground shelters for headquarters, communication centres, medical facilities, ammunition stores, and accommodation for the men. Behind the front line, Falkenhayn arranged for narrow gauge railways to help in the movement of the extra ammunition and supplies needed for the attack.

Poised to assault Verdun, the men of Crown Prince Wilhelm's Fifth Army had faith in their commander, but deep suspicion and hostility towards Falkenhayn and his staff. One of Falkenhayn's aides even jeered at soldiers shivering in the wintry conditions. It was a sad reflection on Falkenhayn's relationship with his men and the remoteness of his staff from the troops on the ground.

Hauptmann Oswald Boelcke, German air ace and pioneer of air tactics.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

Rittmeister Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, the top-scoring air ace of the First World War.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

A German soldier expressed the feelings of most of the men as he wrote:

> Courage has nothing to do with it. The fear of death surpasses all other feelings and terrible compulsion alone drives the soldier forward. We are motivated to fight on by this damned discipline of the Prussian Army . . . and the simple feeling that the terrible must be done.[5]

The wild enthusiasm for war had long since passed. There was a strange sense of foreboding about the forthcoming battle that this German soldier and thousands like him were about to experience. For the *poilu* it must have seemed a good deal worse than foreboding. Many would probably have agreed with the feeling: 'Nous sommes dans un pot de chambre et nous y serons emmerdés.'[6]

The evolution of air warfare took a giant stride forward in 1916 at Verdun and on the Somme. It was a momentous year for the German Air Service and one in which, as on the ground, the innate German sense of superiority over her enemies was eroded by the year's end.

The onset of trench warfare soon negated the traditional reconnaissance (recce) role of the cavalryman. Consequently, commanders on both sides of no-man's-land increasingly relied on the 'eyes and ears' of their evolving air forces. Reconnaissance was the *raison d'être* and aerial photography was the vital asset, as it gave accurate and up-to-date information on enemy positions, rear areas and troop concentrations. Pilots and their observers also identified enemy artillery batteries and other high-value targets and sent back crucial data to their own gun lines on the 'fall of shot' – the pattern and accuracy of the artillery barrage laid down on an enemy target.

The role was soon so important that other aircraft were designated to protect the recce flights and aerial combat – the war in the air – was born. Between 1915 and November 1918, the Western Front more than any other theatre of war witnessed a constant struggle for air superiority above the trenches, incessant attempts to use technology to provide 'unbeatable' fighter aircraft and ever more advanced tactics. With the designs of Anthony Fokker, the Germans developed a synchronising gear to allow machine guns to be fired through the propeller and this helped Fokker monoplanes to dominate the skies over no-man's-land until the Allies brought in new tactics and improved aircraft during 1916. The experience of Verdun and the Somme led to the formation of the German *Jagdstaffeln*, or specialist fighter squadrons, with single-seater aircraft such as the Albatross DIII. By mid-1917 they would form the first *Jagdgeschwader*, or fighter wing, led by the 'Red Baron' *Rittmeister* Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen. The unit became known as the 'flying circus' because of its colourful planes and its flamboyant reputation in action above the trenches.

German pilots such as Oswald Boelcke, Richthofen and Max Immelmann developed tactics in the early years of the war. Above all, Boelcke was both a brilliant pilot and

tactician, inspired his fellow airmen and was widely respected by his enemies. After notching up 40 victories he was killed in an air collision with one of his own pilots. Of all the 'Aces' of the skies in the air war, Manfred von Richthofen was the top marksman, with 80 victories. Richthofen became an inspiration not only for other pilots, but also the German soldiers in the trenches and the German people. His successes and the reputation of his 'flying circus' were a real boost to German morale and to many he appeared both invincible and immortal.

The struggle above the battlefield of Verdun would soon become as savage and bitterly contested as that which was about to unfold on the ground.

The dawn of Monday 21 February 1916 brought fog to the French sector around Verdun. The stillness was suddenly shattered by a murderous bombardment of 1,220 German guns along a frontage of barely eight miles. It was the greatest artillery concentration thus far on the Western Front and it signalled the opening of the most prolonged and agonising struggle of the First World War. After a year on the defensive in the West, the German Army was once again on the attack.

For a while, it would seem as though the future of France, and the war, hung in the balance. Though the German commander General von Falkenhayn planned to wage a limited offensive, it would devour almost a million men, friend and foe. Verdun was to become one of the most notorious battles in history.

For nine terrifying hours, the German guns kept up a relentless barrage, obliterating the poorly prepared French front line trenches and burying hundreds of men alive. This storm of steel fell most heavily on Colonel Driant's regiment in a part of the front line hidden by a wood. Driant had been the man who had first alerted the French authorities over Verdun's vulnerability. Even though his defences were stronger than other French regiments in the line, his men still suffered.

At 4 p.m., the first waves of German infantry attacked. As the assault was pressed home, the French line was in danger of buckling. A massive infantry follow-up assault on this first day would have certainly broken the French line. But this was not what Falkenhayn had in mind.

He did not want the French to withdraw, but to pour their troops into Verdun so that he could destroy them. By the end of the first day, the German attack had penetrated the French defences to a depth of two miles in places.

After another furious bombardment, the Germans attacked again on the morning of 22 February. A terrifying and deadly new terror weapon came with the forward lines of German assault troops – the *Flammenwerfer* or flamethrower. They were used with devastating effect on the most stubborn French resistance, torching the brave French soldiers where they stood.

Under this renewed attack, the French line began to give way. In danger of being entirely cut off, Colonel Driant decided that the remnants of his regiment should withdraw before they were slaughtered. As they retreated, Driant was mortally wounded.

By now, whole French infantry battalions were disappearing under the weight of the German assault. Falkenhayn's plan to destroy the French Army at Verdun seemed to be working. Worse, French troops were being killed by their own artillery and German machine guns broke up many French counter-attacks almost before they began. Communications broke down and desperate French commanders were forced to use runners, many of whom were killed before they could reach another position with their messages. Those that did get through brought messages of hopelessness in the face of the German assaults. One said:

> Lieutenant Commanding 3rd Bn/60th Regiment to 143 Bde. The CO and all my company commanders have been killed. My Bn is reduced to . . . 180 men. I have neither ammunition or food. What am I to do?[7]

By the end of the fourth day of the offensive the Germans were closing in on the forts that protected Verdun itself. The supposedly impregnable Fort Douaumont now

German infantry repel a French counter-attack at Verdun.
(Verdun Collection)

An exhausted German soldier at Verdun.
(Verdun Collection)

became the centre of German attention. German assault engineer Sergeant Kunze was the unlikely hero of what happened next.

On the morning of 25 February, under cover of a barrage, Kunze led his assault group from the elite Brandenburg Regiment onto the top of Fort Douaumont, but was blown off it by a stray shell into a ditch below. Miraculously unharmed, he looked around for an opening and found one just above him, so he ordered his men to form a human pyramid and then broke into the fort. Entirely alone, he began to wander through this vast concrete labyrinth.

He heard the muffled bangs of Fort Douaumont's 155mm gun. Guided by these, he made his way nervously to the turret. The French gun crew were oblivious of his presence until challenged by him and made prisoner.

Kunze then continued through the corridors, armed only with a pistol, and began to realise that Fort Douaumont was virtually unmanned. Its garrison had, in fact, been recently reduced to a mere 56 elderly French artillerymen. Scarcely believing his continued good fortune, he eventually found the remainder of the garrison in the main dormitory, many still in their beds. He simply locked them in the room, then called his own men into the fort. Sergeant Kunze had single-handedly captured Verdun's most prestigious bastion.

When the news of Douaumont's fall reached Germany, there was wild rejoicing. Church bells were rung and services of thanksgiving held as the German people were given assurance that Verdun, and therefore France – was about to capitulate.

In France, Fort Douaumont's surrender was greeted with dismay and disbelief. In Verdun itself, French troops streamed through the streets shouting: *'Sauve qui peut!'*

('Save yourselves!'). After five days of battle Verdun appeared to be on the verge of collapse and France was facing its most critical point of the war.

At this crisis point, Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, realised that only one man could save Verdun and perhaps France: General Henri Philippe Pétain. On the evening of 25 February 1916, Joffre ordered Pétain to take over the Verdun garrison.

On arrival, Pétain's first task was to reassure his men that their desperate situation would soon be brought under control. Thereafter, he worked tirelessly to contain and then defeat the German assault. His first orders were that Verdun was to be held whatever the cost and that the existing defences and artillery strength must be improved. As result, reinforcements were immediately diverted to defend Verdun.

Pétain was certain that deliverance could only be achieved by the sustained use of artillery and he began to deploy an increasing number of guns. Yet Petain's mere presence was his most powerful weapon. His encouraging phrase, 'They shall not pass', became immortal. Morale was revived almost overnight and there was new steel in the *poilus'* resolve to hold Verdun.

Meanwhile, along the only route into Verdun free from German shellfire, French trucks began to bring a steady and endless stream of supplies and reinforcements. This vital lifeline soon became known as 'la Voie Sacrée', or 'the Sacred Road'. During the first week of March, 190,000 men trudged along it on their way to the front line. Transport passed down the road at a rate of one truck every fourteen seconds.

Falkenhayn appeared to be achieving his aim of drawing the whole French Army into this slaughterhouse, but Pétain put his doctrine of 'firepower conquers all' into effect.

Increasingly heavy artillery bombardments caused the German assault to falter and Falkenhayn reluctantly to change his mind. He finally granted Crown Prince Wilhelm his wish to extend the attack to the western side of the River Meuse. By 8 March, the Germans had carved out a holding position across the river and another titanic struggle began.

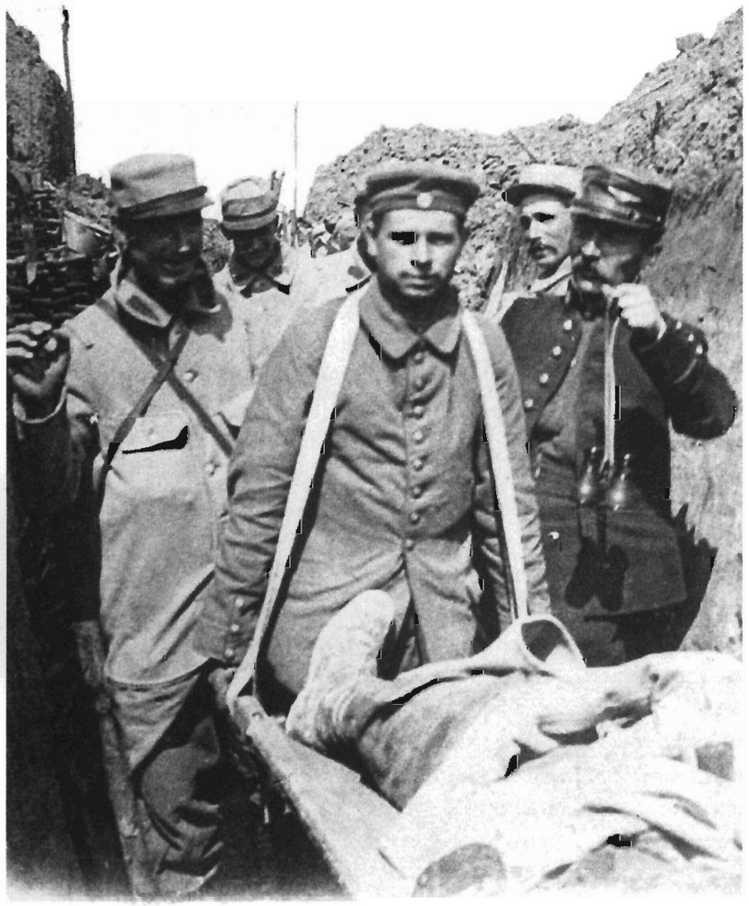
The French casualties mounted again, as Falkenhayn had intended. But Pétain was inflicting severe losses on the Germans too.

By April 1916, French counter-attacks were better planned, fierce, and frequent. The Germans were beginning to be pushed back from the gates of Verdun. The thunder of the guns never ceased. To both French and German infantrymen, gunners and engineers engaged in or close to the ever-shifting, barely definable front lines, the artillery was a screaming, mind-numbing harbinger of death and mutilation.

Henri Barbusse explained that:

> A diabolical uproar surrounds us. We are conscious of a sustained crescendo, an incessant multiplication of the universal frenzy; a hurricane of hoarse and hollow

A German prisoner acts as a stretcher-bearer for a wounded comrade.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)



> banging, of raging clamour, of piercing and beast-like screams, fastens furiously with tatters of smoke upon the earth where we are buried up to our necks, and the wind of the shells seems to set it heaving and pitching.[8]

By May, the Verdun landscape had become a scene of surreal and nauseating horror. The battlefield had been pulverised by the massed artillery of both sides. A French pilot, flying above this livid, lunar landscape, compared it to: 'the humid skin of a monstrous toad'.

On the ground, soldier and writer Jacques Meyer described the real frightfulness when he noted: 'Everywhere there were distended bodies that your feet sank into. The stench of death hung over the jumble of decaying corpses like some hellish perfume.' When the Germans captured Côte 304 in May, one of the first demands of the assault troops was for a double ration of tobacco to mask the overwhelming reek of the corpses rotting around them. Like Jacques Meyer, a fellow French soldier wrote at this time that:

> We all had on us the stench of dead bodies. The bread we ate, the stagnant water we drank, everything we touched had a rotten smell, owing to the fact that the earth around us was literally stuffed with corpses.[9]

At last, the French artillery and infantry were beginning to gain the upper hand over Falkenhayn. One reason for this was that, unlike the Germans, the French were continually relieving their battle-weary units with fresh troops. Conversely, German morale dipped dramatically as the increasing number of German prisoners, exhausted from prolonged combat, testified.

Pétain's inspiration had saved Verdun, but the strain of dealing with continual crises and maintaining the fighting spirit of his men eventually exhausted him. In May 1916 he was promoted to make way for two more thrusting and ruthless men: Generals Robert Nivelle and Charles Mangin, the latter of whom was already known by the *poilus* as 'the Butcher'.

But the battle was far from over. It raged on, putting pressure on the British Army to attack earlier than planned on the Somme. By mid-July, the French had retaken some of the forts lost to the Germans at the beginning of the battle and the tide was turning in favour of the French. Furthermore, despite the horrific cost of the opening day on 1 July, the massive British offensive on the Somme successfully diverted Falkenhayn's attention from Verdun. On 11 July he would be forced to go completely over to the defensive. He could not simultaneously attack the French and resist the British and French pressure on the Somme.

Not only had Falkenhayn's policy of destroying the French Army failed, it had also dangerously sapped the German Army's strength. With the Brusilov offensive under way on the Eastern Front and also putting Germany under the cosh at the time, the pressure on Falkenhayn became almost unbearable. His days as the German military supremo were numbered.

Once the German Army was forced to go on the defensive at Verdun, the French were able to draw breath and prepare for the great counter-offensive that would drive the German Fifth Army back to its original start line by December 1916.

The price of Falkenhayn's failure and French endurance was prohibitive. The German casualties alone would amount to over 330,000 by December 1916. The French would suffer 377,000 casualties, of whom 40 per cent were listed as dead or missing. The sacrifice of both sides was horrific, as is still seen today by the graves and ossuary, which are permanent memorials to those who fell on both sides of the wire at Verdun.

The writer Guillaume Apollinaire, who was to die two days before the Armistice, wrote an ironic poem that could have summed up the mutually awful experience of German and French soldiers alike at Verdun:

> Ah Dieu! Que la guerre est jolie
> Avec ses chants, ses longs loisirs . . .
> Adieu! Voiçi le boute-selle.
> Il disparu dans un tournant
> Et meurt là-bas tandis qu'elle
> Riait au destin suprenant.[10]

'I had a Comrade.'
(Verdun Collection)

(Oh God! What a lovely war
With its songs, its long leisure hours . . .
Farewell! The trumpet call is sounding.
He disappeared down the winding road
And died far away while she
Laughed at fate's surprises.)

In the main defensive phase, Pétain's army had frustrated German efforts and rescued Verdun and the nation from the jaws of defeat. The later counter-offensive would make Robert Nivelle a 'Hero of Verdun' too, although his celebrity status and later promotion to replace Joffre as the French C-in-C would have rapid and dire consequences in 1917.

Above and overleaf: Verdun – Cause and Effect. Aerial photographs of Fleury/Verdun in 1914, 1916 and 1918. *(Allen Collection)*

The most tragic and long-term legacy for France was a deeply psychological one. During 1916, more than three-quarters of France's soldiers had passed along the 'Voie Sacrée'. Their experience would shape the character of the French Army for years to come. Haunted by the horror, Pétain wrote that 'the constant vision of death had penetrated the French soldier with a resignation that bordered on fatalism'.

The French writer, Paul Valéry, described the Verdun campaign as 'a kind of duel before the universe, a singular and symbolic journey'. There is no doubt that it was a supreme test of willpower for the Kaiser's men as much as for the *poilus* – not one man who fought at Verdun would ever quite recover from the eternal awfulness of simply being there. But for the French, the dreadful mental strain that inflicted them at Verdun would leave a wound that that would be torn open once more in spring 1917 and lead to mutiny.

Years later, General Frido von Senger und Etterlin would recall the price of Verdun at Notre Dame de Lorette, where he had fought prior to Operation *Gericht*. The results had been depressingly familiar. The inscription read:

> Piles of bones, once animated by the proud breath of life, now merely scattered limbs, nameless remains, human chaos, sacred agglomeration of countless relics – God shall recognise you, the dust of heroes.[11]

Falkenhayn had been determined to see Verdun become a symbol of hopeless French sacrifice. But the ordinary French *poilu*, led by Pétain, Nivelle or Mangin, would not

yield. The grim, prolonged and costly duel was to become a permanent scar on the French psyche; and it would have desperate consequences in April and May 1917.

For the Kaiser's men on the Western Front, it was to leave an indelible scar too. But an even greater agony was to unfold for them in the summer and autumn of 1916: the defence of the Somme.

Fleury/Verdun 1918.

CHAPTER 6

MATERIALSCHLACHT – THE GERMAN AGONY ON THE SOMME

JULY–NOVEMBER 1916

A Dead Boche (Summer 1916)
To you who read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
'War's Hell!' – and if you doubt the same,
To-day I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust for blood:

Where, propped up against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

Robert von Ranke Graves (Somme, 1916)

The German Army's part in what many have described as the 'Slaughter on the Somme' was profoundly different from that perceived by most because the slaughter has been seen as a rather one-sided affair. The reality was very different.

Certainly from today's perspective it is difficult for many to comprehend a four-month military campaign in which a total of just over one million men became casualties. But to put this into perspective, it is worth remembering that in the 16 days of the main events of the Battle of Kursk on the Eastern Front in July 1943, regarded even today as a great Soviet victory, over 250,000 Red Army soldiers were killed, and

German machine gun crew: the scourge of unwary enemy infantry.
(IWM: Q23709)

a further 650,000 wounded or taken prisoner. Coupled with the German toll of around 300,000 casualties, of which over 100,000 were killed, the notion of a pure slaughter on the Somme is somewhat distorted.

It is true that the German Army on the Western Front by early 1916 was more skilled and better equipped for trench warfare than either the British or the French. This is not too surprising, as the BEF had only just expanded its Army from around 250,000 in 1914 to just over a million largely inexperienced men and the French had always been uncomfortable with the notion of defensive operations, rather than the 'offensive spirit'.

Many of the German veterans of the inconclusive, though bitter fighting at Ypres, Neuve Chapelle, Artois/Champagne and Loos in 1915 had survived and stiffened an army that had been well-led at the sharp end and remained resolute against Allied efforts in the West. It had come close to beating the Russian armies on the Eastern Front in that year also. In short, as John Terraine has noted: 'It must never be forgotten that the German Army of that period was very good indeed.'[1]

One of its undoubted strengths was in defence and the Somme sector was an excellent example. Strengthened after failed French assaults there in 1915, the trench systems bristled with barbed wire, strongpoints, deep and spacious dugouts and fortified villages. It provided an awesome array of defensive measures to counter any British or French offensive.

German machine gun crew in the anti-aircraft role.
(IWM: HU90289)

The impressive defences were augmented by the intimate knowledge of the German soldiers of their sector and the tactics that they would use to repel any attacks. Many of the German divisions were assigned to a specific sector of the Front and stayed put so that the junior commanders and HQ staffs were very familiar with the terrain and detailed plans to defend their area. Typically, each man would:

> March [again and again] up the same road from the trenches which for weeks we had been covering. Again and again we looked upon the same scene. We knew every house and every tree; at every turn of the way we knew just how far we were from our goal . . . We knew exactly what portions of the road came under enemy fire and we would pass them hastily, mechanically falling back into the ordinary marching tempo as soon as the bad spots were passed. Usually we were silent on the march.[2]

Apart from French attacks in early 1915, the German garrison on the Somme had enjoyed a relatively quiet time of it before the Allied offensive began. Equally, many of the British sent to the Somme sector had come from the Ypres salient and the Somme had given respite from the dreadful experience of daily life in the line in Flanders.

On both sides, once the routine was fixed and a reasonable pattern of front line, reserve and then rest in billets behind the lines was set, there was time for reflection and thoughts of home. Personal correspondence was typically mundane, but with a few matter-of-fact details

German 77mm field gun in action.
(IWM: Q.56487)

German crew manhandle a 75mm light trench mortar on the Somme, 1916.
(IWM: Q. 23. 816)

about the war thrown in. *Schütze* Alois Mühmelt was part of a front line battalion near Achiet-le-Petit, in the north of the Somme sector. In December 1915, he wrote:

Schütze Albert Mühmelt, one of three brothers who fought on the Somme in 1916. His eldest brother, Alois, was killed near Serre on 1 July. His other brother Robert was killed by artillery fire on 17 September and his body was never found. Albert survived the war.
(Farley Family Collection)

> Dear Parents!
> First of all, congratulations to dear father on his birthday. May the dear Lord keep him in good health for a long time to come and be a comfort to his children. Here we have terrible rain day after day. The mud in the trench reaches above the knees. If only the war was over soon! Please send me some foot wrappings [large cotton squares used as socks with jackboots] and a few pairs of [proper] socks . . . Have you received the money? [This was a sum of 15 Marks from his pay sent home]. [My brothers] Robert and Karl have not written for some time.
>
> Here artillery and machine gun fire goes on nearly all day on both sides. It is really a miracle that one doesn't get hit. One man of the 8th Company was killed by shrapnel yesterday. He was about to get his food from our field kitchen in a wood 800 metres behind the trench when suddenly two artillery shells landed among it. Our Company was in the same position for 10 days and we were shelled continuously, but lost no one. He was out of the front line and was hit by chance. No one is safe for one moment. Here at our quarters (billets) several enemy aircraft bombarded our battalion offices and the orderly room . . . We shot one aircraft down . . . The parish priest has written to me, but otherwise there is nothing to report.
>
> Warmest greetings to you all, your son,
> Alois.
>
> P.S. Please write again soon. Is Hedwig [a sister married in Berlin] staying with you? I will soon have a watch sent from Berlin. It doesn't cost me anything. I will

receive a hundred picture postcards for 7 Marks, which I shall sell. Then you get the watch gratis. They are said to be good.[3]

Alois was a typical German soldier 'doing his bit' along with his brothers Robert and Albert. He was to be killed on 1 July 1916. Robert was wounded during the Flers-Courcelette battle and died of his wounds. Albert fought on to the last days of the war, having been wounded, and then earned the Iron Cross for his valour during the Passchendaele campaign. He was to be taken prisoner by the British in October 1918. The brothers had joined up to serve God, the Emperor and their Fatherland and their beliefs and fates were typical of millions on both sides of the wire.

The German soldiers knew their trade and were formidable in defence. They knew the ground and intended to stay there. The real problem lay at the top. The German Army's most fundamental weakness throughout the war was rooted in its military leadership and now it was the turn of Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff. Falkenhayn was a complex and enigmatic figure. A favourite of the Kaiser, he had been elevated to his supreme position as a result of Moltke's failure during the Battle of the Marne in September 1914.

Since then, he had single-handedly incurred contempt towards him from the best senior commanders in the German Army at that time, such as Ludendorff, Hindenburg and no lesser characters than the Kaiser's sons Crown Prince Wilhelm and Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria.

Opportunities to at least reach for a resounding German victory in the East in 1915 had been spurned by Falkenhayn, but towards the end of 1915 he had conceived the diabolical plan to split the Allies in the West asunder by 'bleeding the French white' at Verdun. The German Verdun offensive, which began on 21 February 1916, did seriously threaten both the French Army's integrity as a fighting force and, more importantly as it was to turn out, its morale.

However, what Falkenhayn had failed to consider was that the extraordinary French resistance in front of Verdun would lead to a significant 'bleeding white' of the German Army too.

The impact for Allied planning soon became obvious. First, the French defence of Verdun was on the brink of failure almost daily for weeks and it was clear that something had to be done to relieve the pressure on the beleaguered *poilus*.

Second, Douglas Haig was obliged to conduct a combined Anglo-French offensive earlier than originally intended and on ground that was not of his choosing – centred on the River Somme.

Moreover, the French had been active in this sector in 1915 before handing the northern part over to the BEF, which had led the German First and Second Armies deployed across the Somme sector to greatly improve their defences in the interim. Last, but by no means least, this was to be the British Army's first major offensive since its expansion in manpower to over one million men by early 1916.

In late April 1916, as the charnel house of Verdun continued to work overtime, Falkenhayn wondered why there were no obvious signs of an Allied relief operation elsewhere. Rightly, he was convinced that one would come. Naturally, he was anxious to know where and when the Allied 'counter-offensive' would fall.

In May, General Fritz von Below, commanding the German Second Army between Noyon on the River Oise in the south to Gommecourt in the north, began to feel that the offensive might be directed against his front. It was held by only three Korps, some 150,000 men in all, and only two of these, General von Stein's XIV Reserve Korps and General von Pannewitz's XVII Korps, would be heavily involved at the outset of the allied 'push'. Below explained his reservations to Falkenhayn, especially as the Second Army had virtually nothing in reserve.

Falkenhayn, too occupied with the increasing bloodbath at Verdun, sent him labour corps personnel to assist in constructing third line defences and a detachment of 8in howitzers that had been captured from the Russians, with little ammunition to fire from them.

There were other concerns too. At sea, the Imperial German and Royal Navies clashed on 31 May at Jutland. Both sides claimed to have won, though neither did. However, British overall command of the sea was unaffected and the Naval Blockade of Germany continued unabated.

The German situation continued to deteriorate on land also. In early June, Russian General Alexei Brusilov launched a bold offensive on the Eastern Front, forcing Falkenhayn to divert five divisions there from the West.

As if things could not be much worse for the German troops manning the front lines of Verdun, the Somme and the wavering line in the East, their concerns were also drawn towards families and friends inside Germany. The war was beginning to really bite, causing unrest, a thriving black market and extraordinary resourcefulness by the women at home. Evelyn Blücher wrote in her diary:

> The unexpected duration of the war has led to unforeseen complications in the economic administration . . . [and the black market] has reached such a climax, that it almost seemed as if revolution . . . were threatening in Berlin . . . Long processions of women waiting for hours before the butchers', grocers' and bakers' shops were to be seen everywhere, and gave rise to the name of the 'butter-polonaise'. These women often got up in the middle of the night, to be first on the scene, and took campstools with them . . .[4]

By mid-1916, daily rations had been set at half-a-pound of sugar and meat or lard, one pound of potatoes, and 100 grams of butter per head per week. Eggs were almost impossible to buy, unless people were able to pay exorbitant prices. The population as a whole was undernourished and illness was on the rise.

Back on the Western Front, Below's fears of a major Allied offensive falling on his sector were being corroborated by a mass of evidence. But Falkenhayn was by now convinced that any Allied offensive effort would be directed around the River Scarpe; nearer Arras and the Vimy Ridge, rather than on the Rivers Somme and Ancre.

There was the infamous comment by British Government Minister, Arthur Henderson, that munitions factory workers were postponing holidays until the end of June and when asked why, merely said: 'The fact should speak volumes.'[5] This was issued as part of the general press release on his visit to the factory workers and was soon public knowledge throughout Europe.

Crown Prince Rupprecht wrote in his diary on 10 June: 'This fact should speak volumes. It certainly does so speak, for it contains the surest proof that there will be a great British offensive in a few weeks.'[6]

Espionage also corroborated the suspected imminence of the great offensive. On 14 June Rupprecht noted that: 'According to a report of an agent in The Hague, the British Attaché there has said that the offensive in the West will begin next week.'[7]

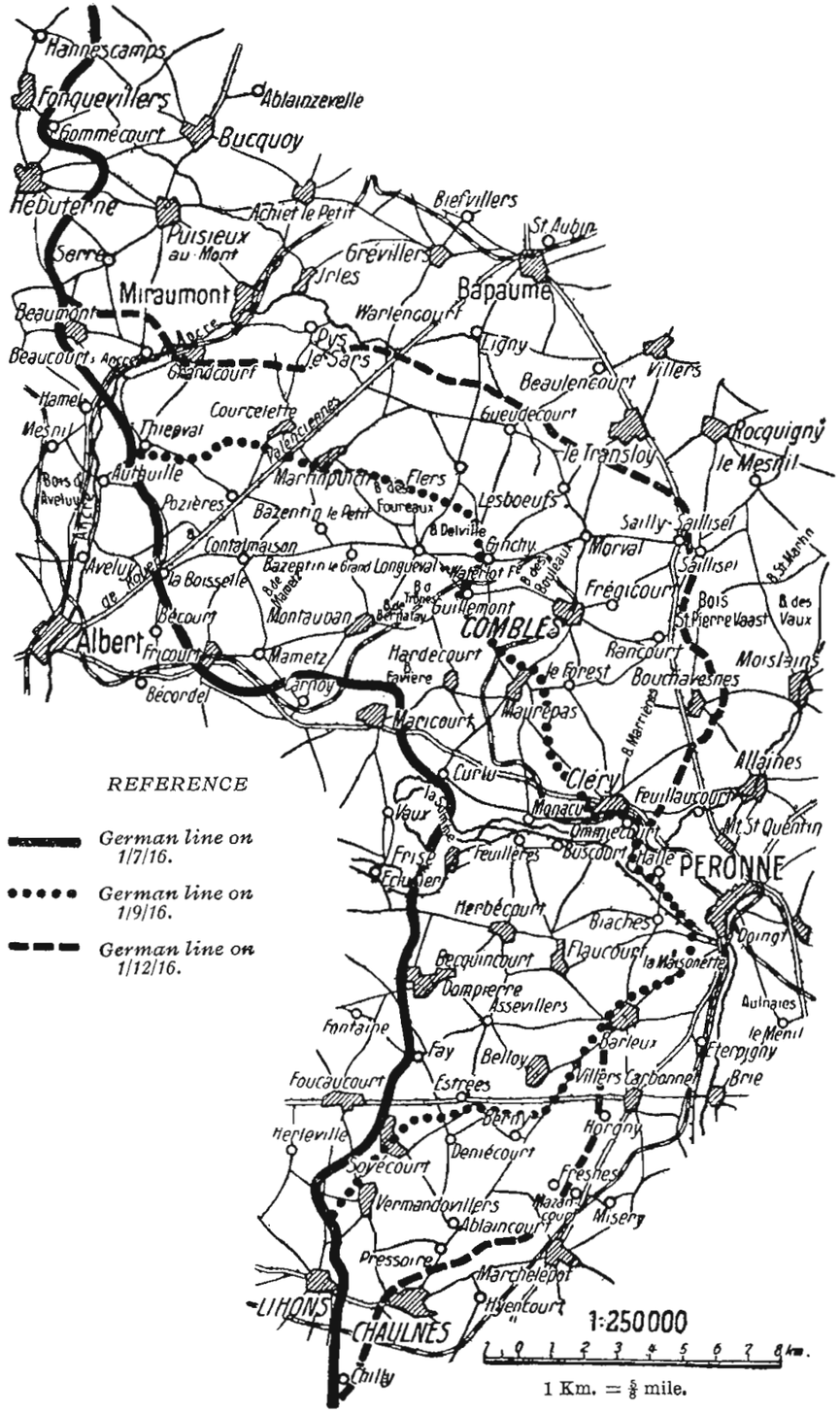
By 23 June Crown Prince Rupprecht was convinced through reliable intelligence reports that the offensive would be by both the British and French north and south of the Somme, but his views and those of OHL intelligence section were dismissed by Falkenhayn, who remained convinced that the full weight of the Allied attack would fall on Rupprecht's Sixth Army.[8]

Then, on the night of 23/24 June, a raiding party of the 91st Reserve Regiment in the Gommecourt sector captured a soldier of the British 46th Division, who stated that a 5-day bombardment would begin on 26 June and an attack on a 30-mile (sic) front would follow.[9]

Between 24 and 26 June, Rupprecht recorded that some of the French newspapers were reporting openly about an impending British offensive in which, at last, the great British Army, the work of Kitchener, would make a decisive attack and show what it could do. In Britain, the 'Great Push' was discussed in pubs and on the streets of town and country, and, to cap it all, Rupprecht noted confidently on 27 June that: 'Reports of the German Military Attaché in Madrid and an agent agree that the enemy offensive will begin on the 1st of July.'[10]

With four days to go, a soldier of the British 29th Division facing Beaumont Hamel was captured by troops of the German 119th Regiment, part of 26th Reserve Division. He also convinced them that an attack was soon to take place. At La Boisselle, the German 180th (26th Reserve Division) and 110th Reserve Regiment (28th Reserve Division) were given prior warning of the planned British assault by an intercepted British Fourth Army HQ message wishing all ranks good luck for the attack the following morning! Y Sap and Lochnagar positions were at least partially evacuated before the mines were blown either side of La Boisselle village.

Any chance of tactical surprise for the British between Fricourt in the south and Gommecourt in the north was lost before Zero Hour on 1 July because of the German



Sommeschlacht 1916: the Somme campaign – German front lines on 1 July, 1 September and 1 December.
(After Weltkrieg)

phone tap at La Boisselle and the premature explosion of the 40,000lb mine at Hawthorn redoubt near Beaumont Hamel, were imminent.

In the south, these remarkable revelations prior to the attack on 1 July were not passed on to the majority of the German troops. Second Army intelligence reports led to the conclusion that an attack against the Fricourt and Gommecourt salients and possibly local attacks in between, perhaps at La Boisselle, Thiepval and Beaumont Hamel. What had not been foreseen, except in part by Rupprecht's HQ, was the assault towards Mametz, Montauban and across the French Sixth Army sector.[11]

The British preliminary bombardment duly began as planned, with the Somme sector as its centre of gravity. Falkenhayn, despite the wealth of evidence, maintained

The effects of British artillery on the Somme in summer and autumn 1916.
(IWM: 065442)

that the main threat lay against the Sixth Army and therefore left no more than three infantry divisions behind the Second Army as its immediate reserve.

Even so, regardless of the advantage of deep dugouts and labyrinthine redoubts, the German troops manning the front suffered considerably from the Allied preliminary bombardment. A twenty-year-old junior corporal of the 99th Reserve Infantry Regiment (German 52nd Reserve Brigade) near the village of Thiepval described the effects of it on 29 June: 'They were at it day and night. Shall I live until morning?' On 30 June, he continued the theme – but now it was worse still:

> One's head is like a madman's. The tongue sticks to the mouth in terror. Continual bombardment and nothing to eat or drink and little sleep for five days and nights. How much longer can this go on?

He was killed on 1 July.

The early morning of Saturday 1 July promised a fine day. It had rained for much of the week of the Allied preliminary bombardment and the German troops on the Somme had experienced very uncomfortable conditions because of the inclement weather as well as the downpour of artillery shells on their positions. But most knew that their ordeal was about to end. Most were desperately keen to at least escape their 'rat trap' dugouts (the shallow *Unterstände* and deep, mined *Stollen*) to fight the enemy on their own terms. Under the 'monstrous anger of the guns' they felt utterly helpless and vulnerable. When the seemingly endless barrage finally lifted, they knew that their reaction would be crucial – a matter of life and death.

The experience, tactical skill and courage of the German troops under the artillery cosh for so many days were about to pay off in a manner unforeseen by the commanders and men on both sides of no-man's-land. Every army has its good, bad and average units, formations and HQs, but on the Somme most of the German regiments in the line were good, knew the ground that they were defending intimately and had rehearsed their tactics time and again before the British and French attacks were launched. Both 26th and 28th Reserve Divisions, deployed between Redan Ridge in the north and Fricourt in the south had practised continually to improve their response times for rushing out of their dugouts, setting up machine-gun positions and artillery OPs and manning the parapet once the barrage lifted. Experience taught them that speed was the key. Experience had told them that they had to win that vital 'race to the parapet'.

Against this, the majority of the 100,000-plus British infantrymen that were about to go over the top, many for the very first time, were anticipating more of a mopping-up operation in clearing what they were led to believe were destroyed German front-line defences, rather than having to take on stiff resistance. Because of their relative inexperience, (some, like 4th and 29th Divisions were exceptions), the assault was begun at a walking pace for most and with 'full kit,' including rolls of barbed wire and pickets, digging tools, boxes of grenades, machine-gun and mortar ammunition all

needed for 'consolidation' after the smashed German front-line positions were occupied, rather than taken. In other places, such as at Thiepval Wood, where the 36th (Ulster) Division faced the Schwaben Redoubt, considered the toughest nut to crack, and in the south where 18th and 30th Divisions were about to assault between Carnoy and Montauban, the leading waves had already crept into no-man's-land and were ready to race across it to catch the German troops with their defensive trousers down.

At 7.20 a.m., the drum roll of artillery fire was rudely and abruptly broken by an explosion beneath the Hawthorn Redoubt near Beaumont Hamel village. The sight, captured on film by the British, was spectacular. But the decision to blow this mine earlier than the planned Zero Hour was disastrous.

It trumpeted the imminent attack across the front and, as a result, set the tone for the ensuing British tragedy. In this sector, the troops of 119th Reserve, 121st Reserve (26th Reserve Division) and 169th Regiment (52nd Division) facing the British 29th, 4th and 31st Divisions respectively reacted quickly and were fully prepared for the assaults when they began ten minutes later. Crucially, 119th Reserve Regiment had special sections trained as a quick reaction force and they were able to win the firefight against the assaulting British troops attempting to occupy the lip of the crater blown by the Hawthorn mine between 7.20 and 7.30 a.m. The regimental history is a testament to the first minutes of triumph and tragedy on that day:

Battle of the Somme, 1916. German infantry with captured British Lewis light machine guns.
(IWM: Q.55482)

> During the intense bombardment there was a terrible explosion which for the moment completely drowned the thunder of the artillery . . . More than three sections of No. 9 Company were blown into the air, and the neighbouring dugouts were broken in or blocked . . . The ground all round was white with the debris of chalk, as if it had been snowing, and a gigantic crater . . . gaped like an open wound in the side of the hill. This explosion was a signal for the infantry attack, and everyone got ready and stood on the lower steps of the dugouts, rifles and machine guns in hand, waiting for the bombardment to lift. In a few minutes the shelling ceased, and we rushed up the steps . . . Ahead of us, wave after wave of British troops were crawling out of their trenches, and coming forwards towards us at a walk, their bayonets glistening in the sun.[12]

The fate of 29th Division at Beaumont Hamel and that of the Regular 4th Division assaulting Redan Ridge and the 'Pals' battalions of the 31st Division at Serre were now emphatically sealed. Though the German positions had been severely damaged by the artillery bombardment, with trench lines and dugouts destroyed, the deeper *Stollen* were relatively unharmed and it was from these that the German 'race for the parapet' began and was, in most cases, won. In 119th Reserve Regiment's sector, strongly built shelters around the fortified village of Beaumont Hamel were augmented by those in 'Y-Ravine' (*Leiling Schlucht*), and the Leiling and Bismarck Stollen to the south of the village.

As the day progressed, the scale of the British catastrophe and German success in this sector became gruesomely clear. Nowhere does any reference appear in the German divisional or regimental accounts of British penetration of the German line except for the brief battles for Hawthorn crater and the *Heidenkopf* or 'Quadrilateral' Redoubt position overlooking Serre and Redan Ridge. Two platoons of 119th Reserve Regiment trained for counter-assault operations repulsed British troops from Hawthorn crater using fire and manoeuvre tactics by moving from shell hole to shell hole and grenade fighting. Heidenkopf Redoubt was cleared after bitter fighting on the evening of 1 July and two companies of 169th Regiment counter-attacked the remnants of the British 31st Division who had occupied the German front line, successfully driving them back, and took 34 prisoners.[13]

At the end of the day, the three German regiments facing 29th, 4th and 31st Divisions recorded a total of 1,214 casualties of a total of just over 8,000 across the Somme front facing the British sector. The British divisions of VIII Corps had suffered a staggering 14,000 killed, wounded, missing and prisoners of war; a ratio of almost 7:1.[14] With the exception of the German 12th Division, which was unceremoniously driven out of its defences by the British 18th and 30th Divisions around Montauban, the dreadful events that unfolded for the British between Serre and Beaumont Hamel formed the template for 1 July.

Four front-line German divisions had taken on twelve British divisions between Gommecourt in the north and Montauban in the south and won the day. But, though the day was won, the battle was far from over, and the tables would turn as the

campaign developed, although painfully and with tremendous sacrifice on both sides. Tactics would play their part, but *materialschlacht*, best demonstrated by the power of artillery, would decide the outcome.

There is no doubt that the Somme campaign was, like Verdun, a sustained and increasingly lethal artillery battle. The weight of the guns and the sheer number of calibres and stocks of ammunition largely dictated both the form and limitations of the campaign. The first day of July has always distorted the true picture of that campaign as a whole. Indeed, as a result of this narrow, blinkered perception, the widely held view remains that the German defences were always rock-solid, bristling with machine guns and utterly impregnable.

Few, if any, battles have been more scrutinised, more emotively discussed and more misunderstood than the 'Battle of the Somme' in 1916. That 1 July was a terrible day for the British Army cannot be disputed, but one day of a campaign of more than 140 days cannot begin to paint the full picture that historical perspectives should do. John Terraine underlined this point in a brief but apposite paper in which he noted:

> The reason for the disaster, unfortunately for mythology, is not to be found in any single, simple fact – such as an imprecise order (as at Balaclava), running out of ammunition at a critical moment (Isandlhwana) . . . or stupid generalship (popular myth). It is, as in most large affairs, rather in a complex of causes that we may find the key to this tragedy. The first of these deserving consideration is one that British insularity and a certain unconscious but unpleasant arrogance have obscured and often neglected entirely: the quality of the German Army.[15]

The difference on 1 July was that of the inculcated discipline and training that gave the German defenders the edge on that day. Despite the effects of the British eight-day preliminary bombardment of 1,732,873 shells and the real damage done by it, when the barrage lifted the German troops' discipline and courage enabled them to emerge from their dugouts and win that all-important 'race for the parapet.' Coupled with this fact on that fateful day was the overall inexperience of the commanders, staffs and soldiers of the British Fourth Army.

But, contrary to popular belief, the British would learn rapidly to adapt, change and match the apparently overwhelmingly superior German soldier man for man as the Somme offensive progressed. As the subaltern Charles Carrington wrote at the end of the campaign: 'Though enthusiastic amateurs when the fighting began, the British were soldiers at the end.'[16]

What is generally not acknowledged is that by 1 July, much of the German front line and second line positions had been demolished and that their defenders had sustained a minimum of 10,000 casualties before the fateful first day of the Anglo-French Somme offensive. The preliminary bombardment had had a significant physical and psychological effect, rendering much of the defensive sector untenable.

In most places it was only the uncut wire and the plodding nature of the British advance that provided the opportunity and time for the German machine gunners to recover from their ordeal and thereafter wreak havoc among their enemy.

But if the German soldiers now engaged in the Somme battle thought that their 8,000 casualties on 1 July compared with 57,470 British losses (of which around 19,000 were killed) was a sign of an easy campaign to come, they were very soon disillusioned.

Even at the failed attack against Ovillers by 8th Division and against La Boisselle by the 34th (Tyneside Irish and Scottish) Division on the 1st of July, the German defenders of the 180th Infantry Regiment and 110th Regiment were staggered by the resilience and courage of the British assault troops against ever increasing odds. A German eyewitness wrote immediately after the attacks:

> Looking towards the British trenches through long trench periscopes . . . there could be seen a mass of steel helmets above the parapet showing that the storm-troops (sic) were ready for the attack. At 7.30 a.m. the hurricane of shells ceased as soon as it had begun. Our men at once clambered up the steep shafts leading from the dugouts to daylight and ran singly or in groups to the nearest shell craters. The machine guns were pulled out of the dugouts and hurriedly placed in position . . . [Then] a series of extended lines of British infantry were seen moving forward . . . the first wave [of which] appeared to continue without end right and left. It was quickly followed by a second line, then a third and fourth. They came on at a steady easy pace as if expecting to find nothing alive in our front trenches . . .

As the advance developed and the German defenders took stock of the incredible scene before them, the barked orders of battle-hardened NCOs woke their men from inaction sparked by the surreal picture of thousands of British troops heading towards them as if on parade:

> The [leading wave] was now half-way across no-man's-land. 'Get ready!' was passed along our front . . . and heads appeared over each shell crater edge as final positions were taken up for the best view and machine guns mounted firmly in place. A few moments later, when the first British line was within a hundred yards, the rattle of machine gun and rifle fire broke out along [our] whole line of shell holes, [followed soon after by deadly accurate shellfire] . . . The advance rapidly crumpled under this hail of shell and bullets. All along the line men could be seen throwing up their arms and collapsing, never to move again . . . The extended lines, though badly shaken and with many gaps, now came on all the faster. Instead of a leisurely walk they covered the ground in short rushes at the double [and] within a few minutes the leading troops had advanced to within a

> stone's throw of our front trench . . . Again and again the extended lines of British infantry broke against the German defence like waves against a cliff, only to be beaten back. It was an amazing spectacle of unexampled gallantry, courage and bull-dog determination on both sides.[17]

The same eyewitness referred to another quality of British and Dominion character that was to prove decisive in the months and years of the war to be still played out when he noted that 'The British soldier, however, has no lack of courage and once his hand is set to the plough, he is not easily turned from his purpose.'[18]

The German defensive doctrine hitherto had been to conduct 'positional defence', where the front line was the main line of resistance, packed with troops, and any Allied penetration of this line was to be negated by infantry counter-attacks with supporting field artillery, and medium guns where necessary.

The preliminary bombardment on the Somme and, ironically, the weight of fire poured into the Verdun cauldron in the opening days of the German offensive in February, should have given Falkenhayn every reason to modify his defensive tactics after the events of 1 July. They did not; and the action that he did take proved to be a fatal error.

More vexing was the realisation that the BEF and French armies had launched a joint offensive, which had achieved most of its objectives on the British right flank and French sector by the evening of day one. Falkenhayn, OHL and the troops facing this attack were surprised and dismayed by the fact that the French, still heavily engaged at Verdun, had the capacity to mount such a strong, coordinated attack with heavy artillery support. The scale of the Anglo-French attacks and their implications for the future defence of the Somme, rather than any idea of success against these attacks on 1 July, were the matters that most taxed the German High Command. On 1 and 2 July, OHL summed up the situation as:

> *1st July:* Disastrous news from the Péronne sector this afternoon. Successful attacks by the English and French on our forward positions on a 10 km [sic] front have given them command of both banks of the Somme. [Geographically, this was entirely accurate and reflected the British success in the south between Fricourt and Montauban.]
> *2nd July:* A marvellous evening, but the mood was one of depression. Further bad news from the Somme . . .[19]

Heavy German casualties and loss of ground on 2 July in the French sector and thereafter in both French and British areas of responsibility were also attributed to the effects of concentrated artillery fire. On the same day, Below demanded immediate reinforcement by infantry divisions and especially artillery of all calibres. On 1 July he had lost over 109 guns north of the Somme and all of 121st Division's artillery batteries south of the river.[20] OHL assured him that three divisions, sixteen heavy batteries and three

Eingreif (counter-attack) troops wait to go over the top to reinforce troops already assaulting across no-man's-land.
IWM: Q.23.753)

flights of combat/reconnaissance aircraft were en route already. As a mark of just how serious the German High Command took the opening days of the Somme campaign, they rushed fifteen heavy batteries from the Verdun sector to boost Below's defence.

The success of the German counter-attacks on 1 July was varied, and in some places, such as against the junction between the BEF and French near Montauban that night, had failed. Major counter-moves by *Eingreif* divisions were out of the question for the first few days, as the units assigned to such tasks still had to arrive and receive orders. Local counter-attacks, such as those against the French sector and those mounted to throw back the 36th (Ulster) Division at Thiepval and also at Fricourt, Mametz and Montauban, were costly efforts.

Tactical commonsense was also costly for the German commanders who chose to use their discretion in the opening days of the Somme battle. General von Pannewitz, commanding XVII Korps south of the Somme, withdrew on 2 July after receiving permission to do so by HQ Second Army. He had held the line near Herbécourt where the French had broken through and the retirement, providing a more solid defensive sector, was tactically sound. When Falkenhayn heard of this he immediately drove to Below's HQ at St Quentin and demanded to know how such a voluntary abandonment of territory could possibly be sanctioned.[21] As a result, Falkenhayn then infamously decreed that:

> [All units are reminded that] . . . the first principle of position warfare must be to yield not one foot of ground, and if it is to be lost, to retake it by immediate counter-attack, even to the use of the last man.[22]

General von Below's COS, General Grünert was held responsible for allowing von Pannewitz's withdrawal and was removed from his position to make way for *Oberst* Fritz von Lossberg, whose skills as a defensive expert were already acknowledged throughout the German Army.[23] Grünert's 'failure' was to have done his job rather too efficiently, for not only had he anticipated the Anglo-French attack against the Second Army, as his commander Below and Crown Prince Rupprecht had done, but he also asked firmly for reinforcements, which Falkenhayn and *OHL* had refused, because they had wrongly expected the main offensive elsewhere.

Falkenhayn's new edict of not one step back, regardless of tactical necessity, was soon proved to be obsolete and doomed thousands of his most experienced troops to be killed or mutilated, needlessly sacrificed for ever-more desperate attempts to retake ground of little tactical importance.

This policy was underscored by General Fritz von Below, who also unwittingly described the true nature of *Materialschlacht* with his special order of the day on 3 July that:

> The decisive issue of the war depends on the victory of the [German] Second Army on the Somme. We must win this battle in spite of the enemy's temporary superiority in artillery and infantry . . . For the present, the important thing is to hold our current positions at any cost and to improve them by local counter-attacks. I forbid the evacuation of trenches. The will to stand firm must be impressed on every man in the Army. I hold Commanding Officers responsible for this. The enemy should have to carve his way over heaps of corpses.[24]

The shaken Second Army took stock on 3 July and reinforcements, including a desperately needed thirty-eight heavy artillery batteries, plus infantry to fully man the second line defences opposite the British successes between Fricourt and Montauban, were in place. Another four fresh infantry divisions were en route and would slot into the defence to plug the gaps on 5 July. It was a day on which the British, and particularly General Sir Henry Rawlinson, finally realised the magnitude of their losses on 1 July.

From the depths of near despair, at least the officers of Supreme HQ renewed their confidence when they received the latest situation report on the Somme fighting on the evening of 3 July: 'The evening news from all fronts was good. The Anglo-French offensive has been halted on the Somme and in places repulsed.'[25]

It was a wet, cold, dismal day on 4 July and this seemed to prophesy the gloom that overhung the Somme sector. Trenches and the steps into dugouts and redoubts became slippery, damaged trenches caved in. It was foul for both sides and the German

defences offered little more protection from the weather than the British, for the latter were at least in billets if they were not already in the line.

The week or so that followed gave Below the respite needed, and with Lossberg as his new COS, he did not waste time directing the vital improvements needed for his defence of the Somme. Further heavy and medium artillery batteries were sent forward from Rupprecht's Sixth Army and Verdun; infantry divisions were resupplied with machine guns to full establishment and reserve infantry units were trained for the specialist counter-attack (*Eingreif*) role. Three flights of German aircraft were transferred to Below, providing some defence against British air superiority and limited reconnaissance of the forward British positions.

By the time Rawlinson's Fourth Army was ready to attack in force once more, the German Second Army had been reinforced with a further 40 new or reinforced battalions, though they too would face fresh British and Dominion divisions from the First and Second Army.

By 7 July, the German defences in the second line were receiving the type of regular pummelling from British artillery that soon became the daily, dreadful curse of almost every ill-fated German soldier that served on the Somme. Where time had not allowed dugouts to be sunk deep enough, the effects of continual artillery attention were devastating. Infantry battalions in the line were losing one third of their strength from artillery fire alone. The third battalion of 122nd Reserve Regiment in the Bazentin-Pozières sector lost five officers and 238 men, the first battalion of the Lehr Regiment at Contalmaison a staggering 618 officers and men in this manner, and communications became all but impossible as the British guns cut even deep-laid telephone cables. As a result of continued British attacks, artillery fire and the disruption of communications, large-scale counter-attack operations were difficult to coordinate and even the relief of one infantry division by another in the line was a fraught and often costly manoeuvre.

The period 7 to 12 July saw further reinforcement in these difficult circumstances of the German 7th and 8th Divisions from Sixth Army and 77th Reserve Regiment of 2nd Guards Reserve Division from the Gommecourt sector into the main battlefield area. The infantry 'battle casualty replacements' were augmented by the provision of a further sixty-five gun and howitzer heavy artillery batteries and three artillery observation flights, two reconnaissance and one bombing flight.

On 11 July, Falkenhayn tacitly acknowledged that the Somme campaign was already hurting the German effort on the Western front by ordering a change of emphasis at Verdun. That afternoon, as the German Fifth Army's assault on Fort Belleville, a mere mile from the city, petered out, Falkenhayn arrived at Crown Prince Wilhelm's HQ and immediately ordered a 'strict defensive' at Verdun because of the serious situation developing on the Somme. On the 132nd day of the horrific struggle that had begun in February, German artillery units were ordered north. Infantry divisions would soon follow. The principal Allied objective of taking pressure off the

French defence of Verdun was realised, and it was to have further consequences for both Falkenhayn and the German troops who were now being fed into the 'mill on the Somme'.[26]

On the 13th, the Second Army braced itself for a further set of British attacks and Below carried out a reorganisation of his resources into *Kampfgruppen*, or battle groups, which were normally based on a particular commander and a minimum of two or three divisions. The *Kampfgruppen* were ad hoc groupings of units belonging to other formations, as there was little time to reinforce or reorganise after some of those units involved had sustained heavy casualties. Hence *Gruppe Stein*, with three divisions, faced the British line between Monchy au Bois and the River Ancre; *Gruppe Armin*, with two divisions, was deployed between St Pierre Divion/Thiepval and Longueval and *Gruppe Gossler*, with one fresh and two depleted divisions, was to hold the line between Delville Wood and the River Somme.

The long hard slogging match was already under way and on the British side, Haig anticipated a 'wearing down' rather than 'breakthrough' battle and the focus of the continued British efforts was on the sector between the Albert-Bapaume road and the right flank of the Fourth Army where it had its boundary with the French just north of the River Somme.

General Max von Gallwitz, GOC Army Gallwitz and a key commander at Verdun and the Somme in 1916; and also at Meuse Argonne against the American AEF in 1918.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

Ironically, what Haig had doubted and what the German commanders had not bargained for and has been so often ignored in the past, was the innovation and imaginative tactics that the British would use a mere two weeks after the first day on the Somme. General Rawlinson planned a night attack against Bazentin in the centre of the German second line between Pozières and Longueval. The French commanders too doubted that it could be done so soon after the failure of 1 July. But Rawlinson put into practice what he had originally considered doing on 1 July by attacking shortly before dawn and with his leading assault waves well into no-man's-land before the barrage lifted. Furthermore, the 'barrage', or preliminary bombardment, was

short; so short that it took the German troops tucked away in their dugouts completely by surprise.

The assault was a resounding success. Over 6,000 yards of the German second line was taken between Bazentin-le-Petit and Longueval. Mametz, Bernafay and Trônes Woods had all fallen and success at Longueval gave promise of the capture of another German stronghold in Delville Wood. Even the dominating ground on which the German defences of High Wood stood was within the British assault troop's grasp. But this fleeting opportunity was let slip because of problems of communication and the lack of reserves to exploit it by the British, and German recovery after the stunning setback that morning.

July and August were the summer months of grim harvest on either side. Infamous names such as Delville and High Woods, Pozières, Mouquet Farm, Guillemont and Ginchy were scored into the very fabric of a German or British soldier's existence as the battles for each tree-splintered wasteland, or pile of rubble that was once a thriving rural village, ebbed and flowed by assault and counter-attack.

Throughout July and August, the Falkenhayn doctrine, which had in effect ordered his best troops to 'lose your life but not a foot of ground', became the bloody German testament of unbelievable courage and sacrifice, but sacrifice at a much greater cost to the German Army on the Somme than the damage it was doing in return.

Weltkrieg and unit or personal records demonstrate a consensus that by mid-August, with over 250,000 casualties to add to the 8,000 of 1 July, even the hardiest units were giving ground or surrenderring rather than take another massive pounding for virtually no purpose. Divisional strengths and the robustness of so-called 'fresh' divisions thrown into the line were diminishing in an alarming way. The commanders most involved on the ground, Generals Fritz von Below and Max von Gallwitz, were frustrated by the lack of time that infantry regiments withdrawn from the line after a battering at the hands of the British or French had to rest, regroup and train before being pitched back into the fray. Fresh divisions brought in from other sectors and new soldiers arriving as reinforcements for units that had already lost so many men in earlier Somme battles were quickly disillusioned and disheartened by the sheer weight of the Allied superiority in artillery, air power and other *matériel*.

So by the end of August, the 'mill' was grinding down the core of German morale as well. Its 125th Regiment summed this depressing situation up even with the benefit of hindsight: 'The days on the Somme were the worst in the war.' But if July and August were bad, the autumn months of the Somme campaign would mark a grave turning point for the German Army that had existed since 1914.

It is worth recalling here that in addition to the 'Rohr' and 'Laffargue' tactical innovations in 1915, the OHL had, in spring 1915, sanctioned the raising of special engineer, artillery and infantry units for 'special operations' in offensive or counter-offensive actions. Initially, the assault engineer detachment provided two companies of

engineers as specialist *Minenwerfer* (trench mortar) and *Flammenwerfer* (flamethrower) teams; and an artillery *Abteilung* (unit) of twelve 3.7cm guns. These were in addition to locally established counter-attack infantry and field artillery (77mm gun) *Gruppen*, or sub-units, of between company and battalion strength.

From these roots grew the first *Sturmabteilung* and *Sturmbattailon*. By April 1916, OHL had formalised the establishment of one *Sturmbattailon* per army. Though all of these 'Storm battalions' were all Army troops, they were put under operational command of infantry divisions as the situation demanded. The standard order of battle (ORBAT) of a *Sturmbattailon* at this time was two or three infantry companies, a machine gun company, a *Minenwerfer* company, an 'infantry gun' battery of four 3.7cm guns and a *Flammenwerfer* section; a total of between 450 and 650 men. Battle casualty replacements came from special 'high-level ersatz' training units in Germany.

As the Somme campaign developed, infantry divisions warned off for the battle organised their own storm companies or battalions, although they were not officially authorised as Army establishments. Many fought with distinction during the campaign, but most were ultimately annihilated, ironically mainly because of their special training and discipline. Their relative success as *eingreif* (counter-attack) units compared with the ad hoc use of troops in the line for local counter-attacks meant that they were used again and again, rather than when their increasingly precious skills were most needed.

The Somme campaign was characterised by attack, counter-attack and attack, followed by yet more counter-attacks. It was this pattern, and that of the incessant crump of artillery fire, that turned this part of the Western front into a 'mill' as effective as that turning the screw at Verdun. By the end of July, the German Second and First Army resisting the Anglo-French onslaughts had carried out no less than sixty-seven counter-attacks. Each one was costly, and the more specialised troops were generally those whose loss was most difficult to replace. But one of the inherent problems of the German Army's doctrine that was to have fatal consequences in 1918 was its desire to use elites for the most difficult tasks to the detriment of the Army as a whole. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria was concerned about such implications because much of the most desperate fighting was constantly allotted to these special units. To him, it was a worrying shortcoming as the 'ordinary' infantry of the line were increasingly leaving such tasks alone: 'as instructors for the infantry [and developing tactics] they were excellent; but the view must not be allowed to arise that one cannot attack without them.'[27]

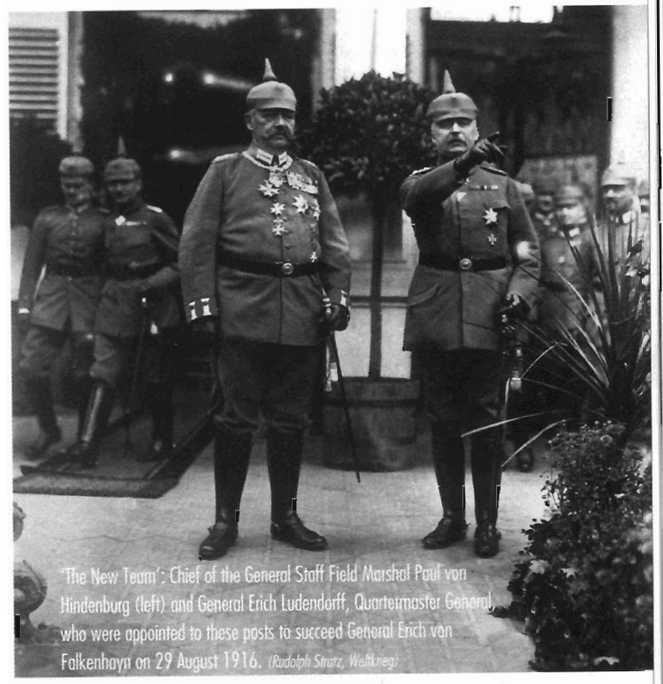
Although no elite units of this type existed in the British or French armies in the First World War, their advantage was that every battalion and every division would train and fight under a single tactical ethos and with weapons that would later provide the 'ordinary' infantry units the ability and flexibility to fight in a more cohesive way than the 'ordinary' German infantry battalion.

The British learned how predictable German defensive tactics were and used artillery with increasingly deadly effect to snuff out counter-attacks and continually blast the German defences. Regimental histories bear testament to the conditions to which the

German Army on the Somme was reduced by the incessant battering that it received throughout the offensive. Diaries and memoirs recall the 'Hell of the Somme' and the dreadful human experience of the *Materialschlacht*, or the 'attritional battle'.

The elite, specially trained *Eingreif*, or counter-attack units, which provided the 'main punch' with the artillery in attempting to throw back any British penetration of the German defences, were often annihilated by the sheer weight and accuracy of the British artillery ranged against them.

British artillery was increasingly supported from the air, as the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) held sway over the German airmen and provided vital information to the guns. It was cursed by the German soldier on the ground and by the High Command. General von Below, who defended the Somme sector during the campaign, wrote a memorandum for *OHL* in January 1917 which attested to this:



'The New Team': Chief of the General Staff Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (left) and General Erich Ludendorff, Quartermaster General, who were appointed to these posts to succeed General Erich von Falkenhayn on 29 August 1916. *(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)*

> The enemy's aeroplanes enjoyed complete freedom in carrying out distant reconnaissance . . . With [this] the hostile artillery neutralised our guns, and was able to range with the utmost accuracy on the trenches occupied by our infantry; the required data for this being provided by undisturbed [aerial] trench reconnaissance and photography . . . [With] bombing and machine gun attacks from a low height against our infantry, battery positions and marching columns, the enemy's aircraft [left] our troops with a feeling of defencelessness against the enemy's mastery of the air.[28]

The Allied casualties may have been comparatively high, but they were learning and applying the lessons of both Verdun and the early phase of the Somme campaign, whereas most German commanders continued to expect rigid discipline and self-sacrifice despite using already outdated tactics.

Changes had to occur in the German High Command and they did between 28 and 29 August. At Supreme HQ in Pless, daily routine was interrupted by a growing rumour that Falkenhayn was to be replaced by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (and, by implication, General Ludendorff). On 29 August, a senior aide noted:

> Hindenburg and Ludendorff arrived . . . Hindenburg (today is the anniversary of Tannenberg) was appointed Chief of the General Staff and Ludendorff First Quartermaster-General, with promotion to Infantry General. Falkenhayn left unobtrusively for Berlin . . . At 6.00 p.m., I walked with the Chancellor . . . who told me incidentally that Falkenhayn had left because he refused to hear the Kaiser asking Hindenburg's advice on the conduct of the war. There was only one adviser to the Kaiser and that was the Chief of the General Staff. If the Kaiser insisted upon receiving Hindenburg he – Falkenhayn – must go! The [Kaiser's] reply was: 'As you wish.'[29]

Falkenhayn was gone, removed for, among other things, his profligate use of manpower. With his departure, fundamental changes were soon planned in both the defence of the Somme and German tactical methods, or doctrine, for the future. Most of the excessive loss of life and limb on the German part at Verdun and on the Somme until now could be put down to Falkenhayn's inflexibility. But greater threats to Germany soon appeared once he quit the stage.

Within months, General Erich Ludendorff was to become nothing less than the military dictator of Germany, brushing the Kaiser's already diminished responsibility aside. Despite the 'legitimacy' afforded him by the ever present FM Hindenburg, loved by the people until the end as the 'Hero of Tannenberg' and trusted beyond that, Ludendorff became answerable to no one, unlike Haig or his French counterparts who had a full bag of British and French military and political issues to resolve before any plans could be laid.

It was with this political change, as well as the military disaster that was unfolding on the Somme, that the seeds of Germany's ultimate destruction in the First World War were sown. By the end of August the situation was later described by *Weltkrieg* as being 'the most serious crisis of the War'. However, at the time, the German agony was at least ameliorated by Falkenhayn's sacking and the appointment of the new regime in the minds of the men at the front and those at home:

> Although the battle on the Somme has proved to be of much longer duration than anyone expected, no decisive action has taken place up to now. Bloodier and more costly as it has proved to be than any other phase of this murderous war, Germany remains determined not to be crushed by the Allies . . . Hindenburg's (and Ludendorff's) promotion as C-in-C in place of Falkenhayn (29 August) was a very popular step . . . It is said that Hindenburg made it a condition of his accepting the post that no further actions against Verdun should be attempted.[30]

As the Somme battles raged, Ludendorff and Hindenburg had to contend with an emerging conflict in Romania, and the Brusilov offensive on the Eastern Front. Desperately needed reinforcements, weapons and equipment were diverted there rather than to the Somme.

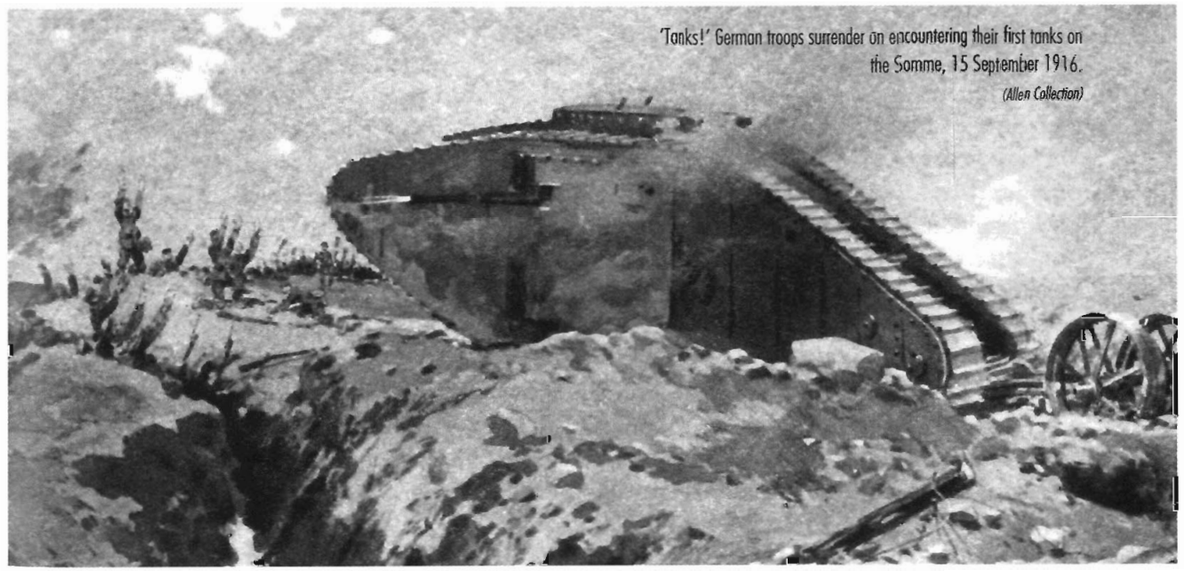
As a measure of the vital importance of the German defence of the Somme, an order was issued on 2 September to cease all offensive action at Verdun. Four infantry divisions and eighteen heavy artillery batteries were rushed to the Somme sector.

On 8 September, an emergency planning conference was held at Cambrai to review the situation. It was a grim meeting. It was soon apparent that the men of the First and Second Army defending the Somme sector were in dire straits.

Divisions could not be kept in the battle for more than fourteen days. The implication was that in effect a 'fresh' division had to replace an exhausted or virtually destroyed one every day. Consequently, each division had to complete at least three tours in the front line, without sufficient time for rest, reinforcement and training before being hurled back into the cauldron.

Worse still, as the British inexorably pushed the German line back, many of the defences were more rudimentary. German soldiers were more likely to fight from a loose trench line of shell-holes than from deep dugouts, which were now becoming death-traps as the British and Dominion troops became more adept at storming defensive positions.

September was to bring the heaviest German losses of the whole battle: over 220,000 were added to the lists of killed or missing, wounded or prisoners of war, by the month's end. Crown Prince Rupprecht was to mark the appalling state of affairs by noting that the battle casualty replacements covered a mere 10 per cent of the required total. Those battle-weary and bloodied troops that remained had to hang on – and hang on – in the hope of some relief from the daily artillery bombardments and bitter, bloody, morale-sapping British assaults.



'Tanks!' German troops surrender on encountering their first tanks on the Somme, 15 September 1916. *(Allen Collection)*

Major counter-attacks were planned against Delville Wood, Pozières Ridge, Ginchy and Guillemont with no realistic chance that the manpower and resources would be available. All were cancelled.

In the first week in September, Hindenburg had noted that he 'had succeeded to an evil inheritance'[31] and acknowledged that no reserves existed at that time for offensive action. He demanded an immediate review of the tactics used, as well as a future strategy to ameliorate the desperate position that Germany was now in on the Western Front. The review led to the decision to prepare a much stronger and shorter defensive sector some 15–20 miles behind the then current Arras and Somme front lines – which was to become known as the *Siegfried Stellung*, or the Hindenburg Line – and to adopt new flexible, or elastic, deep defence.

But much of this almost became academic. Unknown to the German Army and its Central Power allies, the 'wearing down' battles that raged across the Verdun and Somme sectors of the Western Front between July and early September had been necessary parts of a wider Allied plan to go on to the offensive. It was unique: the only time in the whole war when the full power of the Entente was turned simultaneously on Germany. The Brusilov offensive in June, which had so shocked Falkenhayn, was followed up on 12 September by a combined Russian and Romanian assault in Transylvania. On the same day, the French Sixth Army renewed its offensive in the southern sector of the Somme. On 15 September, the Italians launched the seventh battle of the Isonzo river; and the British 'Flers-Courcelette battle' began.

The British attack at Flers-Courcelette was an indicator at least of the shape of things to come, as well as proving just how far the BEF had come since 1 July. The assault included the historic use of tanks for the first time, novel infantry tactics and a new artillery technique; the creeping barrage, which provided a good deal more protection for the infantry from German machine gun and artillery fire as they advanced. Much was achieved on this one day and stubborn German stains on the Somme landscape, such as High Wood, Flers and Courcelette villages were finally removed.

Once again, so many views have been expressed over the years since the event that purport to analyse the failure of a British opportunity, a failure of command and the poor individual and tactical performance of the tanks on this day. Most totally miss the point that 'Flers-Courcelette' was part of this Entente-wide effort to force the German war machine to overheat and grind to a halt by hitting it from as many angles as possible. So many also miss the heart of the matter: what did the attack, and the use of the tanks do to the enemy?

The answer lies not at the tactical level, but elsewhere. Although a breakthrough did not take place, the psychological effect on the already frayed nerves of the German defenders was almost unbearable. General von Below described 15 September as 'A very heavy day, with serious losses, even by Somme standards.'

Weltkrieg acknowledged later that the German defence of the Flers-Courcelette sector was 'as good as completely broken by the end of the day.'[32] But the forty or so

Mark I tanks that were involved on 15 September did not succeed tactically partly because they had not been tested in battle before. But the new weapon had to be tested in battle somewhere where they could at least potentially make a difference.

One thing that the German Army proved to be extraordinarily adept at in both world wars was to recover from almost fatal blows if the enemy gave them the opportunity to do so. It had no choice but to use this ability on the Somme. In 1917 there would be many occasions, such as at Arras, Messines/Third Ypres and Cambrai, when it would do it again.

However, the arrival of the tank was a serious blow to German morale. Casualties on 15 September were enormous. The 210th Reserve Regiment of 45th Reserve Division facing the Canadians around Courcelette lost nearly 70 per cent of its strength; and the 6th Bavarian Division, opposing part of the British XV Corps, lost over 50 per cent of its establishment. Regardless of loss, the counter-attacks kept coming, despite Hindenburg and Ludendorff's succession and the failures along the line in the Flers-Courcelette battle. The German strength ebbed, its 'motor' running down as the fuel provided by its most experienced troops was drained by the mounting casualties.

The battles continued and gradually refocused on the defences either firmly held or lost and then retaken on 1 July. One by one, Thiepval, Mouquet Farm, Schwaben Redoubt, the depth positions of Regina and Zig-Zag Trench, and then finally Beaumont Hamel, fell. Other defences along the Transloy Ridge to the south of the Albert-Bapaume road were pushed back as far as the impregnable Butte de Warlencourt. After 15 September, rain, and with it the foul mud which had cursed the first week of the campaign, came back with a vengeance and made the fighting all the more difficult for both sides. When 180th (Württemberg) Regiment was finally driven from Thiepval by the British 18th Division on 27 September, a black mood fell across those who had held off the enemy attacks since 1 July and come through it all so far. The setback was 'absolutely crushing. [To me] every German soldier from the highest general to the most lowly private had the feeling that now Germany had lost the first great battle.'[33]

The year was growing ever more horrendous for the men at the Front, but in the Fatherland itself, even the bad times before 1916 were almost a pleasant memory by comparison. The Government had no hope of concealing the images of broken men, broken lives and broken promises of a German victory, the latter promise so illusory that it might have been amusing, if it was not so deadly serious. Wives and daughters, mothers and sons saw the results of German ambition in the now overflowing hospitals throughout the nation:

> The unprecedented English artillery fire on the Somme is filling the hospitals more than ever, all those on the Rhine being over-filled, so that the wounded are being transported straight from the Western Front to the Tempelhofer Hospital in Berlin . . . Only yesterday I spoke to an official who told me that within the last week

'The Horror of the Somme.' The remains of a German officer found in the defences of Beaumont Hamel, 13 November 1916.
(IWM: Sutton Ref)

both of his sons had been sent home insane, having gone out of their minds at the awful things they had witnessed.[34]

After further losses at Morval and the fall of Thiepval, the die was cast on the decision to withdraw to a more defensible line. Work began in earnest as orders were issued after 15 September for a strict defensive attitude to be adopted on all fronts.

Between 23 September 1916 and 1 March 1917, the Hindenburg Line grew out of the French countryside from Arras via St Quentin to the River Aisne, shortening the Front by some 50 kilometres and releasing a vitally needed sixteen divisions from front line duty as a strategic reserve. Meanwhile November's foul weather finally drew the curtain on the bloody drama on the Somme in 1916.

Falkenhayn's edict that 'not one foot of ground should be lost' had dealt the German Army a bitter and near-fatal blow. Against all the historical tide of opinion that has portrayed the German military leaders and their men almost as supermen, the facts lead to the undeniable conclusion that the Somme proved to be the graveyard for most of the German 'old guard' of 1914/1915.

In 1928, the German *Reichsarchiv* produced a summary of the Somme campaign. It passed this verdict:

> It would be a mistake to measure the results of the Battle of the Somme by mere local gains of ground . . . The British and the French pursued a plan of exhausting the power of the defenders by the employment of ever-greater masses of artillery in constantly repeated attacks . . . [Our] grave loss of blood [in the battle] affected Germany very much more heavily than the Entente . . . The *Materialschlacht* gnawed

> terribly into the entrails of the defenders. The enormous tension on all fronts forced the [German] Supreme Command to leave troops in the line until they had expended the last atom of their energy, and to send divisions time after time into the same battle . . . Still more serious was that, as the demand for self-sacrifice greatly surpassed what could be expected of the average man, the fighting largely fell on the shoulders of the best, most experienced troops, and not least the [junior] officer. The consequence . . . was a frightful death-roll of the finest and most highly trained soldiers, whose replacement became impossible. It was in this that the root of the tragedy of the battle lies.[35]

'The Cost of the Somme.' Renate Farley lays a wreath at the grave of her uncle, Alois Mühmelt, who was killed in action on 1 July 1916 near Serre. He is buried at the German Military Cemetery at Achiet-le-Petit.
(Farley Private Family Collection)

Even as the battle was being fought, this erosion of the fighting quality of the German Army was noted by, among others, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, who recorded in his diary that the old experienced officers and men had decreased steadily in numbers, and the reinforcements had not had the same quality of soldierly instruction and training and were physically mostly inferior.

Charles Carrington concluded that the Somme was:

> . . . where the British Army fought it out with the German Army, and established their superiority, inflicting casualties which Germany could ill-afford. The result is patent. In August the German Government dismissed von Falkenhayn, their Chief-of-Staff, who had failed in attack at Verdun and failed in defence on the Somme . . . In September, their worst month for casualties, their new leaders, Ludendorff and von Hindenburg, conceded defeat by planning a strategic withdrawal, though, with their usual tenacity they clung to their positions until the winter gave them a short respite before retreating. The German Army was never to fight so well again, but the British Army went on to fight better.[36]

The Battle of the Somme lasted for 141 days, or four and a half months. The struggle, endurance and courage on both sides were astonishing, and the cost is staggering to us today. Officially, the total casualties amounted to 419,654 British/

Dominion, 204,253 French and between 650,000 and 680,000 German men killed or missing, wounded or prisoners of war.[37]

'Winter Vigil, 1916.' *(Allen Collection)*

In cold, statistical terms it could be seen as a slogging match that finished pretty much all square. In more pragmatic terms, it was a bruising, uncompromising contest between an excellent German army that was inexorably worn down and a new, though amateur, British army that learned quickly and became both stronger and more confident by the end of the campaign.

Germany was hurt more by the Somme than either the BEF or the French and the legacy was profound. The pressure applied by both Haig's BEF and the French on the Somme was undoubtedly a vital part of the process of weakening the German Army, the process of 'destroying its arms' and 'breaking its will'. German archives underscore the point:

> The Somme was the muddy grave of the German field army, and of the faith in the infallibility of German leadership.[38]

Though it would take two more agonising years for Allied victory to be complete, the German Army was gravely weakened on the Somme and at Verdun in 1916. As winter set in it became abundantly clear to Ludendorff and Hindenburg that the odds on *Materialschlacht* would not favour Germany.

All the Kaiser's men now prepared for the restless hibernation of friend and foe alike as temperatures plummeted and 'real fighting' had to be put on hold. In Germany, the agony had only just begun. It was going to be a long, cold 'Turnip Winter'. At the Front, the curtains on the year were drawn with sombre note:

> Good night, the old year creeps towards the grave:
> There are the young, and almost all the brave.[39]

CHAPTER 7

A TERRIBLE TURNIP WINTER: THE GERMAN HOME FRONT IN 1916

The majority of the German people were reduced in 1916 to a meagre and monotonous diet of black bread, fatless sausage and 3 pounds of potatoes per week, an egg per fortnight – and turnips. But very few understood the numerous reasons for their predicament. Much of it had to do with the increasingly dictatorial military leadership that nominally served under the Kaiser.

In the first place, the German Army consumed mountains of food, fodder and other important resources. As a whole, it demolished 60 million pounds of bread, 131 million pounds of potatoes and 17 million pounds of meat per week.[1] No one in government, let alone the German General Staff, had given a moment's thought to the implications of such massive needs in a protracted war. The consequence was that the people suffered from shortages even before the men at the front.

Second, the highly decentralised nature of the Bismarckian State militated against tight controls over the nation's food supply. The special interests of the many state governments often clashed with those of the Reich and this led to corruption, divisive economic and distribution policies, and eventual chaos nationwide.

Third, soldiers and statesmen followed separate strategies on labour, so that economic and social distinctions were magnified. The sense of *Gemeinschaft* (national unity) had disappeared by 1916.

Fourth, mismanagement and lack of pre-war planning for anything other than a certain, swift victory, and an ingrained inability or reluctance to adapt to the new conditions of a protracted war, contributed greatly to the chaos of national food distribution. This scandalous failure was reflected in part by a three-way war at home among farmers, consumers and the Government.

When farmers refused to abide by the Government's injunctions against using grain and potatoes for animal feeds, Berlin ordered the wholesale slaughter of pigs in 1915. Some 9 million pigs, 35 per cent of Germany's total, were killed in what the public dubbed *Schweinemord* or 'the pig massacre'.[2] Prices soared overnight,

farmers withheld pigs from the market and ration cards had to be issued. Panic set in and the national mood turned ugly, culminating in food riots in Berlin, and then other major cities in the Reich. It was a portent for future public unrest.

The Allies' naval blockade was a crucial and crippling factor of the situation in Germany. Introduced soon after the onset of war in August 1914, it was to have a profound effect on the German people. Known as the 'Hunger Blockade', it led to less than 30 per cent of the German merchant fleet operating at all by 1916. By early 1917 the blockade had a virtual stranglehold on Germany; a grip that would endure until after the Armistice. The Blockade forced German domestic production to take up the slack, but demand inevitably soon outstripped production. This in turn led to two appalling developments: the *Ersatz*, or 'substitute', economy; and a rampant black market.

Ersatz products were found across the country, first in the industrial, and then in the agricultural and retail sectors. Cereals and potato harvests had dropped by over 50 per cent by early 1916. Bread became known as 'K-Brot', which stood for *Krieg-*, or war-bread, and was made from a combination of oat and rice meals, ground beans, peas and corn meal. Butter was replaced by a concoction of curdled milk, sugar and food colouring; cooking oil by a mixture of red beets, carrots, turnips and spices. Ground European beetles (cockchafers) and linden wood replaced fats. Worst of all, sausage – a German staple – was produced from an unsavoury recipe of water, plant fibres and animal scraps.

On the other hand, the black market thrived for those able to barter currency, clothing, coal and jewellery for food. Farmers were simultaneously reviled and prized for their decision to ignore government-imposed price ceilings for their own ends. By the end of 1916 almost half of all egg, meat and fruit production, one-third of dairy product output and a quarter of the grain, flour and potato supplies were sold on the black market at prices almost one thousand per cent above pre-war levels.

Government ineptitude and failure to suppress the black market demoralised millions of otherwise loyal German people and led to widespread unrest. It also spawned a new national pastime – smuggling. More than half of all food reached consumers illegally. Hoarding, bartering, smuggling and black-marketeering not only undermined the national economy, but also corrupted the moral order as Germany's civilian population inexorably split into two camps.

First, there were those who had nothing to exchange for food and other essential items, who suffered terribly throughout the war. Second, there were the 'chancers' who were able to gamble on the black market and smuggle the essential and luxury contraband, and who often made fortunes out of the misfortune of others on the Home Front, as well as from the men who were fighting and dying in the front line.

Huge numbers of urban dwellers went on weekend excursions to the countryside on what became known as *Hamster Reisen*, or 'Hamster Tours'. They left their towns and cities on a Friday evening with only a change of clothing, but a great deal of baggage,

and returned on a Sunday with fully-laden suitcases and knapsacks carrying the spoils of weekends spent haggling with local farmers. Draconian government measures to stop this practice, enforced by an army of police, alienated the German people. This was made worse by the issue of ration cards for every conceivable foodstuff, item of clothing and even soap.

By the final months of 1916, the situation at home was truly dire. People were becoming gaunt and bony and their thoughts turned more towards what their next meal would be than to the war. Faces were like masks, blue with cold and drawn with hunger. Ordinary Germans had already seen enough of the war. They regarded it as a surreal, desperate carnage in which the High Command and politicians still indulged themselves, promising victory at the beginning of each year and remaining aloof from the sacrifice of both the troops and the people. Most Germans no longer wanted war, victory or no victory. What they wanted was peace and bread and work.

Verdun and the Somme had given the people plenty of reason to mourn, but the war on the Home Front was striking deeply too. Food queues were endless and women were forced to spend many a cold night, ration cards in hand, lining up for bread, meat and other basic items. Britain and France did not ration bread and sugar until mid-1918. Could it get worse?

It could; and it did.

By November 1916, coal shortages forced stores, restaurants and theatres to close early. Then, the winter of 1916/17 was the coldest for years and temperatures plummeted to –30°C in many parts of Germany.

Food, heat and mere survival became the only topics of conversation. A total of 1,016,000 men had died at the Front and the million-plus German casualties on the Western Front alone in 1916 added to the misery of those at home.

To cap it all, the dismal harvest of autumn 1916 ushered in the so-called 'Turnip Winter'. Heavy rains, an early frost and a shortage of field workers reduced the potato harvest by almost two-thirds. Turnips, whether boiled, baked, fried or raw, became the national staple instead. But the turnip, or *Kohlrübbe*, was a stringy, coarse root crop – tasteless and bland at the best of times. The German people were reduced to an unsavoury diet of turnip and gruel-like soup, known laconically as *Drahtverhau*, or 'barbed-wire'.[3]

The writer Ernst Glaeser noted that:

> The Turnip Winter really brought the War home. Hunger destroyed our solidarity; the children stole each other's rations . . . Soon, the women who stood in pallid queues before shops spoke more about their children's hunger than about the death of their husbands at the Front.[4]

The foul weather, horrendous shortages and deteriorating situation at home and on the Western Front especially were dreadful portents for 1917. The dreadful state of

affairs called for something to lift the gloom, and irreverence was one. A German writer suggested a new creed:

> I believe in the Turnip, the Holy Provider of the German people, and in jam, its begotten son . . . I believe in the Holy War, the universal society of black marketeers, the community of foragers, the resurrection of taxes, the reduction of meat rations, and the eternal existence of the ration card.[5]

In the new year, the German High Command would turn its attention to winning the war at sea, and perhaps in the East, while defending its possessions in the West. Sadly, military strategy would do nothing to relieve the burgeoning pain and suffering of the very people for which this war was apparently being fought. Few Germans believed that 1917 would be anything other than another bloody but indecisive year at home and abroad.

CHAPTER 8

NEW PLANS FOR OLD – *ALBERICH* AND A CUNNING PLAN

JANUARY–MARCH 1917

Germany had endured unprecedented pain and suffering at home and at the Front by the turn of the year. Desperate measures at home during the 'Turnip Winter' were now matched by political divisions and drastic action by the German military leaders, Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Chancellor Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg, with a different view of the war's progress than his military rivals, believed that the prospects of concluding a reasonable negotiated peace were good at the beginning of 1917. Both the Central Powers and the Allies had sounded out the other side on possible peace terms at the turn of the year, but to no avail.

Ludendorff and Hindenburg would not hear of such a thing. They were totally committed to their belief that the opportunity for military victory still lay firmly in their grasp. 'Field Marshal Hubris' now took centre stage and guaranteed imperial Germany's decline and fall. On the Western Front, Britain and France were in a similar position. The military and civilian populations on either side of the conflict's divide would not entertain the idea that the huge sacrifices to date would be in vain. Germany' influence on the remainder of the Central Powers was all-encompassing and Germany demanded nothing less than outright victory. There would be no compromise.

From the sidelines, this obdurate German attitude would appear to have evolved because of Germany's confidence and strength against the Entente at the beginning of 1917. Far from it. The prospects for Germany at the beginning of 1917 were gloomy indeed.

The Allied naval blockade and 'Turnip Winter' were biting hard and the Home Front was another battlefield altogether for ordinary German people. Ludendorff and Hindenburg knew also that they were losing the *Materialschlacht* – the war of manpower and *matériel* – and that the opportunity for victory on land in 1917 was

'Und Ihr? – zeichnet Kriegsanleihe' ('And You? – Subscribe to the War Fund'). Popular poster in Germany, 1916. *(Allen Collection)*

virtually non-existent. In the previous year, over one million German servicemen had become casualties and both the Somme and Verdun had punished the German Army so badly that it had no choice but to stand on the defensive in the West throughout the coming year.

Ludendorff therefore devised, and Germany embarked on, a high-risk strategy for 1917, as Falkenhayn had done to his cost in 1916. But Ludendorff's strategy marked him out as the chancer, the opportunist and it was a significant flaw in his temperament. Without a chance of offensive action on the Western Front and some doubt about progress in the East for much of the year, he fixed on strangling Britain's resources and starving her out of the conflict through unrestricted submarine warfare.

The inherent, huge risk was not so much that of provoking a dreadful British reaction at land and sea, but the very real danger of bringing America into the war. She had been sorely tested by the U-boat campaigns of 1915 and 1916; and memories of the *Lusitania* and other German excesses at sea remained very fresh in American and British minds. However, the Kaiser and German High Command endorsed Ludendorff's recommendations. But at Supreme Headquarters, there were those who already saw the writing on the wall once this decision was irrevocably made. Admiral Georg Müller, one of the Kaiser's senior aides, wrote in his diary on 9 January that:

From heroic pose to reality: An exhausted *Eingreif* soldier. *(Bundesarchiv)*

> Six o'clock audience [with the Kaiser] given to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, Hindenburg, Ludendorff, Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff (Chief of the Admiralty Staff) and three Cabinet Chiefs . . . The crux of the Chancellor's speech was that in view of the opinion of the General Staff and the Admiralty he (the Chancellor) could not oppose unrestricted submarine warfare. It was not so much approval as an acceptance of the facts. Holtzendorff then spoke very enthusiastically on the subject, and was followed by [Hindenburg] who stated that the soldier in the trenches was waiting for the U-boat war, that the Army . . . had troops ready to go over to the offensive within a few months . . .
>
> Then His Majesty replied . . . very much in favour of unrestricted U-boat warfare, and upon this signed the decree that was laid before him. He remarked in passing that he expected a declaration of war by America. If it came . . . so much the better . . . [Later] the Chancellor told me that [now] the Kaiser had done untold harm to himself and to the Hohenzollern dynasty . . .[1]

The power behind the Kaiser's throne was now almost absolute. An ever-more frustrated and weakened Bethmann-Hollweg was destined to resign in July, to be followed by two Chancellors who would prove weaker still against the stultifying but total control of General Erich Ludendorff.

In the meantime, as in a tense and fragile marriage, Germany was hitched to Ludendorff and Hindenburg's decision for better or worse. Ludendorff calculated that unrestricted submarine warfare would reward Germany with victory before the United States was in any position to bring her full military weight to bear in Europe. The new offensive would begin, beneath the waves, on 1 February. By land, he and Hindenburg had a major surprise up their sleeves for the Allies on the Western Front. But if the German strategy for 1917 was to prevail, the military would have to increasingly rely on the support of the Fatherland when it was already enfeebled by war.

In the Fatherland the desperate 'Turnip Winter' bore down on the German people, and 1917 began almost unnoticed. Few were in the mood to look forward with any optimism. 1916 had been a disastrous year on the Western Front for Germany. But her heartland had also become unequivocally the New Front: a Home Front where war was as 'total' as the bloody struggles in the West or East. The Home Front battles were fought by legions of women against an army of police. Ernst Glaeser wrote: 'Soon, a looted ham thrilled us more than the fall of Bucharest or some apparent success elsewhere.'[2]

Hunger, anger at the shortages, and the mounting death rate fuelled riots, strikes and violence on the Home Front. Industrial unrest, which began at important factories such as Krupps and Siemens in 1916, increased dramatically in 1917. The situation became so critical by that autumn that the Army was called in to restore order by subjecting most of the factories to 'militarisation'. Workers' leaders were swiftly drafted and sent to the hardest sectors of the Western Front.

The architect of the Hindenburg Programme, who gave Ludendorff o legitimacy that he scarce deserved.

[Postcard, Allen Collection]

On 16 December 1916 the German Government introduced the Patriotic Auxiliary Service Law. Under this legislation, all men between 17 and 60 years of age became liable for work in the war production industry regardless of previous or current employment. The German military hand, in the shape of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, was at the tiller, and was demanding nothing less than 'total war production' across the Fatherland. Hindenburg became the Patriotic Auxiliary Service Law's patron: the law became known simply as the 'Hindenburg Programme'.

It was to be a full mobilisation of the Home Front and its aim was to dramatically increase Germany's military production. The bloody events on the Western and Eastern Fronts in 1916 had stretched the German Army's manpower and the nation's industrial capacity to wage war. Hindenburg and Ludendorff knew that without a general mobilisation of the civilian population in Germany, they could not hope to compete with the Western Allies in the deadly game of *Materialschlacht*. The German High Command insisted that Germany was turned into 'one vast munitions factory'.

The Hindenburg Programme began in earnest in January 1917. Production targets were increased and were very ambitious. Artillery shell, mortar ammunition and machine gun output was to double, aircraft quotas tripled and coal and steel output would have to increase in line with the new programme. The implications for the adult population were profound; and deeply unpopular. For the working class and many of the skilled middle classes, it was nothing less than an end to flexible working practices and an imposition of government law to control all sectors of German industry. Protest followed and the Government attempted to find a formula that would make the Hindenburg Programme more palatable to the labour unions and to the very people on which it entirely depended.

With a good deal of compromise, the wheels of this new industrial engine conceived to oil the German war machine began to turn. There was a nationwide appeal for volunteers to enter war work. Nationalists hailed the Hindenburg Programme as an ideal focus for a renewed war spirit within Germany and the German High Command saw it as a means to dramatically increase arms production. It was another illusion.

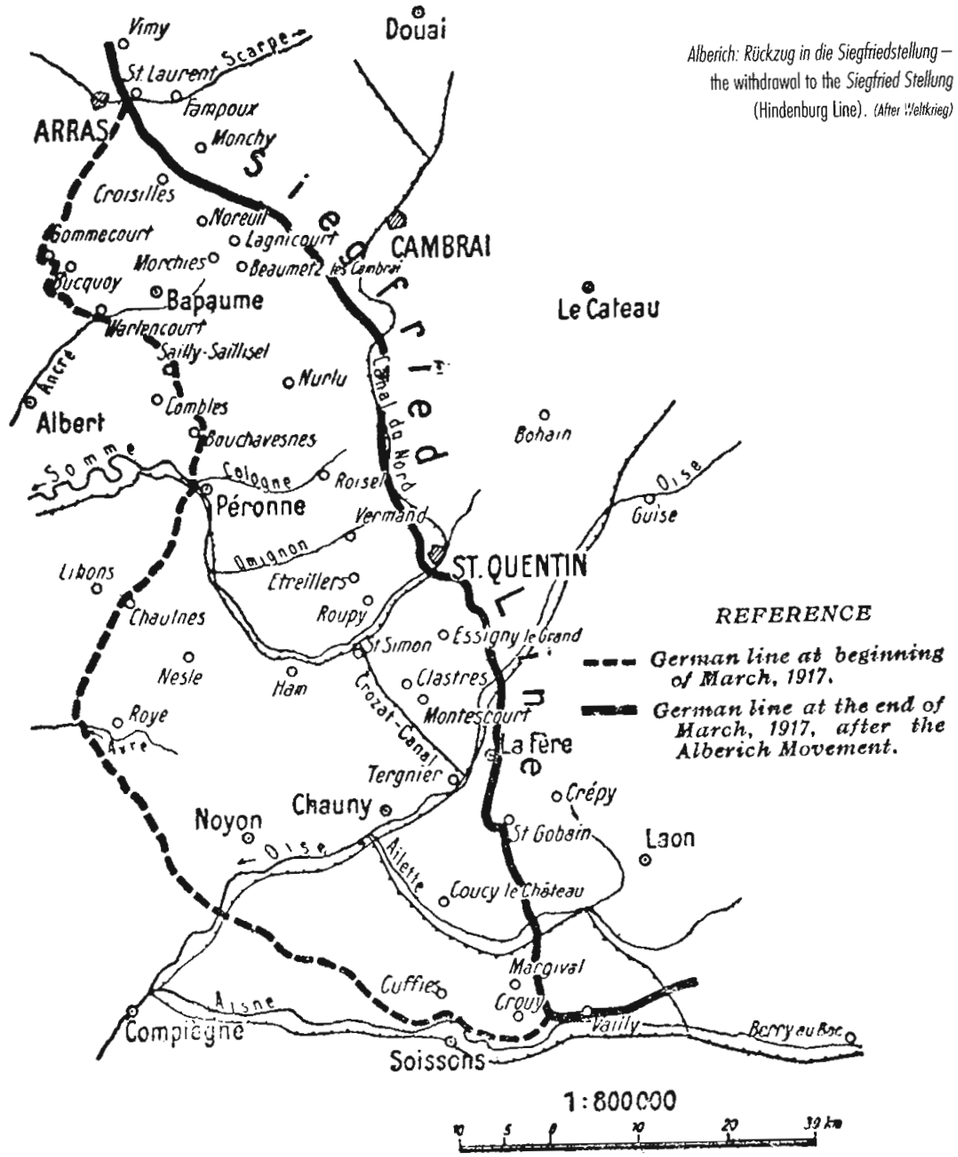
Hindenburg, still regarded with respect by many German people as the hero of Tannenberg and Germany's saviour in the East in the first months of the war, called on them to unite in a supreme effort to strengthen the sinews of war. But the effort was beyond them in a country beset by the 'Hunger Blockade' and already severely ravaged by war. As the months passed in 1917, the national effort was usurped by a rush for profits by a corrupt and untouchable few and precious little evidence of an increase in production.

The German armed forces needed 12,000 tons of gunpowder per month, but were fortunate to receive 8,000 tons in April and a marginal increase to 9,200 tons in July. Steel production actually dropped by 225,000 tons in February and March 1917. There would be no major boost until after Russia's capitulation and the German preparations for the offensive in the first two months of 1918.[3]

Introduced to mobilise and streamline the means of production, the Hindenburg Programme actually created further barriers against such aims and led to a chaotic

system born out of a constantly shifting workforce. Its provisions allowed workers to move from one job to another if they could find suitable improved working conditions and pay. The captains of industry, always bent on profit from their patronage of the war effort, offered ever-higher salaries to entice skilled workers to their factories.

The skilled workers quickly took advantage of this opportunity and the job-changing merry-go-round began. At the end of 1917, the management of the Siemens works in Berlin calculated that the composition of the labour force changed almost three times in that year. Inevitably, this disruption led to a serious drop in efficiency and production.



Alberich: Rückzug in die Siegfriedstellung – the withdrawal to the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line). *(After Weltkrieg)*

Even worse, of 25,000 German miners who had been released from military service to return to the coalface, over 3,000 left for higher pay elsewhere within a year.[4]

The Hindenburg Programme also put the much-vaunted railway network under terrific strain. Domestic rail freight was tied up for days, especially as it was a distant second priority behind the insatiable needs of the German Army in the field. Consequently, vital resources such as coal and foodstuffs were poorly distributed across the Fatherland and the ordinary population suffered more than ever.

As the wartime economy lurched from one crisis to another, women plugged the growing gap in the industrial and rural labour force. Throughout Germany, the war brought almost one and a half million new female employees into the labour market. But in rural or urban environments women had poor working conditions, lack of equal pay and depressingly long hours. Almost 85 per cent of female factory workers put in 65–75 hours per week and night work doubled from 1916 onwards.

Despite the best efforts of an almost fully mobilised nation, the Home Front could not hope to win its own war against want, privation and then famine. Overall, malnutrition in general and lack of foodstuffs high in protein and carbohydrates in particular exacted a terrible toll on the German people. The average diet provided a mere 1,000 calories per day by the end of 1917, reduced from a daily average of 3,500 in 1914. Meat consumption dropped from 1100 grams per person per week to a pitiful 135 grams.[5]

The German withdrawal to the *Siegfried Stellung*, or Hindenburg Line, under the codename *Alberich* (the evil dwarf featured in Wagner's *Niebelung* tale) in March 1917 was a clear admission of the failure of Germany's strategy in 1916. Verdun and the Somme campaigns had had the opposite outcome of that envisaged at Verdun, in particular by Falkenhayn, and bled the German Army white.

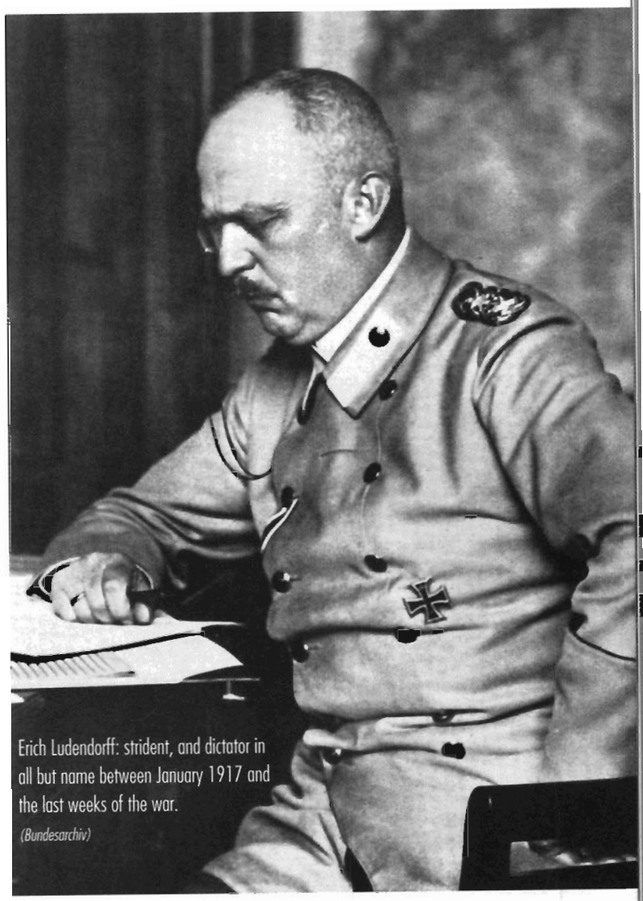
Throughout the winter of 1916/17 German engineers built the formidable defence lines of the *Siegfried Stellung*. Although kept secret from the Allies, it was sold to the German public as an impregnable bastion that would secure Germany's borders; a striking example of forward defence if ever there was one! For public consumption, it was described as 'an iron wall that no human power can overcome'.[6] Operation *Alberich*, the construction of the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line to the Allies) and the withdrawal to it was a most impressive feat of military engineering, deception and discipline.

Authorisation to withdraw was issued by Ludendorff, after some hesitation due to his fears of the potential harm to German morale, on 4 February 1917. When the main withdrawal was under way over the four days of 16 to 20 March, it took the Allies over a week to detect *Alberich*, much too late to counter it. Although the withdrawal was an acknowledgement of both the massive German sacrifice made in the charnel houses of Verdun and the Somme, and of the increasing strength and confidence of the Anglo-French Alliance, it gave the German Army in the West some advantage by improving a now shorter defensive line.

Ludendorff agreed with Hindenburg, soon after taking command of the German Army, that powerful rear positions should be built. Ludendorff wrote later: 'Whether we should retire to them, and how the positions would be used, was not of course decided in September 1916; the important thing then was to get them built.'[7]

Built they were, and with truly awesome efficiency. The Hindenburg Line was a collective name for much more than a single fortified strip of occupied France. The powerful rear positions envisaged by Hindenburg and Ludendorff were divided into sections, each with its own codename.

The first was the *Siegfriedstellung*, which was sited to run from Arras to St Quentin and then continue down to Laon and the Aisne and so snip off the huge salient that was 'voluntarily' abandoned. It was extended north by the *Wotanstellung*, running from Quéant to Drocourt/Lille, and finally continued to the coast as the *Flandernstellung*, or 'Flanders Line'. Later, the *Brunhild Stellung* appeared in the Champagne and the *Kriemhilde Stellung* in the Meuse-Argonne sector. *Siegfried* was the strongest, most elaborate and, like the Wagnerian characters that each of the lines owed their names to, the stuff of legend. It was protected by anything up to nine thick belts of barbed wire in front of concreted machine-gun posts, trench complexes, reinforced-concrete shelters and deep, expansive dugouts.



Erich Ludendorff: strident, and dictator in all but name between January 1917 and the last weeks of the war.
(Bundesarchiv)

The Hindenburg Line system was the 'ideal' model for the German Army's new defensive doctrine of flexible, or elastic, defence in depth, and provided a belt of defensive zones, rather than one continuous line of heavily defended strongpoints. Each stretch of the line had a forward 'outpost zone,' some 600 yards deep with observation and machine gun posts, plus some concrete dugouts for local counter-attack troops, or *Stosstruppen*. Behind this lay the 'main battle zone,' across 2,500 yards, which included the first and second main trench/strongpoint lines and a thick

network of concrete machine-gun emplacements, which provided interlocking arcs of fire criss-crossing no-man's-land, and some field artillery pits for mobile gunner units. The latter would really come into their own as anti-tank gun emplacements when the Allies used tanks en masse towards the end of 1917. The trench lines were protected by formidable belts of barbed wire, over 100 yards across in places, covered by machine gun, mortar and artillery fire.

Behind the trench systems were further concrete bunkers and dug outs for HQs, medical staffs and the crucially important *Eingreif*, or counter-attack infantry units. As 1917 unfolded, third and fourth lines of resistance were added in several places, giving a total depth of much of the *Siegfried Stellung* or Hindenburg Line of between 5,000 and 9,000 yards.

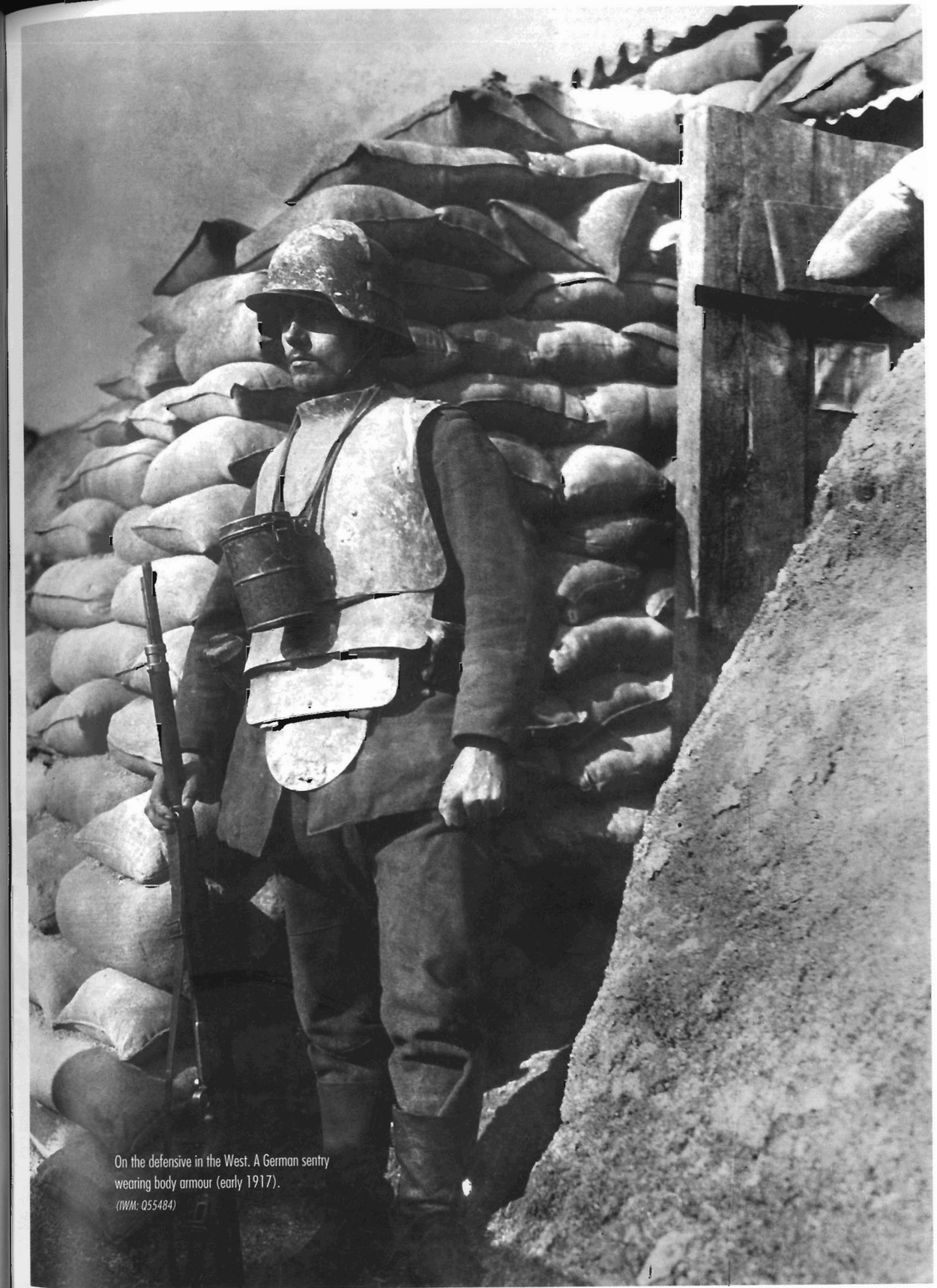
The extraordinary construction and professional, disciplined conduct of the German withdrawal was marred by the deeply controversial 'scorched earth' policy ordered by Ludendorff. To the senior commander responsible for this whole sector, Crown Prince Rupprecht, it was a foul and wholly unnecessary act of war. He vehemently opposed it and even threatened to resign in protest, but was overruled by Ludendorff.

When the initial phase of the *Alberich* plan went into effect, the vast majority of the newly vacant land was left uninhabitable. Roads and railways, bridges and communication lines such as telegraph poles and cables were destroyed, wells were poisoned, town infrastructures damaged, whole villages razed to the ground, orchards and woodland felled and livestock slaughtered if it was deemed of no use to the withdrawing German troops. Worst of all, French women, children and the elderly were left behind, along with thousands of weapons, items of equipment and buildings booby-trapped to kill or maim unwary British and Dominion soldiers as they advanced through this man-made wasteland.

It was a policy that would come back to haunt Ludendorff, as Rupprecht predicted it would, by creating massive logistical problems for maintenance and resupply of the spring offensives in 1918. But Ludendorff never thought that far ahead. The wanton devastation of the countryside in 1917 was to be a major headache in 1918, and all of his own making.

Alberich's most insidious legacy was the thousands of nasty, and often deadly, surprises left to slow down the British pursuit. An English officer's diary recorded:

> March 14th: A busy day. It is reported that the German line appears to be held in the usual strength . . . March 15th: From a captured German [operation] order it appears that our patrols entered the hostile trenches only one hour after they had been vacated; pretty sharp work . . . The German trenches we have taken over are deep, well-constructed, and surprisingly dry . . . Masses of beer bottles (unfortunately empty) are strewn about, and guncotton, attached to shell cases and grenades, has been left ready to explode when picked up or accidentally kicked. We have had five casualties in this way . . .[8]



On the defensive in the West. A German sentry wearing body armour (early 1917).
(IWM: Q55484)

The Allied pursuit was slow and faltering partly for these reasons, and partly because of the problems that had been thrown up for the planning of the Allied spring offensives, especially the French Nivelle operation.

The Hindenburg Line was a masterpiece of the siege war on the Western Font and *Oberst* Fritz von Lossberg was the mastermind who inspired it. Lossberg was Chief-of-Staff (CoS) Second Army under General Fritz von Below. He had served as a Corps COS in 1914 and deputy chief of operations in *OHL* (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, German Supreme HQ) the following year, before becoming CoS to the Third Army and then to the Second Army on the Somme.

He represented the more positive side of the German General Staff system, as his undoubted defensive planning skills were respected at the highest level. He was of a

A German bunker and gun emplacement in the Zandvoorde sector of the Ypres salient in the winter of 1916.
(IWM: Q.45.589)

Der Meldehund an der Front – Dogs used as messengers during an enemy gas attack. Dogs were used successfully by the German Army for message carrying and to bring up food, water and medical supplies in specially adapted containers when it was too hazardous for troops to do the same.
(Allen Collection)

rare breed in the higher echelons of the German officer corps as he was pragmatic, technically skilled and innovative.

But the German High Command did at least have the flexibility to encourage officers like von Lossberg, who masterminded the siting and strengthening of the defences on the Somme in 1916, to use their talents and allow them real influence if they were good enough, regardless of rank. Ludendorff and Hindenburg recognised that talent in Lossberg and employed him in OHL to devise the new designs for the defensive front and the new tactics to go with them.

He provided the practical advice for the siting and construction of the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line), and would personally intervene to expedite a rapid stabilisation of the weak German defences in the Arras sector in April, and then shore up the German defences in Flanders after the debacle at Messines in June and July prior to the British Third Ypres/Passchendaele offensive.

The most important principle of the new German defensive policy, or doctrine, was that of flexible, or 'elastic' defence in depth. It replaced that of static positional defence, so disastrously used by the German infantry under the weight of the Allied guns at Verdun and the Somme.

The layout was based on deep defence, i.e. well-spaced zones, to avoid total inundation by heavy and wide-ranging enemy artillery bombardments and so that each defensive line had to be taken by the attacking force. The infantry selected for the outpost (forward) zone were trained to observe and report enemy strengths and approaches, shifting constantly from one position to another to improve their chances of surviving enemy bombardments. They would dash from one shell hole or local dugout to another and not rely on a single, static trench line. Then, their role was to fight a brief delaying battle and inflict casualties on the enemy infantry as the advance began, before the surviving defenders withdrew to the next defensive area. This would buy valuable warning time for the main defensive garrison. If the situation demanded it, local counter-attack detachments (*Stosstruppen*) would be thrown in, but this would be the exception – and in direct contrast to the policy pursued in positional defence, where costly counter-attacks were ordered to retake every foot of ground lost.

The main battle zone, up to some two kilometres deep, was sited on a reverse slope, contained the first and second main defensive trench lines manned by the 'front line' infantry battalions, and had thick belts of barbed wire covered by well-protected machine-gun emplacements. Directly behind were artillery observers, with *Eingreif* battalions, field artillery and the tactical HQs, medical and communications centres. With a reverse slope position, machine-gun, rifle and mortar fire could sweep the crest of the high ground as the enemy were exposed crossing it. Pillboxes and reinforced concrete bunkers protected the defending troops throughout the main position. The deeper that the enemy infantry assault penetrated, the weaker it became, but the stronger the German defence became. Thus the enemy would eventually exhaust his efforts and inevitably withdraw or face annihilation or capture.

If the enemy managed to continue their advance, they would be absorbed by the reserve infantry counter-attack units, heavy machine guns and heavier artillery and mortar barrages in the rear battle zone.

In a nutshell, the new flexible defensive system bent back, allowing some penetration, then resisted in increasing strength as the enemy assault weakened and finally snapped back like an elastic band to eject the enemy from the defended area.

Though the winter of 1916/1917 was a bitterly cold one, Allied commanders fuelled hopes of a hot reception for the weakened German Army on the Western Front in spring 1917. The Allied conference at Chantilly in November 1916 affirmed that the West would remain the focus of unhinging Germany and the Central Powers, but political and military changes at the top in Britain and France in December threw such plans briefly into a spin.

On 7 December, David Lloyd George succeeded Herbert Asquith as Prime Minister and immediately set about the task of shifting the main effort away from the Western Front. He was openly critical of Haig and was keen to remove him from command, as well as wanting to look to other theatres of war to seek decisive success against

Germany and her allies, as he had done since 1915 first as Minister for Munitions and then as Secretary of State for War.

In the same month, the French C-in-C General 'Papa' Joffre became another victim of the war when French Prime Minister Aristide Briand removed him for his lack of urgency in meeting the threat at Verdun and the continued high casualties of the French *poilus*. General Robert Nivelle, whose reputation had been enhanced by his exploits in the latter months of the Verdun campaign, replaced Joffre. Nivelle was a persuasive and hugely confident commander and he was certain that he had found a winning formula for 1917, which would hinge on a bold offensive on a wide front and overwhelming artillery support.

Nivelle was a charmer, a man of flamboyant gesture and plausibility, who convinced the Allied commanders and politicians that his offensive was the one to break the deadlock of the Western Front and finally 'knock the Germans for six,' as the new British Prime Minister wished. Even Lloyd George, ever the 'Easterner', was seduced by Nivelle's plan. The British and French politicians were anxious about the casualties in 1916 and saw no end to attrition until Nivelle convinced them otherwise. In short, his strategy was to achieve a stunning and rapid breakthrough.

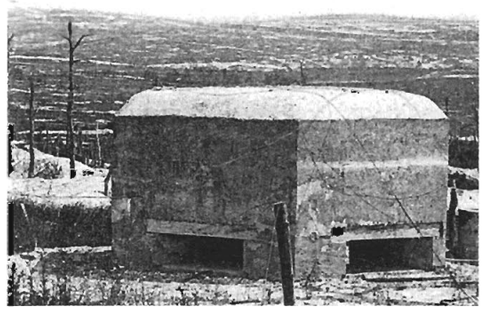
Two diversionary attacks, by the BEF and the French between Arras and the River Scarpe in the north and the River Oise respectively, would fix German attention and reserves in this sector and mask final preparations for the main offensive against the Chemin des Dames in Champagne. Nivelle described this main blow as a strike with a 'mass of manoeuvre' – no less than twenty-seven divisions to exploit the break in the German line. According to the new French C-in-C, the breakthrough would come within 48 hours. His self-assurance and the 'certainty' of the spring offensive were echoed by Nivelle's fellow commander in the latter stages of the Verdun campaign, General Charles Mangin, who had declared in December that: 'We know the method and we have the Chief (Nivelle). Success is certain.'[9]

Nivelle seemed to have thought of everything; everything, that is, except the enemy's likely actions in early spring 1917. *Alberich* surprised him and the British, but it did not deter him from his plan. General Franchet d'Esperay, whose French Northern Group of Armies was ordered to carry out the diversionary assault in the Oise sector, suggested an immediate attack to catch the withdrawing German units off guard. Nivelle rejected this audacious request. He would not change his plan for d'Esperay or even to acknowledge the shift in German deployments. His inflexibility would cost him and the French dear in the months to come.

At the Calais Conference on 26–27 February 1917, the difference between Allied relationships and the more straightforward German High Command responsibilities were borne out by the intrigue regarding the role of Haig and the BEF as part of the Allied effort. Lloyd George, who had already made it plain that he would remove Haig if an opportunity arose, conspired with the French to subordinate the BEF to Nivelle's supreme command. This led to a strong protest from King George V and the War

Cabinet, so Haig and the BEF were spared. But the fallout was acute. The compromise left a feeling of greater mistrust between Lloyd George, Haig and other senior officers, and did little to promote Anglo-French relations only a few weeks before a major Allied offensive.

On the other side, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had few of these problems to contend with. Though they deferred to the Kaiser and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, they held both the military and political reins of power. But the Germans would soon have another problem to tackle: the prospect of a new and powerful enemy.



CHAPTER 9

AMERIKA, ARRAS AND *L'AFFAIRE NIVELLE*

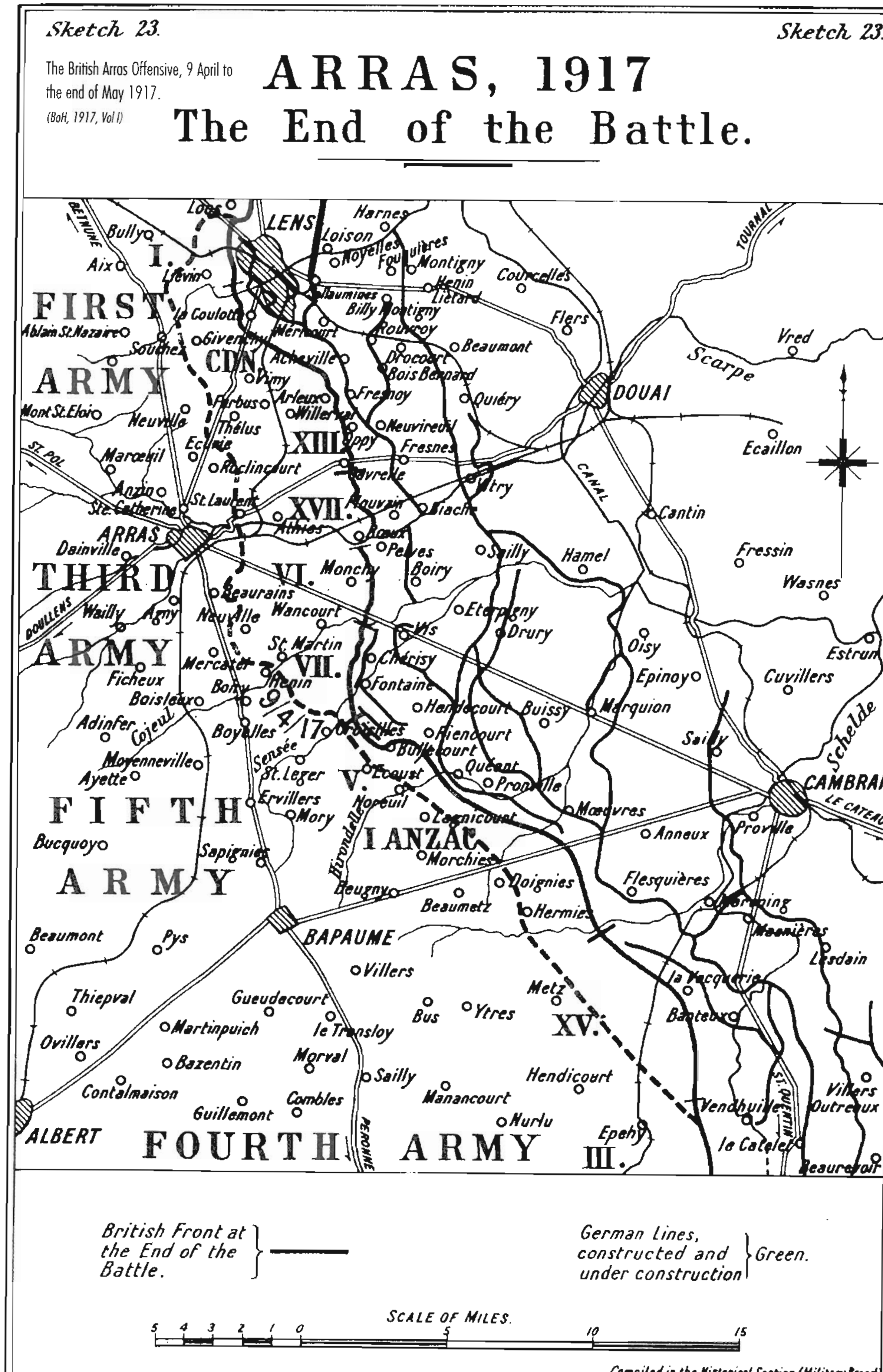
APRIL–JUNE 1917

Ludendorff had assured his troops and the German people that the war could be won in 1917 by strangling Britain's war effort at sea, while remaining on the defensive in the West and seeking a decision on the Eastern Front. But his assurances rang very hollow indeed in early April.

The United States of America declared war on Germany on 6 April in response to Germany's strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare and attempts to foment trouble in Mexico. US President Woodrow Wilson assured the American people that they now had an historic task of 'keeping the world safe for democracy'. Although the first American troops were despatched to Europe soon after the US commitment to the war, it would be a long time before America was ready for action. She lacked trained soldiers and the military infrastructure to provide the manpower and equipment needed on such a large scale.

General John Joseph 'Black Jack' Pershing, one of America's most experienced soldiers, was appointed to command the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). He arrived in France in June 1917 and quickly made it clear to his Allied counterparts that his army would ultimately fight only as a cohesive all-American force. He was not prepared to commit it to battle until its strength and equipment had been built up. It would take a year for the AEF to field over one million men on the Western Front, and although they would play an important part in the latter stages of the German offensives in early 1918, it would take until September of that year for the AEF to play a full part.

The immediate and deeply damaging blow of America's entry into the war for Ludendorff and Germany was a psychological one. The German High Command knew full well from the outset that the United States would provide two precious assets that the Central Powers would conversely find increasingly difficult to match as the war dragged on: manpower and an untouchable, insatiable industrial appetite. Although it would take time for the full impact to be felt, the promise of an overwhelming force to



The British Arras Offensive, 9 April to the end of May 1917.
(BoH, 1917, Vol I)

Ordnance Survey 1939.

take up the torch in support of the Western Allies against Germany was a constant thorn in Ludendorff's side from April 1917 on. It would affect his judgement and his decision on Germany's final attempt to tip the balance in Germany's favour in 1918.

Three days after America entered the war, the prelude to *l'Affaire Nivelle* began with the combined British and French offensives against Arras and the Oise. Nivelle's strategy remained as it had done before the German withdrawal and so the British Third Army (plus the First Army's Canadian Corps), comprising fifteen divisions and commanded by General Sir Edmund Allenby, launched its attacks on the snow-swept morning of Monday 9 April.

Although the French drive to the south under General d'Esperay had been truncated because of the withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the British assault against a total of ten German divisions was a great success at first. Nearly 3,000 guns blasted the German positions for four days and, when the assault went in 48 tanks were available to support it. The main objective was to punch a hole in the right flank of the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line) and old German (OG) defences in the centre before capturing parts of the German line from the rear. Further operations were to then threaten the German-held sector around Cambrai. To Allenby's north, the Canadian Corps was given the formidable task of taking Vimy Ridge.

General-Oberst von Falkenhausen was GOC Sixth Army that faced Allenby's Third. His grasp of the concept of the new 'elastic defence in-depth' was not as firm as that of commanders of other German armies on the Western Front and as a result, the Sixth Army was rather caught 'in transition' between positional and flexible defensive methods.

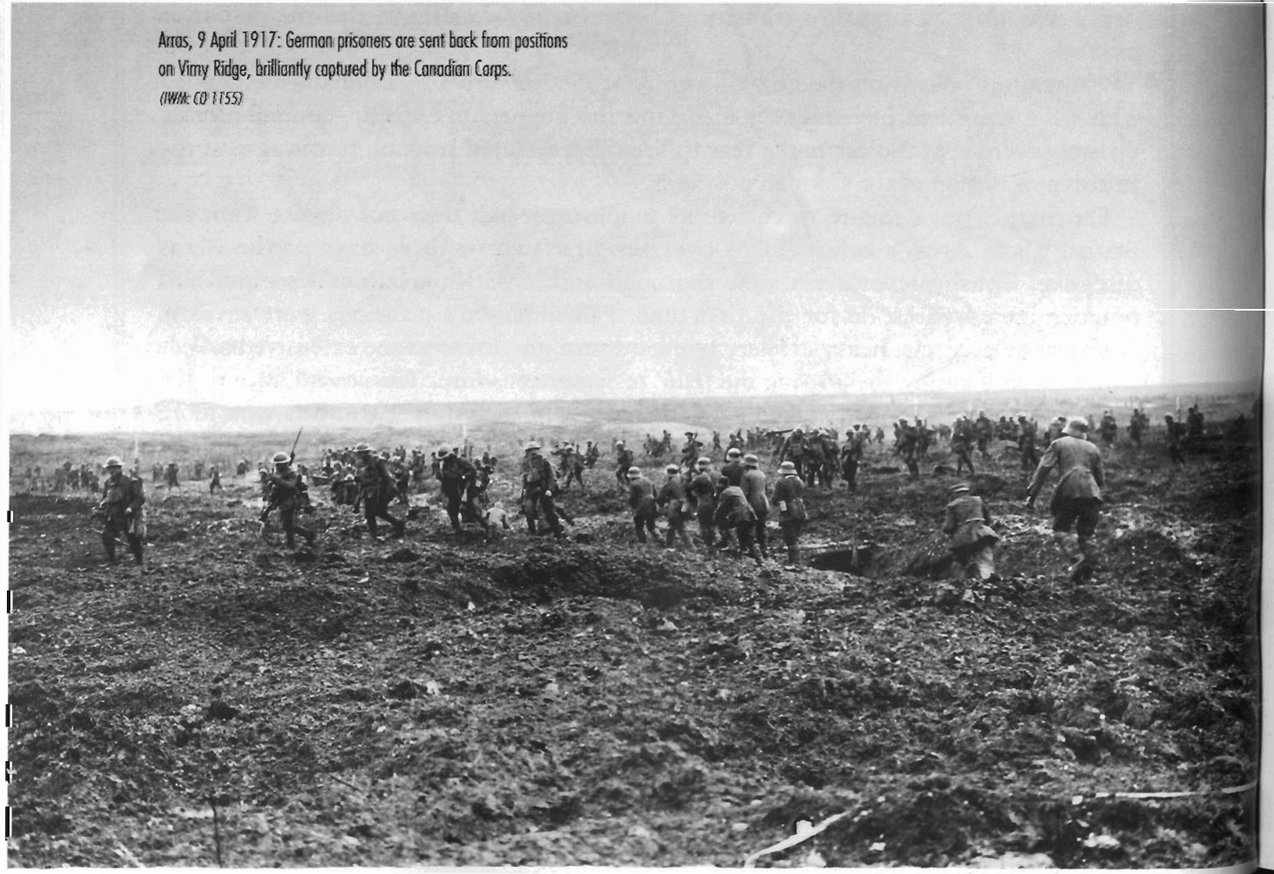
The main problems on the ground were that the forward zones remained crammed with troops, instead of lightly manned, and the important *Eingreif* (counter-attack) divisions were kept too far to the rear to provide any rapid reaction forces against the British penetration of the German positions.

The Sixth Army's failure to change its modus operandi does not detract from the British Third Army's achievement over the first two or three days of the Arras offensive. British preparations were thorough and recent innovations were put into practice on a large scale for the first time. Falkenhausen's positions were severely damaged by accurate, heavy artillery bombardment and many of the extensive barbed-wire obstacles cut by shells using the '106' instantaneous fuse. The crucial 'race to the parapet', which had failed so badly on the Somme in early July 1916, was won more by the British and Canadian assault troops than by German machine gunners. The artillery were provided with excellent air OPs by the RFC which updated the Royal Artillery with timely intelligence on German gun-battery locations using new methods such as 'flash spotting' and 'sound ranging', despite the weather and increasingly hostile skies.

On 9 April former German bastions such as Neuville Vitasse, the northern segment of the *Siegfried Stellung* and, most famously, Vimy Ridge, fell like ninepins. The

German defences crumbled so completely in places that British progress threatened a limited breakout; and Falkenhausen had neither sufficient artillery, nor any *Eingreif* units to stem the flow of some British assaults. Allenby's VI Corps advanced an average of two miles and captured German field guns and their crews caught out by the sheer speed of the attack and the British XVII Corps managed to do even better by rolling back Falkenhausen's bewildered troops over three and a half miles in one day. At that time it was the lengthiest advance since trench warfare had begun.

If these failures were bad enough, the loss of Vimy Ridge was the lowest point of German resistance in the initial events of the British Arras offensive. The Germans had held it since 1914 and considered it invulnerable. Once again, it was largely British innovation and ingenuity as well as meticulous rehearsal and preparation that won the day. The Canadian Corps had the benefit of approaching the German front line underground through a series of deeply dug tunnels that traversed much of no-man's-land. Not only did the Germans not see them coming, but also they were overwhelmed when the Canadians emerged and attacked as the barrage lifted. It was a stunning success for the Canadian Corps, but nothing less than an abject failure for the German garrison thrown off Vimy Ridge. One or two particularly stubborn rear guard actions were fought out on Hill 145 and 'the pimple' but by the end of the first day the Canadians held the ridge, which dominated the area around it.[1]



Arras, 9 April 1917: German prisoners are sent back from positions on Vimy Ridge, brilliantly captured by the Canadian Corps.
(IWM: CO 1155)

Old friendships, like old habits, die hard. There were still enough British and German servicemen on either side of the wire who had family or pre-war connections from 'the other country'. During the fighting at Arras, *Leutnant Graf* (Count) von Schaffgotsch saw a wounded English officer in difficulties near the German wire, so dashed forward to recover him in a rare lull in the battle. When he reached him he recognised a friend of his from his Oxford University days just before the war. The count tended to his English friend and ensured that he was despatched to the German field hospital before resuming his own duties in the front line. He escorted him to hospital.[2]

Between 9 and 11 April, the German Sixth Army suffered over 15,000 casualties and 7,000 prisoners and lost 112 guns and 350 machine guns. The British Third and First Army personnel involved in the assault around Arras and in the capture of Vimy Ridge took a remarkably low 8,238 casualties by comparison – and for tangible, important territorial gains. The German failure was attributable to the lack of preparedness of their new defensive tasks against the enemy assault, but compounded by the novel British tactics and also a greater confidence that they could take on German units and win.[3]

Arras had so far gone well and appeared to augur well for the wider Allied offensive. But at Bullecourt the German withdrawal had affected the original British planning so that the GOC of Fifth Army, General Sir Hubert Gough, could only attack the *Siegfried Stellung* around the village of Bullecourt and close to the junction of the *Wotan Stellung* line of the Hindenburg system. The assault against Bullecourt went in early on 11 April after a 'buckshee battle' the day before that had heralded the intentions of the 4th Australian Division's attack.[4]

Though supported by tanks (which the Aussies cursed anyway), the battle was a disaster, despite the extraordinary efforts of the assaulting Australian troops. It was a lesson in poor planning, but a tribute to stout and dogged defence by the regiments of the experienced and well-drilled German 27th (Royal Württemberg) Division. By the close of that day, the Australians had lost nearly 3,500 men, including 40 officers and 1,142 men captured. On the other side of the wire, it had dawned on the Württembergers of 27th Division that they had 'accomplished something extraordinary and had achieved a success that was rare for a division in defence'.[5] In contrast to the Australian casualties, 27th Division had lost 138 killed and 531 wounded, with no prisoners.

It was the only real success anywhere in the German line over the first three days of the Arras offensive and therefore General Moser, the commander of the defending XIVth Reserve Korps (*Gruppe Quéant*) and Major-General von Mauer, GOC 27th Division, were given appropriate accolades and medals.[6]

The Sixth Army commander Falkenhausen was not so blessed as the defenders of Bullecourt, for everywhere else his Army had lost significant ground. He was replaced by General Otto von Below on 23 April. Thereafter, Falkenhausen carried out more

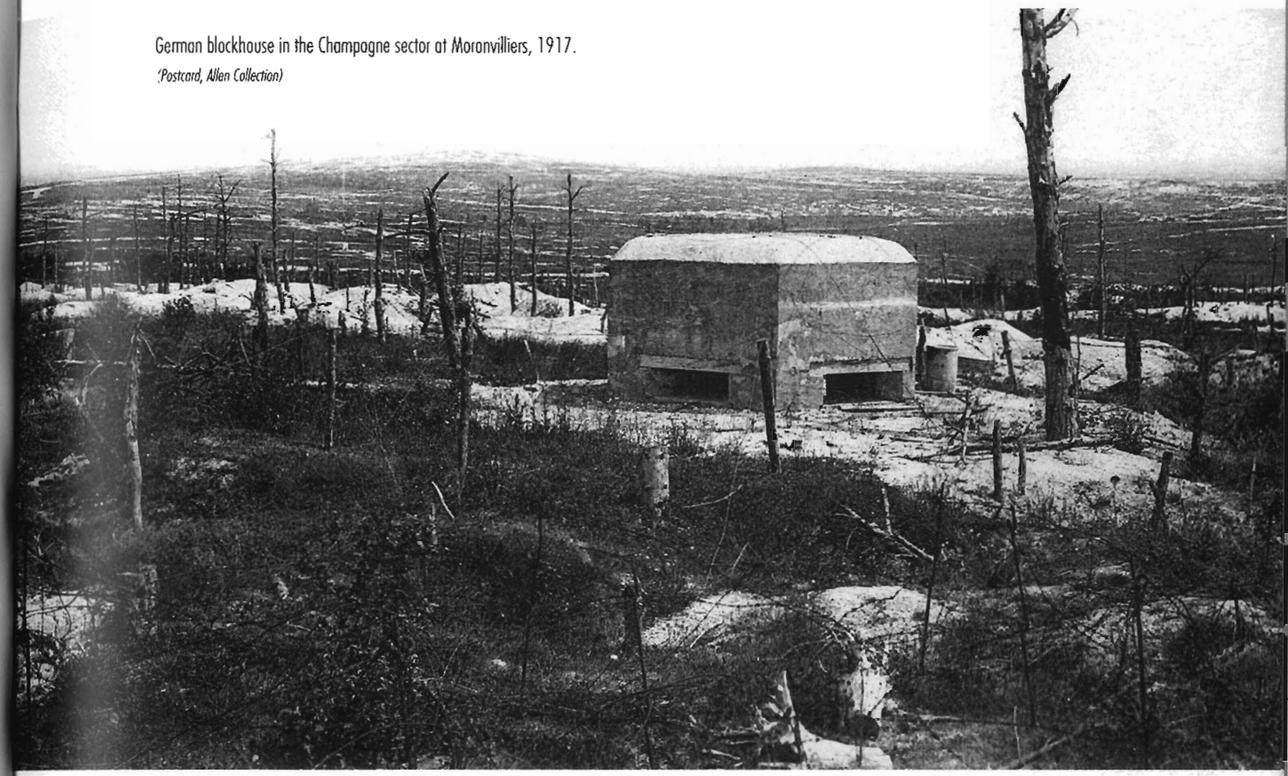
'Horch (minen) graben', German mining listening gallery in early 1917.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)

mundane duties than those of command as Governor-General of Belgium. The immediate priority was to make good crumbling defences and for that task there was only one candidate: *Oberst* Fritz von Lossberg.

Lossberg was appointed COS Sixth Army and he set to his task of shoring up the German line straight away. His appointment coincided with a gradual turning of the tables as the British momentum began to slow. On 11 April the German bulwark at Monchy le Preux fell to a combined infantry and cavalry assault, and General Allenby stressed that 'risks must be freely taken in pursuing a defeated enemy', but within 24 hours, the mood had changed. British Third Army was encountering stiffer resistance as German reinforcements arrived to fill the gaps and the *eingreif* divisions became more active.

A pattern was emerging once more as another Allied offensive stalled. German discipline and courage had prevented a breakthrough; British preparations and the assaults were improving, but the momentum of an offensive could not be maintained through lack of reserves. Then German resistance stiffened and another uneasy stalemate ensued. This time, the logical thing for the BEF to do was to consolidate its gains and wait for the Nivelle offensive across the Chemin des Dames. But logic was the very last thing on Nivelle's mind in mid-April 1917.

The German withdrawal had virtually negated the French diversionary attack on the Oise and Nivelle was under pressure to modify his grand plan. Ironically, the Briand government that had put Nivelle in fell on 20 March and the new French Prime Minister Ribot forced a Council of War on 6 April, the day that America entered the war, and discussion even centred on cancelling any major offensives until the 'Yankees' arrived. The consensus was that *l'Affaire Nivelle* should be cancelled immediately if it



German blockhouse in the Champagne sector at Moronvilliers, 1917.
'Postcard, Allen Collection)

did not realise the promise of a swift and decisive victory. The chorus of disapproval was stopped by an ultimatum from Nivelle, which was nothing less than 'Back me or sack me'. Sadly, despite the obvious and widespread doubts about Nivelle's strategy, he called the doubters' bluff and they assured him of their total support. It was a bad, bad mistake.

Two days before the conference, a German raid on the French positions south of the Aisne managed to pick up the entire operation order for the Nivelle offensive. What's more, Nivelle was made aware of this desperately dangerous compromise, but did nothing. His whole plan depended on surprise, speed and the weight of artillery, but without surprise, now utterly gone, speed might be a problem for Nivelle's assaulting divisions as the Germans now knew where and when the French were coming. Nivelle now knew that only the brute force of artillery and the élan of his *poilus* would give him any chance of success. It did not augur well.

The great offensive was launched on a 25-mile front on Monday 16 April after a crashing 14-day bombardment by almost 4,000 guns and *poilus* of the French Fifth and Sixth Armies went forward confident that Nivelle's 'mass of manoeuvre' doctrine

Nivelle Offensive: German sentries in the forward zone ready to throw grenades.
(IWM: Q55005/G.O. 2393)

would be enough to overwhelm the German defences. But the assault was across some of the most difficult terrain on the Western Front and against German positions up to six miles deep and protected by the heights of the Chemin des Dames[7] where steep wooded gorges or marshy valley approaches would slow French progress. Worse, the German defences were solid, recently organised under the 'elastic defence in depth' doctrine and with the main obstacles tucked away on the reverse slope.[8]

Nivelle's superiority in numbers and artillery made little difference once the offensive was under way. Initial French confidence was rapidly lost as the leading assault troops discovered that they had overrun the lightly held enemy forward zone only to be cut down by a mass of machine-gun and artillery fire from the relatively undamaged German second line.

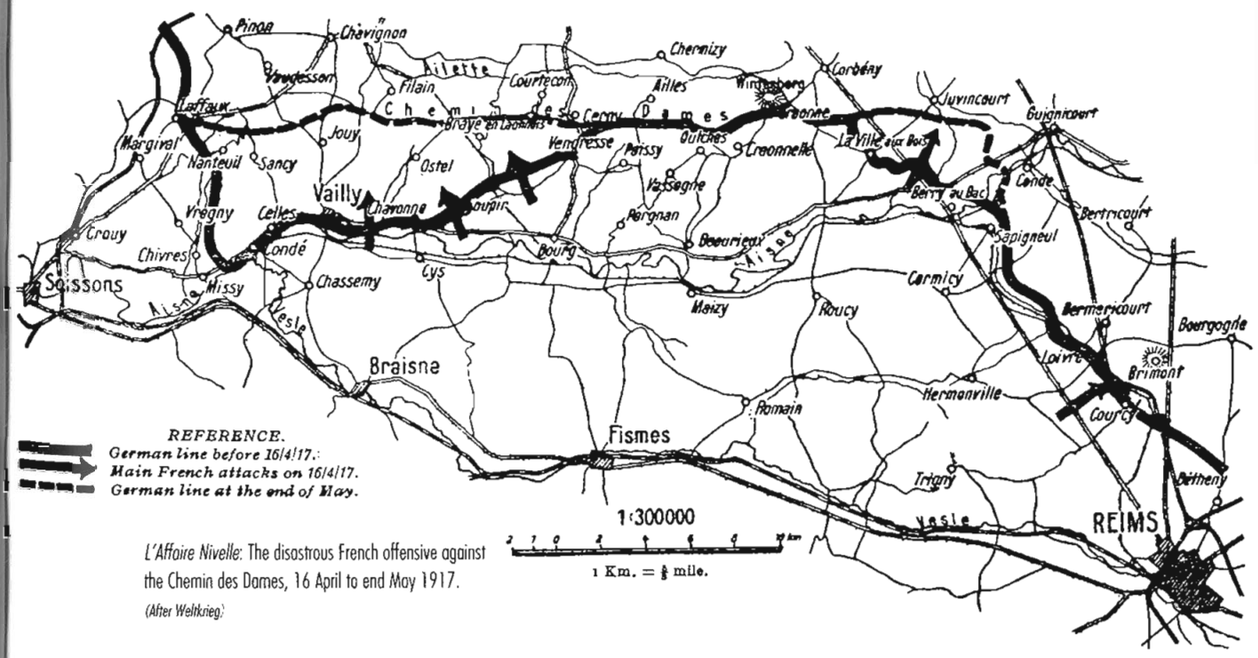
The next three days saw some German withdrawal after fierce resistance and by 20 April the French had advanced some four miles in places and taken key heights. With 20,000 German prisoners and 147 guns 'in the bag' the advance appeared to have made reasonable progress.

The reality was different. Most importantly, the promised rupture of the German line and subsequent decisive breakthrough had not materialised and any gains made by 20 April had been at great cost. In just four days French losses were 30,000 killed, 100,000 wounded or PoWs and almost 5,000 missing.[9] Although it would continue until early June and the total casualties stack up as 163,000 German and 185,000 on the French side, the damage to the French Army and to Nivelle's reputation was already done within the first four days.[10]

By 21 April, Nivelle's grip was already loosening and the 'grand plan' was reduced to the seizure of more limited objectives, rather than the capture of the whole of the Chemin des Dames ridge and decisive breakthrough. Further attacks did achieve some notable success, but it was not enough to salvage Nivelle's battered authority; General Pétain replaced him, but not before the French *poilus'* disillusion had turned to anger and then mutiny.

Regardless of the German success against the ill-fated Nivelle offensive, there were worrying signs of longer-term problems in the structure of the German Army that were becoming evident, not the least of which was dealing with the increasing vigour and skill of the BEF. Staff officer *Hauptmann* Rudolf Binding's comments at this time were prophetic:

> *17th April:* [On our logistics] I have no notion how to get our horses to move our infantry transport, our gun ammunition, ourselves, our guns . . . The Army order that all horses which are returned to veterinary depots on account of mange remain 'on the strength' of their units leads to the most deceptive statistics (I think that in some respects Ludendorff is the best liar on the earth), but does not help one forward . . .



L'Affoire Nivelle: The disostrous French offensive against the Chemin des Dames, 16 April to end May 1917.
(After Weltkrieg.)

German gunners use the 77mm field gun in the anti-tank role (Ponzer Abwehr Kanone, or PAK) in 1917.
(Contemporary Watercolour, Allen Collection)

18th April: What a mess we are in! . . . We have to stand fast and meet every [enemy] thrust, even where it hurts us. Ludendorff christens this 'The Defensive Battle.' . . . The enemy's strategy is quite clear. He attacks hard at Arras [then] he attacks somewhere else in superior strength . . . From now on he will keep us constantly on the run. There will be no end to it until we have had our fill. On the whole I should not be surprised if the English (BEF, including Dominion forces), backed by a [largely] unused American Army, came out on top at the last. We economize . . . because we have to, whereas the enemy has enough to spare . . . What is the good of our people doing their utmost in the face of these odds?[11]

By the beginning of May, as the battle ebbed, German spirits lifted. The line was stabilised and it was abundantly clear that the Nivelle offensive had ground to a bloody halt. At Supreme HQ the staff heard encouraging, though sobering news, even though the Kaiser obviously saw it differently:

> *1st May:* In bitter fighting out troops at Arras have withstood the attacks of the English, who are believed to have suffered very heavy losses. The same applies to the [French] battle in Champagne. But at today's audience our losses were also stressed, particularly our loss of commissioned ranks. His Majesty is in a jubilant mood. He insists that if the English now came forward with peace proposals he would reject them out of hand. [He said] They must be made to grovel.[12]

In spite of the losses in 1916, Ludendorff and Hindenburg had increased the German Army by 53 divisions to its highest ever total of 238 divisions by the beginning of 1917. Nevertheless, the manpower barrel was already running low and cosmetic changes had to be made to maintain the hard-pressed German armies on the Western Front in particular. To this end, as part of Ludendorff's 'general muster' in the winter of 1916/1917, 4,500 officers were pulled out of administrative posts and sent for front-line duty alongside 124,000 other ranks fit for service but previously employed in training and staff and administration duties in Germany. Almost 33 per cent of the 250,000 men required on a monthly basis were returning wounded.[13]

In addition, almost 310,000 recruits from the class of 1899 were called forward early to make good some of the shortfall in the military establishment as a result of the huge casualties in 1916. Many recruits were undernourished and inadequately trained and there was a marked deterioration in discipline in places. Desertions were to become a constant problem in 1917 and 1918.[14] Yet the need for men at the Front was balanced by an ever-greater requirement for skilled workers at home and over 300,000 such men were withdrawn from front-line duty under the terms of the Hindenburg Programme. Defence in the West was difficult, but until June 1917 it seemed to be working, despite the best efforts of the British and French offensives.

As General Nivelle's star plummeted to earth and his grand plans were ground to dust along the Chemin des Dames, the BEF was obliged to continue the offensive at Arras. By the time of the next major strike here, *Oberst* Fritz von Lossberg had already made good many of the faults in the German Sixth Army's defences that had existed under General von Falkenhausen before the launch of the first offensive on 9 April. British efforts on 23 April and beyond therefore failed to achieve any of the spectacular successes of the first few days of the initial assaults.

The German troops now grasped flexible defence-in-depth tactics and their artillery was a good deal less vulnerable than it had been before to British counter-battery (CB) fire. Conversely, most of the British attacks did not have the consistently heavy artillery support that they had enjoyed earlier. The result was another bitterly contested series of assault – counter-attack and close-quarter fighting, where bastions of the German defence such as Rouex, the chemical factory and Fresnoy were lost, won and lost again. Bullecourt was the scene of another battle between the Australians and the stalwart German 27th (Royal Württemberg) Division, as well as the British 62nd, 7th and 58th Divisions and the German 3rd Guards Division over a bloody fortnight between 3 and 17 May.[15]

Overall, the British and Dominion forces suffered 160,000 casualties by 17 May against a German total of around 130,000. Arras came to a standstill and another bloody draw.

There was, at least, good news for Germany on other fronts as 1917 progressed. After collusion between Ludendorff and Russian Bolshevik Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in

early 1917, the seeds of Tsar Nicholas II and the Romanov's destruction were sown, with Ludendorff having a major role in the export of revolution.[16] A final desperate fling by the imperial Russian forces in the 'Kerensky' offensive in July was to lead to catastrophe and a guarantee of Russian revolution.

On the Italian front, the Tenth Isonzo offensive was launched in association with the attacks on the Western Front, but on 12 May, and it raged for almost a month, with a disastrous result for the Italian allies. The pattern for 1917 was set firmly by the Tenth Isonzo offensive, for a renewed assault in August would have a similar outcome and the 'Twelfth' offensive, more readily known as 'Caporetto', in late October would be so devastating that an Anglo-French force of no less than ten divisions would be sent from the Western Front to stabilise the line and save the Italian Army from total humiliation.

The story on the Western Front was fated to be oh so different in the second half of 1917. It would witness German defeat on an explosive scale and then a battle that remains more notorious in British and Dominion nations' minds than those of subsequent generations of German people.

CHAPTER 10

CATASTROPHE AND 'THE GREATEST MARTYRDOM OF THE WAR'

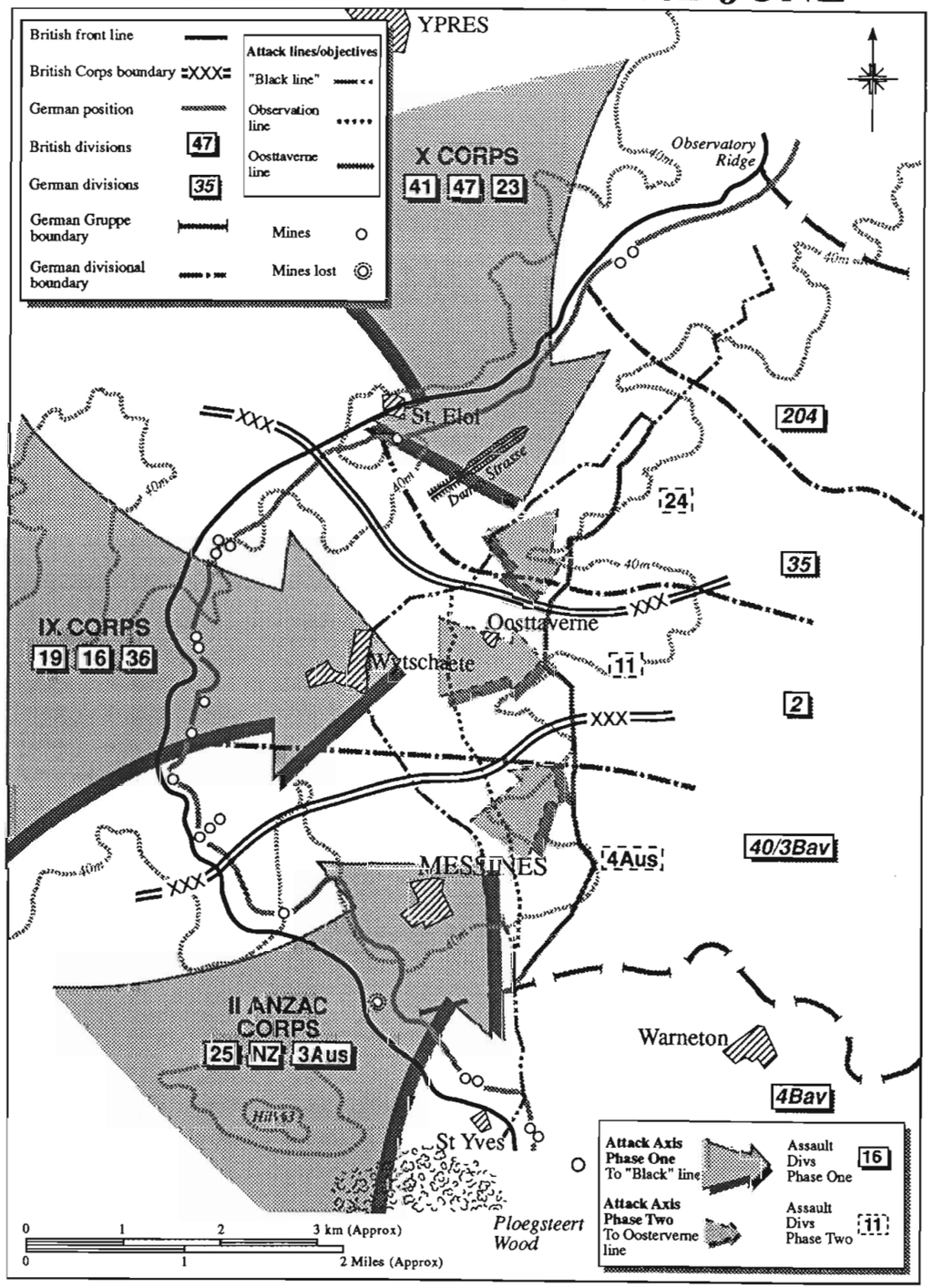
JUNE–NOVEMBER 1917

Though the Allies had entered the New Year confident of victory and sure of Germany's weakness, the promise of spring 1917 had so far proved illusory. They were caught out by *Alberich* and were too cautious to exploit this sudden German withdrawal to the *Siegfried Stellung*, or 'Hindenburg Line'. Following the disastrous Nivelle offensive against the Chemin des Dames between 16 and 25 April and the slowing down of the initially successful British attacks around Arras, the newly-appointed French C-in-C, Henri Philippe Pétain, resolved to remain on the defensive until his shattered forces were reinvigorated and American troops could make their mark.

For the French Army, weakened by the titanic struggle at Verdun in 1916, the bloody repulse at the Chemin des Dames was the last straw. Thousands mutinied and sparked a real crisis. Pétain was regarded above all other French officers as the man who saved Verdun and cared deeply about the fate of his men.

Petain's view that the Allies should go on the defensive appeared sound enough, but with Germany almost fatally weakened and forced to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line in the West after the Verdun and Somme campaigns and entirely on the defensive there throughout 1917, such a strategy was out of the question. Above all, the British C-in-C Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig now saw the chance to implement his preferred plan for an offensive in Flanders to break out of the infamous Ypres Salient, split the German Army in the north and secure the Channel ports against possible U-boat activity.

An essential preliminary operation was an attack on Messines Ridge, one of the most strongly held sectors of the Salient, to the south of Ypres. If this 'handle of



Messines: The plan (and events) of the British Second Army leading to the German debacle on 7 June 1917.

(I. Passingham, 1998)

the sickle' (the sickle being the geographical shape of the salient from north to south) could be grasped, it would facilitate the launching of the main offensive along the Menin Road and to the north towards the Passchendaele and Pilckem ridges and beyond.

The assault on Messines Ridge was entrusted by Haig to General Sir Herbert Plumer – commander of the Second Army. Preparations for the attack on the German defences of the *Wytschaete Bogen* (Messines-Wytschaete Ridge) had begun much earlier than 1917, for the Germans had held and fortified the ridge since Halloween 1914. Such formidable defences required a novel method of attack, but one ironically that would be a classic of siege warfare – the ancient technique of mining, or 'sapping' the fortifications.

Twenty-four mines had been planned and tunnels dug for each one, although one was lost at Petit Douve in June 1916 when the German tunnellers under command of *Oberst-Leutnant* Füsslein blew a counter-mine (*camouflet*) and destroyed the British tunnelling activity here.[1]

By 7 June 1917, 23 mines were laid and primed ready for action that morning. In the tunnels lay almost one million pounds, or 454,000 kilograms, of explosive over a ten-mile front. Unlike on the Somme on 1 July 1916, each mine would blow simultaneously and the average size of each charge – in excess of 40,000 pounds – was larger than any of the individual mines laid for the 'first day on the Somme'.

Furthermore, each of the Messines mines was placed in a precise pattern between Hill 60 and the Caterpillar in the north, to Trench 122/Factory Farm and the Birdcage in the south, to cause maximum disruption across the German defensive front and to destroy most of the toughest defences. British, Australian and Canadian Tunnelling Companies were employed to 'do the business' – the tunnels ranging from 200 to 2,000 feet in length and dug to a depth of between 50 and 90–100 feet.

On the other side of the wire, the story was quite different. Although the German *Gruppe Wytschaete*, defending the Messines Ridge with five divisions was well-entrenched, its commander, General von Laffaert, was convinced that his Korps would easily hold its positions and, despite evidence to the contrary, dismissed any major threat from British mines, or a determined assault by Plumer's men. Flexible defence had not been fully embraced by Laffaert, who felt that his defences were impregnable as they stood. His hubris was a fatal flaw and would condemn all of his men to a terrifying ordeal and thousands to gruesome deaths.

The preliminary bombardment of the Messines positions began in earnest on 25 May – and it was relentless. By the end of the month it was so intense that dogs had to be sent into the German lines to deliver some of the rations, water, medical supplies and ammunition needed by the beleaguered German troops cowering in even the most heavily fortified bunkers across the ridge line.

The meticulous British preparations for the battle involved improvements to roads and railways, frequent patrolling and air surveillance to confirm enemy strengths and

the provision of the overwhelming artillery support by 2,266 guns of all calibres and an awesome array of aircraft from the RFC. Each corps and assault division rehearsed their roles for the impending attack to the last detail, so that every man knew precisely what his task would be in the heat of battle.

Nine infantry divisions were allocated for the main assault to capture the ridge itself, plus three to exploit this success by advancing later to seize the German rear positions based on the Oosttaverne Line, or *Sehnen Stellung*, by the end of the day.

At 3.10 a.m. precisely the 19 designated mines were detonated almost simultaneously – a mere 28 seconds separated the first from the last explosion – and the German front line across Messines ridge was engulfed by flame. Major Walter Kranz witnessed the event from the second German line and described the explosions as:

> . . . nineteen gigantic roses with carmine petals, or as enormous mushrooms, which rose up slowly and majestically out of the ground and then split into pieces with a mighty roar, sending up multi-coloured columns of flame mixed with a mass of earth and splinters high into the sky.[2]

The craters torn by the upward thrust of these convulsions were enormous: at the Caterpillar by Hill 60 it measured 260 feet wide at ground level, with a circle of complete obliteration 380 feet across; at Spanbroekmolen, a 250-foot crater and a diameter of obliteration of 450 feet, to name but two. Some of the German trench garrisons disappeared completely – vaporised by the intense heat and blast effects. Plumer's Chief-of-Staff Major General Tim Harington inspected some of the damage the next day:

> On entering a concrete dugout I found four German officers sitting at a table – all dead, killed by the shock. They might have been playing bridge. It was an uncanny sight – not a mark on any of them. I can see their ghastly white faces as I write.[3]

As these explosions erupted, all 2,266 guns and howitzers, 438 trench mortars and 454 Vickers machine guns raked the German front line and rear positions.

Then, behind the thumping screen of this barrage 80,000 infantrymen advanced as one to seize their objectives and within a few minutes the whole of the German front line had been secured by the first assault waves. Such was the ferocity and completeness of the effect of the mines and subsequent barrage that many of the German troops who had survived were dazed, confused and only too willing to surrender.

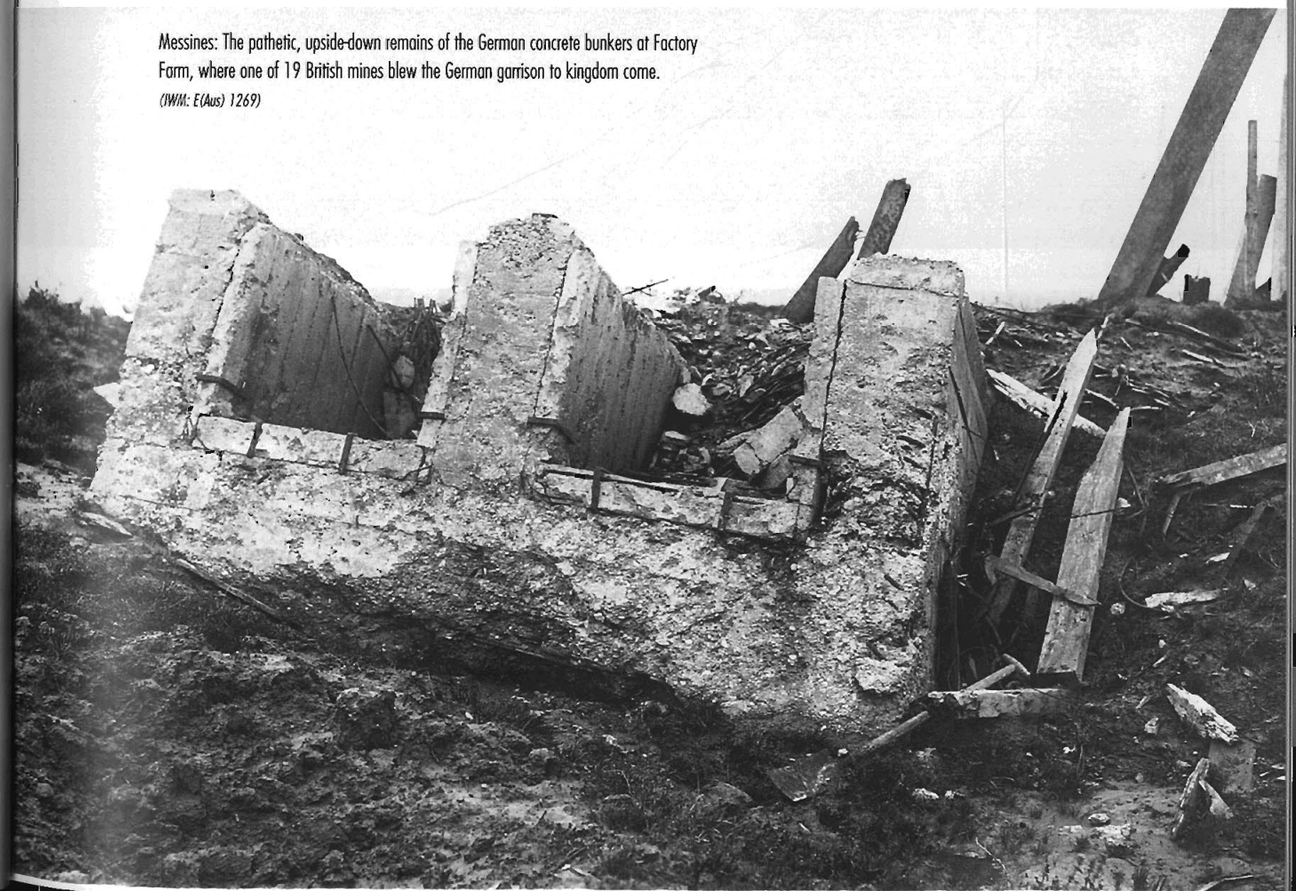
'Whitesheets' fell to the Irish without any major opposition, but the New Zealand Division had to fight hard to wrest Messines from the remainder of a punch drunk but resolute 3rd Bavarian Division. Nevertheless, Messines was fully subdued by 9 a.m.

By mid-morning, the whole of the ridgeline was in British hands and the three reserve divisions were on their way forward to exploit the unbelievable success so far achieved. Guns were quickly brought forward to continue the bombardment of the German depth positions based on the *Sehnen Stellung*, or Oosttaverne Line.

Almost 7,500 German prisoners were taken. Also, 150 guns and mortars, as well as 300 machine guns were captured. Ten thousand German troops were to be posted as 'missing' – the vast majority killed by the preliminary bombardment, effects of the mines and subsequent hurricane of shot and shell as the early hours of the battle passed.

During the early afternoon Mark IV tanks were brought into action to support the subsequent assault of the three reserve divisions, which was launched at 3.10 p.m., precisely 12 hours after the battle had begun. By the evening of 7 June, the entire ridge was securely held and all objectives, with the exception of a small disputed sector of the Oosttaverne Line, taken. By the end of the first day, Plumer had achieved an unqualified success at the cost of 11,000 casualties, and of those, only 10 per cent had been killed.

Laffaert's Gruppe Wytschaete had suffered in excess of 20,000 casualties of which between 30–40 per cent had been killed on the day, together with the 7,000 or so prisoners.



Messines: The pathetic, upside-down remains of the German concrete bunkers at Factory Farm, where one of 19 British mines blew the German garrison to kingdom come.
(IWM: E(Aus) 1269)

Wounded German prisoners during the Messines battle.
(N.Z. H.59)

Though the battle would officially continue until 14 June, the British Second Army had inflicted fatal damage on the German defenders and their High Command's confidence on day one. The victory provided a much needed tonic to the Allied cause after the ultimate disappointment of Arras and the disaster of the Nivelle offensive.

For the German High Command it was a psychological and potentially disastrous military failure. Crown Prince Rupprecht, the commander of the Group of Armies facing the British in Belgium and north-east France, was convinced that the BEF's success at Messines would be followed up by further attacks designed on the same principle and throughout June planned to abandon the low-lying ground to the west of the River Lys. He feared a rapid British exploitation at the very least onto the vital area of the Gheluvelt plateau astride the Menin Road.

General Plumer had indeed envisaged such an operation, but Haig, who at the time preferred the younger General Sir Hubert Gough to theoretically exploit Plumer's success with a wider Flanders campaign, ultimately abandoned the proposal.

Militarily, Messines provided a basic lesson: that surprise, the use of all arms as a veritable orchestra of war, and assaults against limited, attainable objectives that could be held against the inevitable German response in the form of counter-attacks, should be the tactical aim – the essence of the 'Bite and Hold' doctrine. It was to prove a war-winning concept for the Western Allies in 1918.

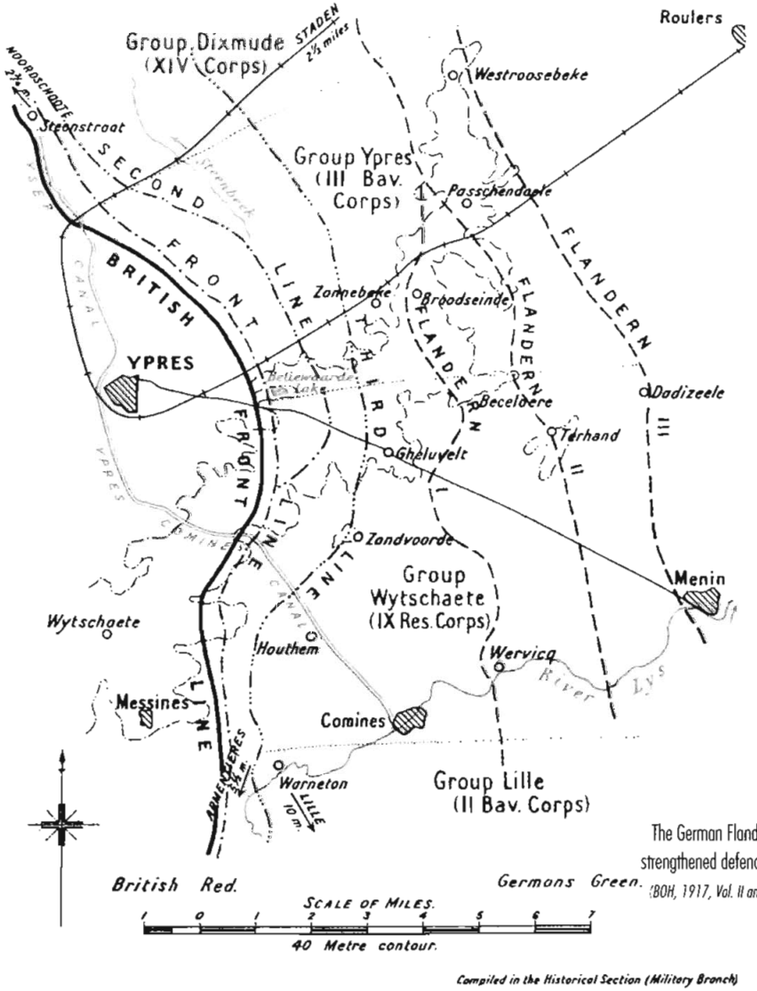
The Germans identified five main reasons for the German debacle at Messines: the enemy's overwhelming concentration of effort and superiority in infantry, artillery, air power and tanks; the devastating and surprise effect of the 19 mines; the unfavourable position of the German front line on a forward slope; the cramped defensive area, where troops were deployed too far forward, artillery was vulnerable to enemy air activity and artillery fire and two divisions (40th (Saxon) and 3rd Bavarian Division) were caught in the middle of a relief in place when the British struck; and the failure of the 7th and 1st Guards Reserve counter-attack (*Eingreif*) divisions. At first, it seemed that Messines was about to transform the nature of the fighting on the Western Front. Many Germans began to face the real prospect of defeat. Opinion was reflected by comments such as:

> How quickly the English (British) are advancing! I wonder if this latest victory will prove a turning point in the war . . . Here the military authorities . . . characterize every Allied advance as an elastic bend in the German line; or if it is reluctantly admitted that the first German line has been broken through, the attack must always waver and fail on the ever-renewed defence of the German reserves.[4]

German troops heard about the reverse and were well aware that their situation was growing weaker as the British piled on the pressure. It was reported from the Home front that:

> A soldier . . . just returned (wounded) from the Front, spoke about the hardships they had to endure. He had no bitterness for the enemy and the English were fine men to fight against . . . 'We all do our best for our [respective] countries and if we meet as prisoners or otherwise, we are perfectly friendly; but . . . there must be something wrong somewhere to make us [Germans] so hated by all other nations, as well as by our own allies.' . . . He went on to say that the [British] Army is in splendid condition, and always being reinforced by fresh and perfectly equipped troops, whilst the Germans have only a tired and worn-out Army . . .[5]

The stunning setback at Messines was a simultaneously gut-wrenching blow to German morale and the High Command's belief in its ability to contain continued Allied offensive action on the Western Front.



The German Flanders positions and strengthened defences in July 1917. (BOH, 1917, Vol. II and by kind permission of the IWM)

During the second half of June 1917 it was clear to the Germans that a major British offensive was planned for the Flanders sector and that Messines had been a necessary preliminary for the operation. The surprise to the German commanders most involved in the defence of the Ypres sector, namely Crown Prince Rupprecht, directing the Northern Group of Armies, and General Sixt von Armin, GOC of the German Fourth Army holding the Salient itself, was that the British had not attempted to exploit their victory at Messines by securing the southern half of the Salient up to and including the vital ground of the Gheluvelt plateau.

Partly because of this, the German forces were almost certain where the British blow would fall and worked day and night to improve the defences of the Flanders Line under the direction of their defensive mastermind, *Oberst* Fritz von Lossberg. What German intelligence could not fathom was the date of the impending assault by the BEF.

Crown Prince Rupprecht had every reason to be concerned about the general situation in the northern sector of the Western Front by the beginning of July. By now, despite the absence of the expected attack against the Gheluvelt Plateau, the signs of a massive British build-up to an offensive centered on the Ypres line were beyond doubt: railways were extended, artillery batteries increased across the front and the movement of British troops and their logistic back-up was incessant. Worse, there were dangerous indications that major diversionary attacks would take place simultaneously in the Arras, St Quentin and Artois sectors to the south. According to General Hermann von Kuhl, Rupprecht's Chief-of-Staff:

> During the battles of the Somme in the previous year it had been possible to contain the offensive – just – by weakening, to an absolutely dangerous degree, the other fronts – and put the forces collected into one major battle area. Even a light enemy attack against any other part of the front than the Somme and Verdun would have been a most serious danger. But such secondary attacks were more greatly feared at the outset in the summer of 1917 following the transfer [by the Army Group] of all dispensable men and materials to the Fourth Army in Flanders for the great defensive battle.[6]

However, Rupprecht was not fazed by a diversionary British reinforcement in the Arras region and stuck to the task of preparing the troops under his command as thoroughly as possible for the onslaught that was about to follow in Flanders.

The question of a voluntary withdrawal, as had been suggested at first to prevent the huge German casualties that were actually incurred at Messines but rejected before the battle, also became an issue in Rupprecht's conferences with Kuhl and Armin in late June. But all knew that the loss of the Salient and other Belgian territory was out of the question politically.

Despite a morale-boosting German attack against the British at Nieuport on the Belgian coast on 10 July, the average German soldier facing the BEF in Flanders prepared for the British assault with increasing concern at its possible consequences.

One of the German soldier's great strengths was his ability to stand and fight when others might quit the field or surrender more readily against poor odds. This quality of courage and discipline was imbued by the Prussian military tradition, but it could be a double-edged weapon at times:

> The Germans are such a patient and long-suffering race that they do not as yet realise their own power, and the Prussian precept, *Es ist verboten*, has been so drummed into them that they accept all regulations and orders without any further demur. I do believe that if they were bidden to go out and eat grass, they would obey in herds, without any further question.[7]

Grenadier Albert Mühmelt, who had survived on the Somme the previous year, now prepared for the British offensive to begin in the Salient. He and his comrades were working day and night to make good their defences. Most doubted that it would be enough to save their skins.

General von Kuhl confirmed such fears at the time when he later wrote:

> In the last ten days of July the enemy's artillery fire rose to a bombardment of planned destruction . . . At times, the [British guns put down terrifying] drum fire . . . The big struggle for Flanders was imminent – the new 'Death of Ypres' was being proclaimed.

One thing was certain: despite the retrospective criticism of General Gough and Field Marshal Haig for the failure of the first weeks of the Third Ypres campaign, the week-long preliminary bombardment of the German positions across the Flanders defensive line brought heavy and mounting losses – and was both physically destructive and a great strain on German morale. At least four shattered German divisions had to be withdrawn before the British assault began on 31 July.

The Official Bavarian History of the Great War records that:

> For a long time now the riflemen had cowered in the shell holes which covered the whole area – the deepest of which were full of ground water. Low-flying aircraft and reconnaissance patrols of the British infantry kept the men in the battle area at full stretch at all times . . . [The full effects of the enemy artillery, hostile air and infantry patrol activity were profound] . . . It is no wonder then that in both officers and men nervous energy was consumed and fighting strength quickly diminished.[8]

Early on the morning of 31 July 1917 a storm of fire erupted which dwarfed the continual effort that had been made over the previous week or so. The German Fourth Guards Division recorded that:

> The storm of fire was . . . drum fire no longer: it was as if Hell itself had opened . . . It was as if the enemy wanted to announce to the whole world 'We are coming – and we shall overcome.'

After some success on the first day, the main Allied offensive in Flanders petered out as a result of dreadful weather from 31 July onwards and came to a grinding halt after the failure of the renewed attacks on 16 August – one of the worst days for the Allies of the entire Third Ypres campaign. But the breakdown of the British offensive was due mainly to the weather and the extraordinary resilience of the German units that were – to a man – fighting for their lives every day that the Allied assaults, incessant artillery bombardments and air harassment continued. This was no cakewalk for the German defenders.

'The Greatest Martyrdom of the War.' The dreadful effects of British artillery on German defences at Ypres: *Flandern 1917*.
(IWM: Q3117)

Leutnant Georg Bucher, who commanded an infantry platoon facing the onslaught before and during the British attacks on 31 July, wrote of his experience soon after his capture later in the battle:

> The English bombardment was in full swing but I went into my shelter and lay down fully dressed on my waterproof sheet . . . [The noise] wouldn't let me sleep. A fierce bombardment was raging over Flanders – over the sector where we lay. . . Sonderbeck, the duty NCO, burst in [to my dugout] . . . 'The big offensive has started', he panted, his eyes rolling . . . 'Already three men have been blown to bits,' he gasped – and hastily gulped a mouthful of rum . . . In a moment I was ready and hurried up the steps with him. There was an absolute downpour of earth and shell-splinters – on every side the night was lit up by explosions . . . There was a terrific explosion from the dugout from which we had just come . . . in a moment the dugout and four men in it ceased to exist: a 15-inch shell had blown the former heavily protected shelter to Kingdom come . . . The third night [of the bombardment] came.[9]

Soon about 50 per cent of Bucher's company were either dead, wounded or driven crazy by the English gunfire. Finally, Zero Hour loomed on 31 July and the heavy bombardment stopped. Bucher and his fellow survivors knew what that meant, and the last thing they wanted now was to be caught like rats in a trap inside the bunkers and dugouts in which they had sheltered for days. They manned the parapets, or the shell holes where the trench had been before the British artillery had blown it apart, and waited for the inevitable attack. At first, the Tommies advanced in groups, and got to within a hundred yards of Bucher's position before he and and the forty men who had survived a company of 160 opened fire. Then 'the English soldiers immediately began rushing at us in smaller groups . . . We had to fall back against this determined onrush.'[10]

According to the troops who, like Georg Bucher, had survived the horror of the bombardments and the first weeks of the struggle for the Ypres sector, the ordeal was almost unbearable because of the extraordinary courage and endurance of their British opponents in attacking through such dire weather conditions. General Hermann von Kuhl, Rupprecht's chief-of-staff, noted that:

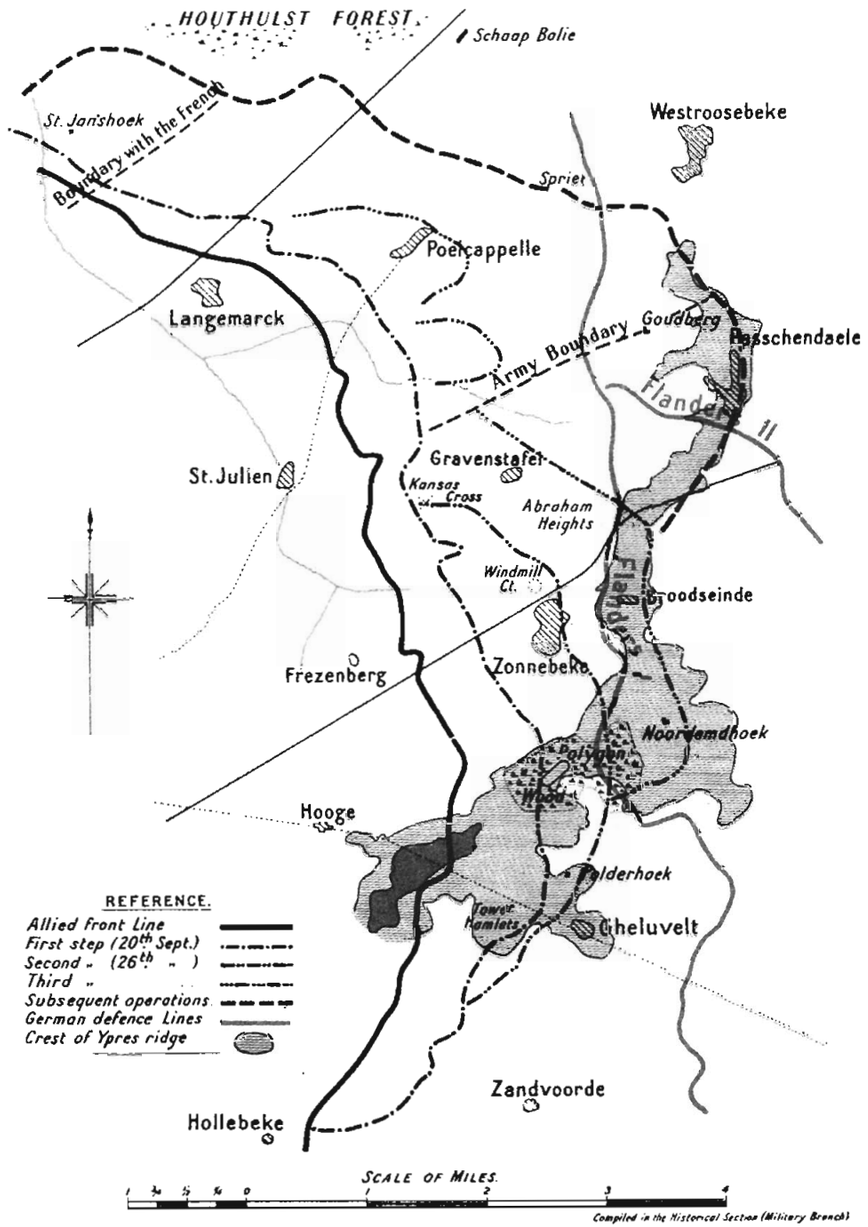
> The first phase of the great struggle ended on about the 25th of August . . . But the fighting strength of the numerous German divisions had been used up; and it was already proving difficult within the entire area of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group of Armies to replace them promptly with fresh divisions.[11]

Naturally, as the failed initiatives of General Gough were replaced by the more careful and experienced approach of General Plumer and the Second Army on the British side at this time, the German Fourth Army licked its wounds and prepared for the next major enemy assault.

Contrary to one of the most long-standing legends of the Third Ypres campaign, even the Germans acknowledged that the weather throughout September was warm, dry and, most importantly, that the tide had obviously gone out on the endless 'sea of mud' of popular myth.

For many German soldiers who had come through the Somme and perhaps Arras before Third Ypres, only a personal sense of duty and courage among their brothers-in-arms spurred them on. The Home Front offered nothing to compare with the comradeship of the combat zone in the battalion, your company or platoon, despite the inherent danger. *Schütze* Johannes Philippsen wrote in his diary in July 1917 of even the battle-hardened, experienced soldier's constant efforts to overcome his fear for the benefit of the pitifully naive new soldiers:

> We, who have seen the dark side, must substitute for that enthusiasm [of the new recruit] a deep-seated determination to stand by the Fatherland whatever happens as long as it has need of us. We know that death is not the worst thing that we have to



Flandern 1917 – Third Ypres/Passchendaele: BEF forecast of the stages of the campaign and German defensive lines in the Northern Sector of the Ypres salient, 22 September after the Battle of the Menin Road (20th) and prior to Polygon Wood (26th), Broodseinde (4 October) and the final German defence of Passchendaele Ridge (October to 10 November).

(BOH, 1917, Vol. II; by kind permission of the IWM)

The ruined town of Ypres, September 1917.
(IWM: E(Aus) 1171)

face. Thoroughly to realise everything and yet to go back, not under compulsion, but willingly, is not easy. To try and deceive oneself by working up a state of excitement is, I hold, unworthy. Only genuine self-command is any use to me.[12]

The next blows against the German line – namely, the battles of the Menin Road on 20 September, Polygon Wood on 26 September and Broodseinde on 4 October, were to push the German defenders to the edge of darkness and despair. These methodical, step-by-step advances boosted British morale while simultaneously hammering the morale of the German troops holding on. It came tantalisingly close to breaking the increasingly brittle crust on the German defensive pie in Flanders.

The success of these attacks has often been ignored by the maudlin majority of recent generations who enthusiastically latch on to the 'We died in Hell, they called it Passchendaele' theory, of both poets and Haig-baiters. But it was not ignored or diminished by German soldiers and commanders both at the time and in subsequent years.

Surely, this is where we should have been looking for the past decades for some balanced comment and historical perspective on the full story of Third Ypres, or 'Passchendaele'. We should have been asking not only, what it was really like for Tommy Atkins and his brothers-in-arms, but also how bloody and truly dreadful was it for *Fritzie Schmidt* by comparison? We know that the problem is not so much one of access to German archives and histories, many of which have been translated into English, or are accurately used in the British official history.

Instead many historians, writers and commentators have conveniently brushed aside the evidence of frightful conditions on the other side of the wire so as not to spoil the template of 'Passchendaele' being unremittingly horrific for the British, Canadians, Aussies, Kiwis *et al.* of the BEF crawling heroically, but futilely to their deaths through the mud-bath and blood-bath of Passchendaele Ridge.

When the storm broke again on 20 September, the German defenders were bewildered and often simply overwhelmed by the new tactics of the British Second Army: new, that is, to the vast majority of German troops who had not experienced such tactics at Arras and Messines. General Sixt von Armin, commanding the German Fourth Army, conceded later that he had overestimated the strength of his defences and fewer counter-attack units were available than were needed.

Flandern 1917. Third Ypres, 1917: foul conditions for both sides.
(IWM: E(Aus) 1200)

However, many of the counter-attack troops that were available and sent into the battle were literally blown away before they reached the hastily prepared defensive line of the attacking British infantry. 'Bite and Hold' tactics demanded limited attacks with overwhelming firepower, consolidation of the gains made and then the destruction of any German counter-attack: the inevitable and entirely predictable enemy response.

Against the British 'Bite and Hold' tactics, even the elastic defence-in-depth was often found wanting. Worst of all, the specially selected *Eingreiftruppen* were still frequently sacrificed on the altar of German command hubris. When an attempt was made to alter the tactics on 4 October and carry out a pre-emptive counter-stroke near Broodseinde, the assaulting troops went over the top at precisely the same time as the British and Australian attackers and were rapidly cut down by machine gun and shellfire.

But then came the rains again; on 11 October Crown Prince Rupprecht commented that the rain had become Germany's greatest ally on the Western Front. Nevertheless, through the deteriorating weather following the battering of the German line around Broodseinde on 4 October, the subsequent assaults on the 9th and 12th of that month did push the hard-pressed German defences back a further 2 kilometres across a 6-kilometre front and threatened Passchendaele ridge for the first time. It also produced a crisis in the German High Command that was more acute than that simultaneously facing Haig and his commanders.

Albert Mühmelt (sitting, right to reader) recovering from wounds received during the Third Ypres campaign and during which he was also awarded the Iron Cross.
(Farley Private Family Collection)

By mid-October, Sixt von Armin's Fourth Army had suffered between 175,000 and 200,000 casualties. But it was not just the troop losses but also the impact that the desperate fighting was having on German morale. The German Official History later admitted that Flanders was having a traumatic effect: 'a deep mental shock' on both the soldiers who had survived so far but endured an increasingly desperate situation, and the men of the fresher divisions that were destined to go through the experience of Passchendaele.

Sixt von Arnim suggested that only a large-scale counter-offensive would restore the shredded morale of his troops defending 'Flanders Fields', but it was not an option. Every man was required already to take his turn in the line simply to contain the British attacks. Almost every man must have sensed similar anguish to that written in a letter, found on an unknown German officer whose battered corpse was found during the battle, which stated:

> After crawling through the bleeding remnants of my comrades, and through the smoke and debris, wandering and running in the midst of the raging gunfire in search of refuge, I am now awaiting death at any moment. You do not know what Flanders means. Flanders means endless human endurance. Flanders means blood and scraps of human bodies. Flanders means heroic courage and faithfulness even unto death.[13]

In the middle of October there was a pause once again as the BEF replaced their worn out divisions with fresh ones, most notably the Canadians, and brought their bigger guns forward. But despite this respite in the daily fighting, the British guns continued to harass the German defenders and it became increasingly difficult to find the reserves to shore up the Flanders Line.

The final agony was the bloody fortnight of the last week of October and first week of November. On 6 November, the mud-matted and blood-soaked rubble that was Passchendaele village fell to the Canadians.

By 10 November, the Third Ypres campaign was over – and the defence of the eternal salient had cost the Germans between 250,000 and 300,000 men. The British casualties were comparable, around 240,000. Though the significance of 1917, with Third Ypres at its core, was how it affected both sides.

It saw the British soldier at his lowest ebb; and for good reason. The promise of 1917 had been dashed by a number of factors, not least of which were the weather and the enemy's dogged resistance against ever-lengthening odds.

For the Germans in the line, all the necessary platitudes passed out by the German High Command about the victory in Flanders against the British offensive since July fooled no one in the foul, freezing trenches.

The dull, cold and wet weather that plagued August, October and November 1917 in Flanders actually burdened the defender more than the attacker. Contrary to the

general belief, most German troops existed in a loose line of trenches made from adjoining shell holes and the bunkers were principally to shelter the troops and not designed to fight from. One account of thousands later encapsulated the experience:

> Our trenches have now for some time been shot to pieces . . . When attack and counter-attack have waged backwards and forwards there remains a broken line and a bitter struggle from crater to crater . . . The fight is carried on from clusters of shell-holes.[14]

Like the Somme in 1916, the Flanders campaign, according to one German officer who had lived through it, 'suffocated in swamp and blood'.[15] The British had failed to break through, but had at least gained the high ground in the northern part of the Ypres sector that allowed them to observe German artillery positions in the plains beyond Passchendaele.

Though the German Fourth Army had endured and refused to crack under the incessant pressure, it took no less than 73 infantry divisions and the grave losses to accomplish the stalemate that was to follow after 10 November. A German soldier, who had already fought here in 1914 and 1915, had written home on the eve of the campaign that: 'I have always had a horror of the name "Flanders"' – and this association was deep-rooted.

The artist Otto Dix, who experienced the Third Ypres campaign as an artillery officer, produced a work entitled *Langemarck*, and noted in his diary during the battle that Ypres was nothing but 'Lice, rats, wire entanglement, corpses, blood, schnapps, gas, guns and rubbish – This is the true nature of war.'[16]

Amazingly, even this depiction of the German experience was short of the true reality. Countless letters from front line soldiers were testament to the fact that as Flanders had been above all a battle between the guns – the sheer murderous quality of artillery – the individual soldier felt helpless and a victim of the 'great Flemish human mill'.[17]

Werner Beumelberg, who had also fought there, commented that:

> For half an hour on a day in a major battle it was possible to fight – the rest [was in a state of near-] unconsciousness, lying in puddles of mud, occasionally endeavouring to crawl into areas that were less fired upon; the constant terror of being mutilated or killed.[18]

The myth surrounding palatial concrete bunkers was most notably blown away by the memoirs of *Leutnant* Felix Lubinski, a Company Commander in the 74th Infantry Regiment:

> Life in the concrete bunkers is hell . . . Officers and other ranks share the same lousy plank beds . . . The plague of flies, grown fat on the corpses that surround

> us, is terrible . . . The old military discipline was gradually slackening . . . The unexpected prolongation of the War, constant shortage of reserves, poor food conditions and the inexperience of the younger officers and NCOs – all added to the discernible deterioration of morale.[19]

Even worse, the concrete bunkers, far from sheltering the men inside, often became their mausoleums. Captain Kalepky of the 86th Infantry Regiment recalled:

> The bunkers were reasonably strong and could withstand even direct hits from some of the heavy enemy shells, but owing to the ground conditions in the Flanders area they could not be erected over a strong foundation. When a couple of heavy shells opened up a crater close to them, they would lean over, sometimes with the entrance down, with the soldiers trapped inside. There was no way of rescuing them, of course, and we suffered a rather heavy number of fatalities in this way – and the thought of the painfully slow death of those entombed haunted us all.[20]

Despite the heroic efforts to hang on in Flanders, German discipline and morale were at an all-time low by the end of the battle. Non-combat casualties had risen rapidly because of the combined effects of exhaustion and the foul conditions in which the troops fought.

Unlike the British units, which withdrew to the relative comfort of billets behind the lines after each action, most of German units were compelled to remain in the line until they were ineffective as a fighting force.

The psychological effect of having to fight on until their company or battalion was ripped apart led to a 'grey desperation' among the German troops. *Flandern 1917* meant something more than Verdun or the Somme as it was, in every sense, a collective trauma for those at the Front and those at home who read about the frightfulness and saw the mounting casualty lists with equal despair.

The author Carl Zuckmeyer, a gunner during the Third Ypres battles, wrote later:

> We were stigmatised, marked, either to die or live with the burden of a scarcely bearable, non-communicable memory that plumbed the darkest depths of our tortured souls.[21]

General Hermann von Kuhl's report, *Flandern 1917*, written in December of that year, concluded:

> The sufferings, privation and exertions which the soldiers had to bear were indescribable. Terrible was the spiritual burden on the lonely man in a shell hole or trench, and terrible the strain on the nerves during the British bombardment,

which continued day and night . . . The hell of Verdun and the Somme was exceeded by Flanders. The battle to hold Flanders has been the greatest martyrdom of the war . . . and looking back, it seems that what was borne here was superhuman; but perhaps it may still prove to be too great a courageous sacrifice.[22]

The last desperate battle for Passchendaele Ridge in the period following Broodseinde was a terrible experience for both sides.

I hear that the [BEF] is daily gaining ground . . . and see that the English view of operations in the West is that the Germans have been on the defensive or retiring for a whole year [since] Verdun . . . For us civilians looking on, the whole campaign seems to be more or less a useless slaughter.[23]

But the horror had been much more protracted for the German defenders and the psychological scars ran deep. The German infantryman remained a soldier who was courageous, dogged, well-drilled and loyal to his comrades. But he had come to fear one thing above all since the Somme campaign in 1916: the power, accuracy and deadly effects of the British artillery. Of the thousands who had to go through it, letters and diaries were excellent testament of the experience:

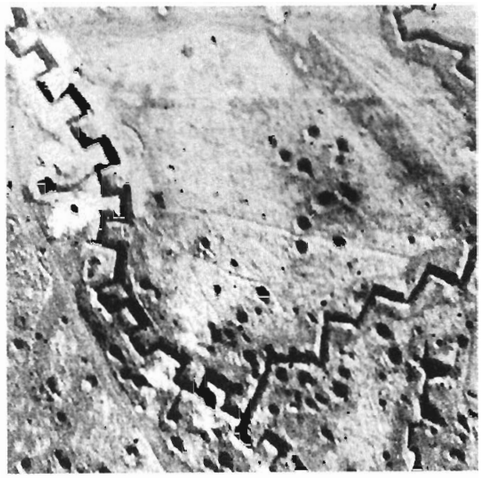
Flanders: 20/9/17 . . . up to now I have never been in anything like it. Before Arras it was very bad. You may not believe me, but here it is the devil let loose . . . This is the seventh day that I have been in the open fields. I must stop, for the enemy is bombarding our position vigorously and I must seek shelter.[24]

The German soldier's endurance and survival against incessant bombardment were greatly admired, but it was by no means eternal.

For those in the Ypres salient, Passchendaele was the final act before winter and the promise of another false dawn and illusion of victory. Further south, men that had been spared this ordeal in Flanders, as well as many who had been moved south after their experience here, were about to face another British onslaught, but of a very different nature.

If they thought that artillery could draw heavily on their account of courage, the sight, sound and effects of massed ranks of British tanks supported simultaneously in the offensive by artillery, infantry and aircraft, would cause widespread panic on the first days of the Battle of Cambrai.

But between Passchendaele and Cambrai a meeting took place that would have fatal consequences. Ludendorff decreed that it was to be held at Mons, on 11 November 1917.



CHAPTER 11

MONS, CAMBRAI AND NEWS FROM THE EAST

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1917

The generals and their principal staff officers met at Mons on 11 November, one year to the day before Armistice would end this rotten affair. Ludendorff considered the situation. Russia was out of the war, so he could concentrate his resources in the West, although he knew that an offensive there would have to be swift and decisive. What he could not afford to do would be to wait, or become embroiled in a protracted campaign, for his resources, especially manpower, were finite; those of the Western Allies were almost infinite.

With this in mind, Ludendorff reasoned that:

The Army had come victoriously through 1917 [on the Eastern Front]; but it had become apparent that the holding of the Western Front purely by a defensive could no longer be counted on, in view of the enormous [resources] which the Entente now had at its disposal . . . Against the weight of the enemy's material [our] troops no longer displayed their old stubbornness; they thought with horror of fresh defensive battles and longed for the war of movement . . .[1]

The collapse of Russia and victory on the Eastern Front gave Ludendorff the opportunity to reinforce his depleted troops in the West and provide them with the necessary superiority to overwhelm the Western Allies. To the German supremo's mind the timing was an essential factor. The Western Allies appeared to be exhausted.

Triggered by heavy casualties, the French Army had suffered widespread mutinies earlier in the year and the British Army had hit a low point in the autumn of 1917 as it struggled at great cost to capture Passchendaele. Furthermore, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, as British C-in-C, was losing the confidence of the British government. Prime Minister David Lloyd George decided to restrict the flow of reinforcements

needed to strengthen Haig's armies. This meant that the British troops in France were forced to go on the defensive.

Ludendorff now knew that Germany had but one chance to win the war. The main issue was whether to launch a major attack against the British or the French. He reasoned that France was becoming increasingly dependent on her ally and that if he could eradicate the British Army, France would be certain to sue for peace. He believed that he would gather sufficient troops in the West to attack and drive Haig's armies out of France. His plan was to destroy the British Army in France and Belgium while simultaneously cutting off the French to prevent their reinforcement of the BEF.

Ludendorff's definition of strategy was one that most would be hard pressed to find in a military manual, and it was to prove a fatal flaw. To him:

> Tactics had to be considered before purely strategical objects, which it is futile to pursue unless tactical success is possible. A strategic plan, which ignores the tactical factor, is foredoomed to failure . . .[2]

If wiser heads than his suggested that this view was generally contrary to accepted military thinking, they were given short shrift. When battle commenced in March 1918, Crown Prince Rupprecht asked for clarification on the German Army's strategic objective; Ludendorff retorted 'I forbid myself to use the word "strategy". We chop a hole. The rest follows. We did it that way in Russia.'[3]

The very real problem was that the terrain of the Western Front and the quality of men and *matériel* available to both the British and French armies were all in a different league to that of the events on the Eastern Front.

Above all, Ludendorff believed that he would be strong enough by February or March 1918 to destroy the British. The three conditions that he laid down were first, that the strength of the two sides was more or less equal; there were only sufficient troops for one offensive and the idea of carrying out an alternative offensive, even as a diversion, was impossible on any reasonable scale. The second condition was that the main blow must fall against the British 'at the earliest possible moment'. The third was as simply stated as it would be difficult to achieve. Thirdly, Ludendorff declared, 'we must beat the British'.[4]

But his principal strategic operations officer, *Oberst-Leutnant* Georg Wetzell, warned him that 'any prospect of success in the West depends upon other principles than those which hold good for the East or against Italy', and subsequently produced a more practical plan for an attack in the West.[5]

Wetzell warned Ludendorff that the successful modus operandi of military operations against the Russian Army in particular were not likely to guarantee victory against the French and British. A breakthrough was almost impossible to envisage as a result of a single assault on one sector of either the French or British line. This would

facilitate the Allied defence, for they could bring their resources to bear to foil the German thrust.

Wetzell recommended a strategy that would cause maximum disruption to the British or French response: attacks in two or three sectors to confuse the enemy and deceive him into the premature use of his reserves. In the first phase, the British reserves would be drawn to the St Quentin sector, where the offensive would be carried only as far as a line from Bapaume to La Fère, north to south. The second phase would mask the movement of the 'great battering train' of heavy guns, mortars and aircraft of the High Command's strategic reserve alongside a massive concentration of infantry divisions to smash through the British defences on the Flanders front. The decisive phase would be an overwhelming onslaught through Flanders and the seizure of the critical town of Hazebrouck.[6]

OHL chose to back Ludendorff's view that one massive offensive across the Somme sector would offer the best opportunity for a devastating, swift victory. It depended entirely on surprise and the subsequent paralysis of the British defenders as the offensive rolled forward. If it failed to achieve the promised breakthrough, the options for victory would be greatly diminished and could never again be on the scale of this first onslaught. It was a huge gamble – a first and last throw of the dice – and the responsibility would now lie entirely at the feet of Ludendorff.

The greatest harm that the United States would inflict on Germany was a punch that had already been thrown on 6 April 1917; and it was a deeply damaging psychological blow for Germany. The mere fact that America had entered the war formally on that day was enough to upset the bloody, but delicate equilibrium that existed between the Allies and the Central Powers. The pressure of the growing number of American troops in France meant that the German Army must strike quickly. The United States had been contributing to their military-industrial output for much of the war, and since April 1917, men, and millions of them were available to make good the French and British losses.

Ludendorff knew that the American troops would be fit, well-nourished and keen as mustard to 'get at the Boche'. The contrast with his men could have not been more obvious. The unrest, poverty and hunger back home in Germany affected men's morale, which was hardly boosted anyway by the fact that they were not exactly well-fed at the Front. It was a bad time for most German troops, our *Fritzie Schmidt*, by the final months of 1917. Combat fatigue was not the only thing that gnawed away at their very fibre:

> We [ordinary German soldiers] are emaciated and starved. Our food is bad and mixed up with so much substitute (*Ersatz*) stuff that it makes us ill. The factory owners in Germany have grown wealthy, [but here] dysentery dissolves our bowels . . . The people at home should see these grey . . . miserable, wasted faces . . . lips trembling and distorted with pain . . .[7]

Battle of Cambrai: 'G' Battalion Mark IV tanks operating with the British 40th Division passing captured German field guns at Graincourt, on their way to attack Bourlon Wood, 23 November 1917.
(IWM: Q.6337)

However, the promised American troops had so far failed to materialise in great numbers; only four US divisions were deployed in France by the end of 1917, and only one was 'in the line'. Ludendorff saw this as a golden opportunity to exploit in early spring 1918. But he knew that the German offensive in the West would have to be an overwhelming and swift victory or suffer the consequences of an irresistible American build up and before they could become overwhelmingly effective on the Western Front.

Just over one week later the German High Command and the soldiers of General von der Marwitz's Second Army defending the Cambrai sector were caught off guard and nearly suffered the same humiliation as the German defenders at Arras and Messines some months before.

The Cambrai sector was on the left of Crown Prince Rupprecht's group of Armies, was part of the Hindenburg Line and was manned by *Gruppe Caudry*, (XIII Korps) under General Freiherr von Watter, comprising the 20th Landwehr Division between the Bapaume-Cambrai road and Havrincourt, the 54th Division between Havrincourt and Vacquerie and 9th Reserve Division, with elements of the 183rd Division to the south. The 20th *Landwehr* Division had recently relieved 204th Division and was relatively fresh, although as a *Landwehr* unit it was of relatively poor quality. The 54th Division had arrived at the end of August after a battering in the Ypres salient and was in the line because the Cambrai sector was a relatively quiet part of the Front. It had assumed the nickname of the 'Flanders Sanatorium', where units like the 54th Division were sent to recuperate from the rigours and incessant unpleasantness of life in Flanders. Although German artillery and mortar ammunition was short in this sector, the defences were considered strong enough to withstand the expected enemy preliminary artillery bombardment and any infantry assault.

By chance, the 20th *Landwehr* Division was due to be relieved by a battle-hardened and tough infantry division, the 107th, on 25 November, and it began to arrive in Cambrai from the East on 19 November, twenty-four hours before the British offensive began. A further infantry regiment (from a neighbouring division) and five field artillery batteries arrived on the same day to bolster the German defences.

From 10 November the Cambrai sector was covered in fog and rain, making German aerial reconnaissance all but impossible. It was bitterly cold and it chilled the very marrow of the German troops holding the line. Partly because of the lack of air cover and because no other intelligence sources suggested otherwise, von der Marwitz confidently reported to his superior Rupprecht on 16 November that: 'Hostile attacks on a large scale against the [Second] Army front are not to be expected in the near future'.[8]

Coupled with von der Marwitz's assessment, there was a general feeling at OHL (German Supreme HQ) that with the closing down of the Passchendaele campaign almost a week before (on 10 November) and with events in the East and in Italy hardly in the Allies' favour, the main fighting on the Western Front was about to draw a dark shroud over 1917.

But as often happens, the confidence was a little premature. After inconclusive trench raids on both the British 55th and 20th Divisions facing *Gruppe Caudry*, some prisoners taken from a raid on the 36th (Ulster) Division on the night of 18/19 November revealed that an attack was being prepared in the Havrincourt sector against 54th Division at least. No date was gleaned for this probable operation, but the information did conform with the situation report from Crown Prince Rupprecht's HQ to OHL on 18 that: 'The British have failed in Flanders, [therefore] partial attacks may be expected on other parts of the front'.[9]

On 19 November parts of the Cambrai sector were 'buzzed' by British aircraft and a scrap of a telephone message suggesting movement south of Flanders was picked up by a German signals listening station in the same sector.

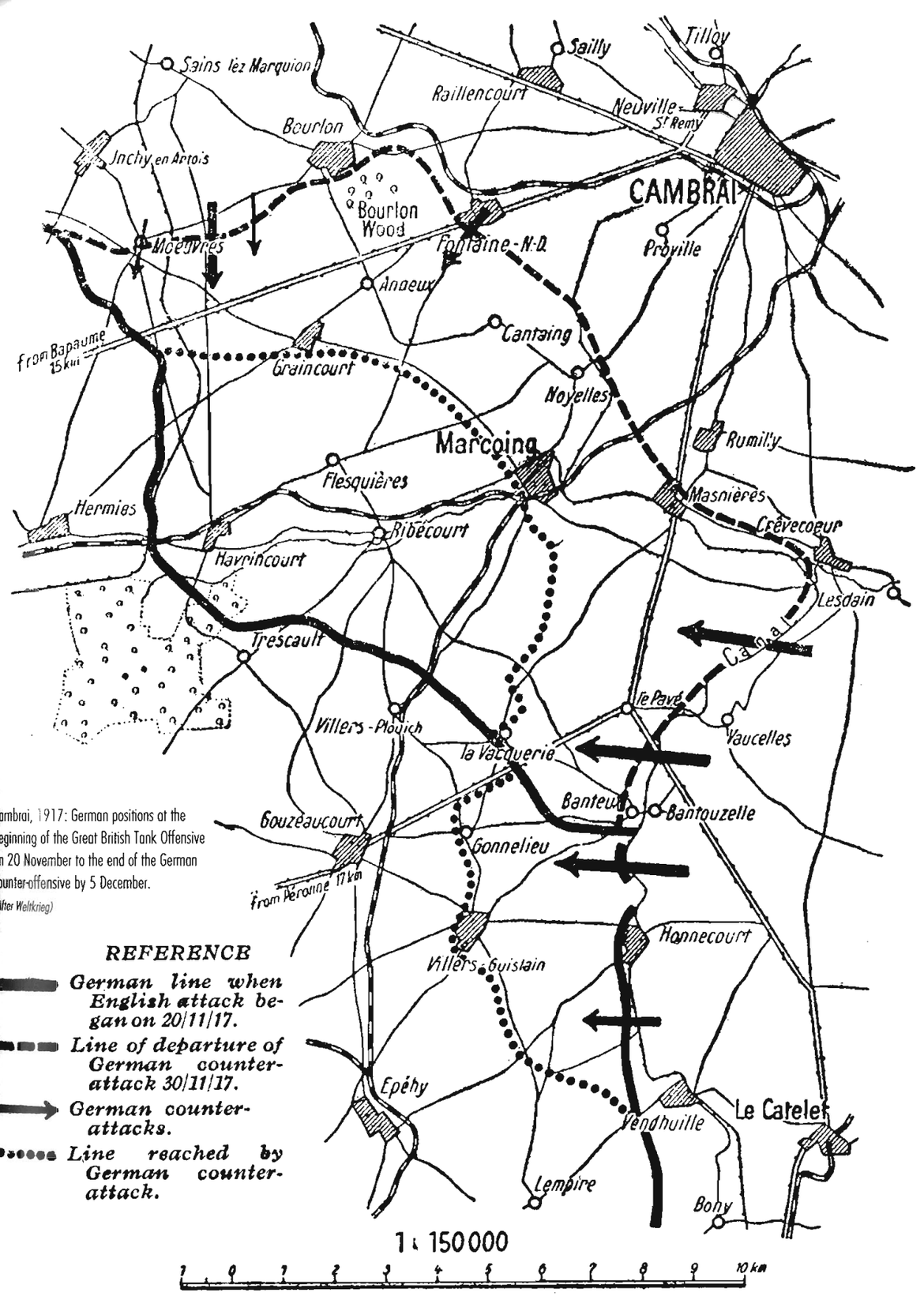
That evening, *Gruppe Arras* on the right (north) of *Gruppe Caudry* reacted to the intelligence passed on concerning the possible attack on the Havrincourt area by issuing a warning order to its divisions to expect some enemy attacks on the 20th after a 'relatively short' bombardment and that some tanks may be used to support an infantry assault 'here and there'. Finally, at 11.59 p.m. on 19 November, General von Watter sent out his own warning order to *Gruppe Caudry*, but it did not have quite the same 'punch' as that for *Gruppe Arras*. It merely stated: 'All units are to note that in the event of the anticipated [limited] attack on the Havrincourt sector, some tanks might be used.'[10]

'Some tanks.' Well, General von Watter would get it half-right.

At 6.10 a.m. on 20 November, the silence of a misty morning in the Cambrai sector was broken by the sound of tanks moving forward and the drone of British aircraft flying low over the German lines. At 6.20 a.m., the tanks and assaulting infantry crossed the 'Start Line' and began to loom in front of the German front line. Any German resistance was immediately broken by the thunder of a massive, sudden bombardment by over 1,000 guns, which ranged over the German defensive lines, artillery batteries and HQ positions in the rear zones. The German defenders were caught entirely off guard.

Aerial photograph of the German defences at Cambrai, November 1917. Note the three formidable belts of barbed wire forward of the main German defensive positions.

(Allen Collection)



Cambrai, 1917: German positions at the beginning of the Great British Tank Offensive on 20 November to the end of the German counter-offensive by 5 December.

(After Weltkrieg)

Supported by six infantry assault divisions on a six-mile front, 378 Mark IV tanks burst into the *Gruppe Caudry* sector, and even in the Havrincourt area where the attack had been expected in part, the battalion and company commanders and their men were stunned by the sheer scale of the British armoured/infantry assault and the sudden, devastating 'predicted' artillery fire. At first, though some successful and fearless German resistance was put up, most of the survivors in the outpost zone either surrendered or fled the onslaught. One *Obergefreiter* recorded later that:

> There had not been any hint whatever of any preparation of an attack; . . . nothing extraordinary on a seemingly thin, quiet front . . . [Then] only after the attack started did we realise what was going to happen. The British forces, strengthened by hundreds of tanks, could move freely and overthrew our thin defences (They were actually attacking a sector of the Hindenburg Line) . . .[11]

In an almost futile gesture some German artillery units responded with weak counter-battery fire, but the British advance was so swift that most of the German shells fell behind the tanks and assaulting infantry.

Inevitably, once the forward positions of the Hindenburg Line were reached by the leading waves of British tanks and infantry, German resistance stiffened and some attacking infantry battalions were

British Mark IV tank captured by Germans and converted for their service.
(Postcard, Allen Collection)

held up by machine gun, trench mortar and rifle fire. But the massed tanks pushed on, crushing the thick belts of barbed wire and a number of German machine gun crews in their wake.

Funker (Signaller) Edwin 'Valentine' Kühns was serving near Bourlon Wood. When the British bombardment suddenly erupted, Kühns and his telephone section comrades were also taken completely by surprise. They were immediately shelled and throughout the first morning it seemed that confusion was turning to an overwhelming sense of chaos and the imminent collapse of German resistance. For the first 48 hours of the British advance, Kühns was heavily involved in managing the huge volume of telephone and messenger traffic. He noted that:

> All the time there were carrier-pigeon messages from Infantry Regiment Paczenski, sent 1 p.m. arrived 1.30 p.m. (sic). [Message read:] 'Last news, English infantry surrounding sugar factory, withdrawing . . . Tanks rolling back and forth along the road from Bourlon Wood.' Or 'Enemy attacking. Marching with heavy forces. Reinforcements needed urgently.'[12]

The one fully active German fighter unit, less than a squadron strong, reacted to the opening moves of the British Third Army's assault by scrambling all of its aircraft, regardless of the thick mist around them. At 6.30 a.m., as each plane taxied before taking off to meet the threat, the pilots and ground crews were staggered to see a number of British aircraft loom out of the gloom.[13] For most of the German flyers it was their last sight of anything as the RFC strafed the German airfield and ripped the grounded enemy planes to shreds. By 6.45 a.m., the RFC had complete control of the skies and exploited every opportunity to disrupt the German defences from the air and augment the great progress made on the ground.

The British offensive had started well; very well indeed. However, German helplessness inevitably turned to stubbornness, and then increasing resistance. In the 54th Divisional area near the village of Flesquières, the 51st Highland Division and their assault tanks were unfortunate enough to run into major difficulties against batteries of 108th Field Artillery Regiment, assigned to 54th Division. In the course of the fighting that followed, several tanks were knocked out as they attempted to advance on to the high ground close to the village.

The actions that day have become the stuff of battlefield legend, but the facts were that a number of 77mm field guns were manhandled out of their gun pits and fired directly at the tanks over open sights. At one stage, *Unteroffizier* Kruger manned one gun alone, as all the other crew-members were wounded or killed, and single-handedly knocked out a number of tanks.[14] The gunners of 54th Division's field artillery batteries had another important card up their sleeves: they were specially trained in anti-tank gunnery and had fought off French tanks during the Nivelle offensive the previous April.

Despite these heroics, as the day wore on it became clear that *Gruppe Caudry* was in deep trouble and that something had to be done urgently. General von der Marwitz, Crown Prince Rupprecht and Ludendorff all immediately acknowledged that the scale of the tank attack and the novel tactics used had the desired effect from the enemy's point of view: the German Second Army had been taken completely by surprise, its forward troops bewildered and helpless against such a mass of armoured vehicles and under an artillery bombardment that struck so heavily without any prior warning.[15]

Gruppe Caudry was deployed across part of the formidable Hindenburg Line, but it was hampered not only by the terrific surprise element of the British assault, but also by a heavy mist and the difficulty of coordinating a cohesive defensive response (as would happen on a much larger scale in reverse on 21 March 1918 on the Somme).

To cap it all, the Cambrai sector line was thinly held by second line combat units such as the 20th *Landwehr* Division, or units like the 54th Division deployed here to recuperate after a hammering at Ypres. It was a lethal combination, so that von der Marwitz and Rupprecht were very concerned about the deep penetration of their position and the speed of the British assault on the first day.

Ludendorff underlined the extent of the German surprise when he noted that:

> In the West the crisis caused by the Battle of Flanders, the Battle of the Laffaux salient [in the French sector] and their after-effects, passed away. We were expecting a continuation of the attacks in Flanders and on the French front, when on the 20th of November we were surprised by a fresh blow at Cambrai.[16]

By the afternoon of 20 November, Ludendorff and Rupprecht had agreed that the desperate situation must be restored by a deliberately planned counter-stroke. But that would take time and reinforcements that were not available to punch their way out of the corner that *Gruppe Caudry* found itself in. The crisis grew as each hour passed. The 54th Division and its artillery lost most of its fighting strength and its defences were almost non-existent by the end of the day. There were 5,785 officers and men killed or missing and a further 5,000 men wounded or taken as PoWs on 20 November. The 84th Regiment had its Regimental commander and the COs of all three battalions killed and its strength reduced to around 30 per cent of its original establishment in this one day. The other front line divisions suffered almost as badly as the 54th, which had borne the brunt of the British thrust.

The situation became so grim that serious plans were made for a general withdrawal and the demolition of the canal bridges in front of Cambrai. The camp commandant of 54th Divisional HQ was sent with an ad hoc platoon of three officers and thirty men to defend the canal crossings at Marcoing and Masnières and for several hours in the afternoon of the first day there was a totally undefended one-mile gap in the Masnières-Beaurevoir defence line between Masnières and Crèvecoeur.

By pure chance, the British failed to identify this potentially fatal weakness before the gap was plugged and the attack began to lose some of its steam as the day drew to a close. But 20 November was deemed a British triumph and church bells rang throughout Great Britain to celebrate a great victory. The celebrations were a little premature.

By midnight on that same day, *Gruppe Caudry* was strengthened by the 107th Division and regiments pulled from both *Gruppe Arras* to *Gruppe Caudry*'s north, the Lens sector and *Gruppe St Quentin* to *Gruppe Caudry*'s immediate south. Three more divisions (119th of Fourth Army, 30th of Seventh Army and 214th of Sixth Army) were rushed towards the Cambrai sector and all would arrive within 48 hours.

The very real possibility of utter disaster had been averted; just. But the situation remained perilous for some days. Desperate messages came in thick and fast to divisional and regimental HQs from the sorely pressed front line units by telephone, runner or pigeon:

> Infantry Regiment 50: 'English have broken through [in our sector] with tanks and infantry, immediate back-up needed', then: Infantry Regiment 50: 'Enemy breakthrough Bourlon Wood with tanks. Some troops in retreat,' but 'Infantry Regiment 175 occupies railway embankment.'[17]

As the days passed after 20 November, the German defences were reinforced and resistance hardened as the British 'punch' lost its hitting power. Rupprecht and von der Marwitz now set about planning an equally stunning counter-blow as the day-to-day fighting continued in the guts of the Cambrai defence.

As the remnants of *Gruppe Caudry's* front line divisions and their reinforcements slugged it out against the remaining British tanks and infantry assaults, a new command, *Gruppe Bussigny* (based on XXIII Korps), was formed, commanded by a tough GOC, General von Kathen. On 24 November, preliminary orders were issued by Rupprecht's Chief-of-Staff General Hermann von Kuhl that a counter-offensive was to be launched 'at an early date'. *Gruppe Bussigny, Caudry* and *Arras* were all detailed for the offensive. Rupprecht discussed the proposed plan with Ludendorff and von der Marwitz at HQ Second Army (le Cateau) and then issued orders for the counter-offensive to the Second Army on the evening of 27 November. The attack was to be launched on 30 November. *Gruppe Bussigny*, supported by *Gruppe Caudry*, would attack from the south-east into the British flank and rear and recapture Flesquières and Havrincourt. *Gruppe Arras* was to then launch a heavy attack from the Bourlon Wood area towards the south.

The plan of attack for the German counter-offensive at Cambrai was straightforward enough. But new tactics were tested to infiltrate and overwhelm the hastily prepared British defences. A short but intensive artillery bombardment using both gas and high explosive shells was to be followed by an infantry assault in which the lightly equipped but heavily armed leading waves were ordered to bypass villages

and strongpoints, infiltrating the British positions and pressing on to capture or destroy HQs and British artillery batteries. The spearhead of the attack would be led by troops with bags full of grenades and armed with light machine guns, light mortars and flamethrowers The assaults were to be accompanied by 77mm field artillery batteries moving forward as rapidly as possible to provide anti-tank fire and close support for the attacking infantry.

The vital ingredient for the success of these new tactics would be the same as that for the British on 20 November: surprise.

Until the evening of 29 November, General von der Marwitz and Rupprecht doubted that surprise could possibly be achieved. Both were convinced that the British must have been aware of increased German movements in the last few days and expected British trench raids and strong hostile air activity, but they failed to materialise. The night of 29/30 November was unusually quiet and the final German infantry moves into forward assembly and then jumping-off positions were made without any enemy interference.

At 6 a.m. on 30 November, the German guns opened up on the British 55th Division and the bombardment gradually spread across the southern sector of the Cambrai front. Within half an hour, it reached a crescendo of withering gas, high explosive and mortar fire, which caused havoc in many forward defences and cut all rear communications.

Zero Hour came at 7 a.m. and the German infantry swarmed across no-man's-land under cover of the artillery barrage, a thick mist and scant daylight. At daybreak,[18] German aircraft filled the sky and sought their revenge for the humiliation of being caught on the ground on 20 November, bombing rear positions and strafing British troops wherever possible. It was to be a day of mayhem across the Cambrai front as the German assaults were pressed home against some stiff resistance once the surviving British defenders recovered from the initial shock of the offensive against them.

Leutnant Ernst Jünger of 73rd Hanoverian Fusilier Regiment went into the initial assault and reflected the German and British experiences of that day:

> At 7 [a.m.] sharp we advanced in single file [and found] Dragon Alley unoccupied . . . We then entered the trench on the right. It was full of arms and equipment and English dead. It was the Siegfried line . . . Going further we met with resolute resistance . . . and we were driven back . . . Then we took part in another assault . . . The English resisted valiantly. Every traverse was contested. Mills bombs and stick grenades crossed and recrossed. Behind each we found dead or still quivering bodies. We killed each other out of sight . . .[19]

In the afternoon, attacking German troops were subjected to determined counter-attacks and heavy artillery fire. But the attack was pressed home and by the evening the British had been severely mauled.

German anti-tank rifle on the Western Front, 1917.
(Allen Collection)

Losses were heavy on both sides, with *Leutnant* Ernst Jünger among the badly wounded, and the German infiltration methods often led to a loss of control, as troops assigned to this specialist role had not received sufficient training. Ludendorff also later suggested that: 'The success was all the more remarkable because it was in the main achieved by half-tired troops who had not been specially trained for attack.'[20]

At the other end of the scale, *Obergefreiter* Franz Benöhr, who had recovered from the shock of the first day of the British onslaught, noted later that:

> [Many of the tanks] moved so quickly at the beginning that they got lost and were then destroyed by our guns . . . Having arrived on the outskirts of Cambrai they had to stop for a day or two for reorganisation, replenishment and the like. Then it was too late for them to move on: Strong German reinforcements arrived and stopped the British attack.[21]

The battle raged on for a further four days, although much of the most intensive fighting took place on the first two days. By 5 December, both sides were well and

truly exhausted; and the line was almost the same as it had been until the early hours of 20 November.

Between 20 November and 5 December 1917, Crown Prince Rupprecht had to use 20 infantry divisions against British Third Army's 15 infantry and 4 cavalry divisions in addition to the 386 Mark IV tanks involved on day one of the offensive.

The part played by the RFC in the British attacks and the German air arm during the German counter-offensive was of immense value to the ground troops that they supported, but losses were high on both sides.

Overall, the German Second Army lost around 45,000 killed, missing, wounded and PoWs (of which about 15,000 were suffered during the counter-stroke battles) and the British just over 44,000 men at Cambrai. As usual in war, statistics hide the bitter truth and tragedy of the casualties that they represent. If Ernst Jünger was one of the many casualties on the ground, Captain (later *General*) Frido von Senger und Etterlin's brother was a victim of the air war. Frido experienced the agony of battle when he heard of his brother's death and went to claim his body the next day:

> On the 1st of December . . . I disinterred my brother's body from a mass grave. As a fighter pilot he had been shot down on the previous day . . . In the clear winter sunshine I had spent a long time searching for the exact spot . . . With a couple of helpers I dug for hours in the mass grave while the German counter-attack swept past us . . . The English artillery fired on the advancing infantry and we had to seek shelter in the grave. On one occasion, we were buried up to the thighs. We managed to free [my brother's] body, which lay in the lowest of three layers of corpses. But the stretcher-bearers rightly refused to carry it back through that intense artillery fire. So I seized the legs of the body under my arms and dragged it towards my car, finally propping it up in the seat next to mine.[22]

Cambrai was a grim end to a gruesome year. Those that had survived it on the Western Front, whether German, British or French, saw only a dark horizon for 1918. Now there was a brief time to reflect and try to recall the days of the Christmases before the war.

Edwin Kühns spent Christmas and the coming of the New Year in the Cambrai sector, where he had survived the terrific British tank onslaught and German counter-attacks a few weeks before. Despite the cold, the hunger and the gloom of a frustrating 1917 on both sides of the wire, Kühns, his comrades and many other German troops at the Front were determined to make the most of the *Weinachtsfest*. He wrote that:

> The celebration was a very simple wartime effort. A Christmas tree with eleven candles . . . [and comrade] Gunther opened the proceedings with a short address and then distributed four Iron Crosses 2nd Class and one Württemburg Medal (Regional gallantry and service award).[23]

Somehow, Germany had suffered, but survived 1917. The only ray of light was victory in the East, but it hardly cheered most of a German population now on the brink of starvation and suffering more than most from the insidious effects of disease brought on by malnourishment and poor medical facilities. It was yet another desperate year of mourning for lost sons, fathers, brothers and other loved ones who had 'fallen for the Fatherland'. By 31 December 1917 the German tally was 1,297,750 killed or missing, presumed dead; and well over half a million were destined to die in the battles of 1918.

The Hindenburg Programme had offered much and did little to fulfil the promise of victory. After the horrible experience of the 'Turnip Winter' hopes had been raised by the notion of a decisive victory through submarine warfare. But this promise proved more hollow than those of 1914, 1915 and 1916 and, most depressing of all, provoked the American reaction that had been feared since the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 – war against Germany.

Throughout 1917, the dire reality of life in Germany had grown further and further apart from the images that politicians and military leaders peddled. The rewards for their deception were discontent, restlessness, civil disobedience and a burgeoning desire to end the war among the people. *Burgfrieden*, the pact of civil peace in wartime, was a notion now dead in the water. It had all gone horribly wrong and, with the exception of the profiteers and a healthy black market, Germans were existing in a surreal, *Ersatz* life:

> People are devoured with anxiety as to the food resources for the coming winter, whilst the Government has to cope with . . . the increasing shortage of raw stuff and material for ammunition . . . As coffee and tea have entirely run out, all sorts of berries and leaves are being used as a surrogate . . . The difficulty of getting butter is increasing daily . . . no one will sell their butter even for very high prices.[24]

At every turn, shortages, ill-health and dark thoughts of a seemingly endless war were enough to leave Germany in a very black public mood on New Year's Eve 1917.

CHAPTER 12

WAR AT HOME AND *KAISERSCHLACHT* AT THE FRONT

JANUARY–MARCH 1918

On 1 January 1918, most German people felt numbed by the cold and numbed by the war, despite the end of the conflict on the Eastern Front. Every day was a day closer to the end of the war, but no one knew how many days, weeks or months that would take. There was a surreal atmosphere in the country and everyone went through the motions of 'normal life', but felt that they had left the gloom of the old year only to enter the darkness of the new one.

Ludendorff and Hindenburg would soon roll out the 1918 version of the ritual New Year promise of victory, but few would believe it unless it was tied to a firmer undertaking to win the war on the Home Front too. The German people steeled themselves for another massive military effort and another year of civilian deprivation, ill-health and yet more belt-tightening to see them through to an inevitable end, glorious or otherwise. To many it was undoubtedly the most dangerous and uncertain adventure of the whole war. On behalf of the Fatherland and in the name of the Kaiser, Ludendorff was about to throw down the gauntlet to fate and against an enemy who, if not crushed quickly, would destroy Germany.

By January 1918 public loyalty and respect towards the Kaiser was diminishing rapidly. Unrest was rife across Germany as conditions continued to deteriorate and the politicians and Ludendorff alike were increasingly criticised. But the Kaiser cut the saddest figure. Utterly devoid of any real authority, he found that the same people who greeted him so warmly a short time ago as a latter-day Caesar were now distributing leaflets in the back streets of Berlin proclaiming 'Down with the Kaiser, down with the Government'. The police were more likely to look the other way than arrest anyone carrying out such petty acts of treason.

It was not all doom and gloom for the German Army. At the end of 1917, Germany's one ray of hope lay on the Eastern Front, for after three years of costly

German dismounted cavalry prepare to advance, machine gun on the flank, 1918. *(Postcard, Allen Collection)*

defeats the Russian Army had collapsed and the nation had been thrown into turmoil by revolution. Revolution led swiftly to capitulation, the new regime suing for peace. By the beginning of March 1918, Ludendorff had three and a half million men, or 194 divisions, on the Western Front. Of these, 67 were concentrated between Arras and St Quentin, outnumbering the British by nearly three to one.

But Ludendorff knew that such numerical advantages had not borne success in the past. Previous German offensives had relied on massive, protracted artillery bombardments, designed to destroy enemy defences and thus enemy resistance. They had all failed. He realised that only novel attack methods would enable Germany to achieve victory.

He believed that the answer lay in the use of specially trained soldiers known as storm troops. Preceded by short but concentrated artillery barrages to the very depth of the enemy defences, the storm troops would attack the enemy trench lines. 'Hurricane' bombardments were developed by the talented artillery officer Oberst Georg Bruchmüller, or 'Durchbruchmüller', as he was popularly known at the time. They aimed to bypass centres of resistance, and break through into the enemy rear areas. Here they would destroy headquarters, communications sites, and neutralise the enemy artillery.

Ludendorff's storm troop detachments were supported by specially selected and trained field artillery units. The storm troops were to be followed by 'assault units' consisting of infantry, machine gunners, trench mortar teams, engineers, sections of field artillery, and ammunition carriers. As well as being trained to help exploit the success of the storm troop units, they were practised in attacking strongly defended positions. They would also repel enemy counter-attacks. No obstacle should hold them up for long. Speed was paramount.

By exploiting success in this way, Ludendorff believed that the German offensive would develop an irresistible tide and achieve the elusive breakthrough.

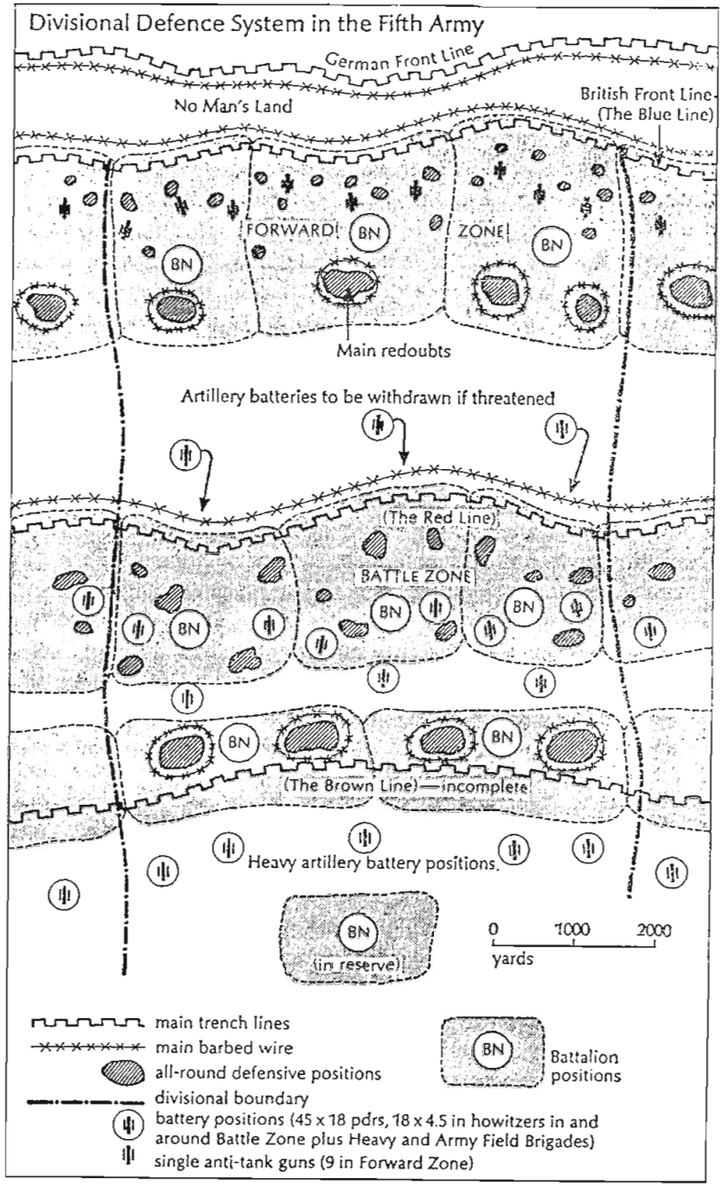
On the other side of no-man's-land, Haig and his generals faced 1918 with little of Ludendorff's optimism. Given the exhaustion of their troops, he and the Allies knew that there was little choice but to hang on until the Americans could make a decisive

difference to the course of the war. To repulse a likely German offensive, Haig realised that he needed to develop a new defensive system based on depth. He planned to adopt the German system that had so frustrated his troops at Passchendaele. The defences would be made up of a 'forward zone', or 'blue line', lightly manned, but with various strongpoints to blunt the initial attack; the 'battle zone', or 'red line', where the main fighting would take place; and finally the 'rear zone', or 'brown line'. British artillery, heavy machine guns and infantry counter-attacks on the 'brown line' would ultimately halt any German attack that got this far.

But Lloyd George's brake on British reinforcements being sent to France meant that Haig had fewer men than a year earlier. It made it very difficult for him to put his plan into practice. Worse still, the British had been forced to take over an additional 15 miles of the Allied Front from the French. Not only did this increase the pressure under which Haig was labouring, but it also placed him in a dilemma. He had to decide if he could risk weakening the line at any point to compensate for the extra frontage he had to defend.

The British sector was held by four armies; the Second in the North, then the First, Third, and finally the Fifth Army in the region of the River Somme. General Gough's Fifth Army was to take over the extension of the British front. But Haig decided that

General Erich Ludendorff (on the right) prepares to 'punch a hole' in the British line in 1918. Ludendorff consults with the Kaiser (centre) and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg on the options for the Great Offensive in the West. *(IWM: Q23746)*



British 'defence-in-depth' based on German flexible or elastic defensive doctrine, early 1918.
(G.G. Wynne, If Germany Attacks)

he could not afford to reinforce Gough by much. The Fifth Army was therefore left to do its best to build its new defences in a desperate race against time.

The German troops began their final training for the March 1918 offensive in the West. They were certain that the deadlock would soon be over. One man wrote: 'Every German soldier on the Western Front felt that the decision of war and peace was at hand.'

The preparations for the offensive had been intense. Training centres were established in each army area. All infantry divisions, including those being transferred from the East to the Western Front, were given special instruction in infiltration techniques. Units already in the line were combed for the youngest, fittest and most battle-hardened men. These would become the backbone of the special storm troop detachments. Surprise and speed were the storm troops' principal tactics.

Many storm troops were issued with the 9mm Bergmann sub-machine gun, a novel weapon that was designed for close-quarter battle (CQB) and most of the company and platoon officers carried revolvers. However, the vast majority of the storm troopers still carried the 7.92mm Gewehr common to the German Army. The ubiquitous stick-grenade, or 'potato-masher' as it was known by the British soldiers, was one of the assault units' main weapons, held in special shoulder-slung pouches. This was characteristic of the *Eingreif* troops used in defensive tactics prior to the great offensive.

Specially trained storm troop squads also used the flame-thrower, machine guns and trench mortars. German artillerymen were trained to shoot accurate artillery bombardments using maps rather than actual gunfire to register the guns on their targets, a method that had been used with such effect by the British prior to the opening phase of the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917.

Ludendorff's plan convinced his men that they were on the threshold of a great German victory. Trust in their commander at this time was total.

If ever a treaty made it abundantly clear why a nation should fight on against an ascendant enemy, Brest-Litovsk was the touchstone. On the Eastern Front a formal end to hostilities was reached on 3 March 1918 at Brest-Litovsk. The final treaty here between Germany and what was by then Communist Russia demonstrated precisely what peace on Germany's and, in particular, Ludendorff's terms would mean.

Under its conditions, Russia was forced to give up one third of her population, 50 per cent of her industry and 90 per cent of her coal production. Brest-Litovsk was punitive, over-reaching and evil in its intent. Anyone who has put hand on heart since and said that the First World War on the Western Front was futile is unlikely to have realised the significance of Brest-Litovsk. If Ludendorff's 'Grand Plan' for 1918 had succeeded, a similar 'Treaty of Paris', or, dare one suggest, 'Versailles Treaty' would have formally stripped France and Belgium at the very least of their assets.

Most important of all, as far as Ludendorff and Hindenburg were concerned, the elimination of Russia and operations across the Eastern Front, tacitly on the agenda since the armistice at Brest-Litovsk in November 1917, released precious assets that were expected to make the difference between losing and winning the war.

Back on the Western Front, the BEF in particular was recovering from the disappointments of 1917, with Passchendaele and the reverses at Cambrai after such spectacular beginnings still fresh in their minds. The experience of 1917 had changed the British soldier to some extent. Perhaps there was a greater fatalism; the old

camaraderie had gone. One man remarked: 'There was still comradeship, but not the homely comradeship of the past.'

Those who were part of the desperately overstretched Fifth Army found the French defences they took over to be in poor condition, which placed an almost intolerable burden on them. General Gough's defences were the least developed in the British line.

Snatching the brief periods of rest they were allowed while out of line, the British troops hoped that when the German attack came they would not be in the trenches. Conversely, those manning the front line hoped that they would be at rest. Nevertheless, they did have a faith now in their ability to match the German soldier. There was an innate belief that they were gaining the upper hand against the Kaiser's men and that, despite the sacrifice, they would ultimately beat them in the field. The discouraging factor was when? To many the war seemed to be timeless, eternal; and now they knew that they would have to endure a German onslaught and further sacrifice if they were to bring the German war machine to a halt.

Haig, facing the awful responsibility of repulsing what he knew would be a massive German offensive when it came, put his faith firmly in his God and in his men. He believed firmly that their traditional patience, endurance, and fortitude would see them through what was set to be the sternest test of the war.

As March wore on there was an eerie sense of inevitability; the troops on both sides of the wire knew that the storm was about to break. Edwin Kühns, stationed near

German officers 'stock up' at the Gulaschkanone at the beginning of the 'Great Offensive in the West'. *(IWM: Q.55245)*

Cambrai, was fully aware that the planned onslaught would be a make-or-break effort. He had never before seen so many troops, guns and supply areas in his sector:

> The big offensive is now ready. All the villages near the Front are full of troops. Troop movement is on a massive scale . . . Everywhere, one sees that things are going to happen in the next few days. Yesterday we were issued with steel helmets. On the 15th of March four of us . . . took 20 minutes to get through the straggling village of Laurcourt to take over the Telephone Station. This is in a dugout . . . With so many soldiers here, they have to sleep outside. Absolutely everywhere is crammed with troops.[1]

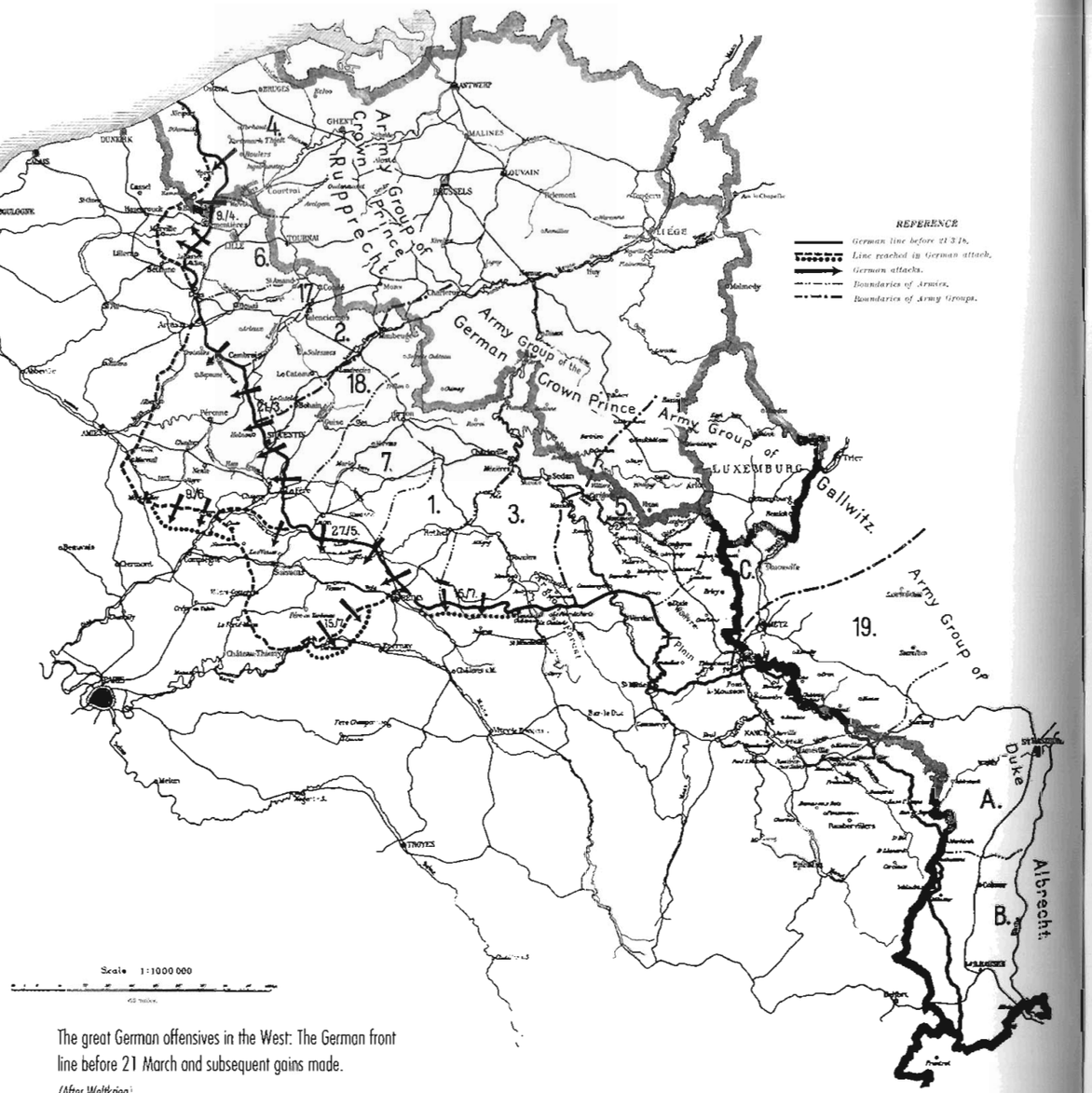
Most of these troops were infantrymen who had trained for the forthcoming battle and now moved to their forward assembly areas a few days before the onslaught began. *Feldwebel* Max Schulz of 46th Infantry Regiment noted in his diary that:

> The whole regiment was paraded in Cambrai and our commander addressed us. He told us that we were going to take part in a great attack, that this would be the last big battle and that it would be decisive. We trusted our generals then and believed what he said. Our morale was very high. I thought of my parents and I prayed that God would bring me safely through it.[2]

Then, on the evening of 20 March, more than 6,000 guns and over 3,000 mortars were slotted into place just behind the 40-mile front and the assaulting infantry made their final move forward into their jumping off positions. It seemed to most German troops involved that this time they really would prevail. The planning, the training and the self-assurance that all had been considered down to the last detail gave them faith in their commanders and their own comrades with whom they were about to go over the top. In cramped dugouts and trenches, as the final hours, then minutes, ticked away there was time for reflection and for thoughts of home, or more simple pleasures:

> I didn't sleep much: too many things on my mind. I wasn't the only one. We thought of our next-of-kin, parents, wife or fiancée . . . [But] I hadn't even a sweetheart I was only twenty and I hadn't ever been with a woman. I wanted to survive to have that experience.[3]

Thousands of men were about to go over the top for the first time. Typically, they thought of whether they would meet the challenge and hoped above all not to let their *Kameraden* ('mates') down. Most wondered if they would survive, or be mown down by machine-gun fire soon after they had gone over the top. Either way, they were ready to do their bit and trusted in God and luck to see them through.



The great German offensives in the West: The German front line before 21 March and subsequent gains made.
(After Weltkrieg)

As the infantrymen wrestled with these final thoughts, the crews of the field guns, the 'heavies' and the thousands of mortars deployed across the whole attack front loaded their first shells and waited for the order to fire. The tension became unbearable.

At precisely 4.40 a.m. on 21 March 1918, Ludendorff struck: 6,423 guns and 3,532 mortars opened fire on the British defences. The barrage fell over a 40-mile front between the Sensée and Oise rivers. The effect was to inundate the entire length of the selected British sector between the forward positions and the battle zone.

Kaiserschlacht begins, 21 March 1918. German storm troops move forward near St Quentin.
(IWM: Q.55483)

The British defenders were at first dazed by the sudden ferocity of the German bombardment. Then thousands of men began choking on the insidious poisoned gas mixed with the German high explosive shells. Desperately they reached for their gasmasks and tried to peer across no-man's-land through the impenetrable cloud that engulfed them. As the bombardment continued, Ludendorff's *Sturmtruppen* had opened up the gaps in their own barbed wire defences in final preparation for the attack.

At last the waiting was over. At precisely 8.40 a.m. the first wave rose to their feet and crashed forward. Other waves soon followed. *Leutnant* Ernst Jünger recalled in his memoirs:

> The great moment had come. The fire lifted over the first trenches. We advanced . . . The turmoil of our feelings was called forth by rage, alcohol and the thirst for blood as we stepped out, heavily and yet irresistibly for the enemy lines.[4]

At first, it seemed that nothing would resist this human tidal wave as it began to penetrate Haig's defensive lines. The German barrage moved 100 yards forward every two to three minutes, protecting the advancing men. Some British strongpoints, bypassed by the storm troops, continued to fight on until they were overwhelmed. The British guns also fought back until they were overrun or forced to withdraw by the speed of the German advance.

But the bitter, desperate fighting during the German assault was not without incidents of compassion on either side. Jünger, fired up by this long-felt desire to sweep away the enemy, pressed on ahead of his unit and suddenly discovered that he was on his own. Then, as he was to note:

> I caught my first sight of the enemy. A figure crouched, wounded apparently . . . in the middle of the pounded hollow of the road. I saw him start at the sight of me and stare . . . with wide-open eyes as I walked slowly up to him holding out my revolver . . . Grinding my teeth, I pressed the muzzle to the temple of this wretch, whom terror now crippled, and with my other hand, gripped hold of his tunic. With a beseeching cry, he snatched a photograph from his pocket and held it before my eyes . . . himself, surrounded by numerous family . . . I forced down my mad rage and walked past.[5]

Through the thick fog and preceded by the leading storm troop units, forty-three German assault divisions of the Second and Eighteenth Armies had risen up and attacked the British Fifth Army sector and a further nineteen divisions of the Seventeenth Army assaulted the British Third Army sector.

The British defenders were outnumbered and severely hampered by the impenetrable fog and deep-ranging heavy artillery fire. Many of the British artillery batteries were destroyed by German counter-battery fire or their gun crews were neutralised by the debilitating effects of gas shells. The British forward zone of defence quickly fell apart in places.

The short, but massive bombardment and the extensive use of gas shells within the *Bruchmüller* artillery fire plan left the ground relatively uncratered and assisted the initial German attacks and especially the infiltration tactics of the storm troops. The heavy mist, choking gas and breakdown in communications, as HQs were hit and telephone cables destroyed, added to British confusion.

The conditions masked the German advance as planned and the fog made it virtually impossible for many of the British strongpoints in the battle zone to support each other with interlocking machine-gun fire and vital artillery shoots into the mass of German assault troops. The situation looked most promising for General Oskar von Hutier's Eighteenth Army in the south where Fifth Army was weakest, and where its units had only just taken the line over from the French. Within hours, the German drive had slipped beyond the battle zone and threatened a break through in the British III Corps area. The right flank of General Gough's Fifth Army was forced back and then withdrew under fire to the Crozat canal.

The excellent progress of the Eighteenth Army masked the frustration of both Second and Seventeenth Armies in the centre and north of the attack sector. In the Cambrai sector, the plan to cut out the strong defences of the Flesquières salient by flanking attacks failed, leaving subsequent German units exposed to enfilade fire. The leading assault units of von der Marwitz's Second Army were unable to break through the British battle zones and Below's Seventeenth Army was held up by the well-prepared and immensely stronger defences of General Byng's British Third Army.

Nevertheless, by the end of the day, almost fifty German divisions had engaged in one of the most dramatic days of the whole war. The dazed but courageous men of General Gough's weakened Fifth Army had been thrown back by the sheer magnitude and shock effect of the German storm that had blasted them since dawn.

The early morning fog across the battlefront was a major ally for the German assault troops and blinded the British machine gunners, artillery observers and battalions manning the forward battle zones. There is little doubt, as events would prove a week later when Operation *Mars* was launched near Arras, that a clear day would have had a disastrous effect on the German offensive on 21 March. Martin Middlebrook's excellent study of the first day of *Kaiserschlacht* emphasises that without the fog that morning:

> . . . German infantry casualties . . . would have greatly exceeded the 40,000 men actually killed and wounded . . . and the German advance would have been halted in most places in front of the Battle Zone . . . The second phase of the battle would then have started under conditions much more favourable to the British . . .[6]

In the event, and despite numerous tales of heroic last stands and derring-do, 21 March was a disastrous day for Haig's BEF. It was the bloodiest day of the First World War. There were over 78,000 casualties, almost 40,000 on each side.[7] Though the *Sturmtruppen* had advanced in one or two places up to ten miles by the end of the day in the south, overall, 21 March was a day of great sacrifice and confusion.

Most vexing for the German High Command would be the fact that although the total casualty figures were around 40,000 each, the British included no less than 21,000 prisoners (PoWs) and the remainder comprised 7,512 killed and 10,000 wounded, a sub-total of just over 17,500. This compares with a mere 300 German prisoners, but a massive 10,000-plus dead and 28,778 wounded, a sub-total of almost 39,000 killed or wounded.[8] It was a haemorrhage of manpower that Ludendorff could not possibly sustain.

Added to this, after the events of 21 March unfolded, Ludendorff had to contend with the reality and frustration of only partial success. Less than a quarter of the first day's objectives had been achieved, and at great cost. Furthermore, the unexpected achievement by Hutier's Eighteenth Army in the south led Ludendorff down a fatal 'garden path'. Ever the opportunist, and never the strategist, he would reinforce the southern thrust and send it bowling across the Somme countryside on a one-way ticket to nowhere of any tactical, operational or strategic consequence. The subsequent events of the spring offensives would dramatically prove the point that 'German strategy, both in peace and war, has always been opportunist, and concerned with looking for weak places rather than with formal objectives'.[9]

The fact that *Kaiserschlacht*, the Kaiser's battle, had begun without the stunning success expected was reflected at Supreme headquarters by Admiral Georg Müller, one of the Kaiser's chief advisers, who noted in his diary:

> *21st March:* . . . After lunch we drove in the direction of St Quentin to the 1st Guards Division in billets at the village of Essigny. Lightly wounded men were on their way down the line . . . Back in the train at 7 p.m. . . . The results of the offensive are not

very satisfactory for the first day. [We were told] after supper that the British had taken a terrific pasting. Actually, the day's objectives were not reached.
22nd March: The mood at breakfast was low. We must reckon with the possibility that the offensive might come to a standstill. The High Command were blamed for their undue optimism . . .[10]

Either way, the die was cast. Germany's 'Great gamble in the West' was under way and her fate now rested squarely on the shoulders of General Ludendorff.

The German tide continued to break across the British defences and further storm troop units and attack divisions were thrown into battle. Operation *Michael* seemed unstoppable, especially in the Fifth Army's sector, and British defences continued to crumble. By 24 March, they had driven the British back some fifteen miles. Some 50,000 prisoners had fallen into German hands, together with hundreds of artillery guns. By now, the Seventeenth, Second and Eighteenth Armies had all enjoyed success to some degree.

Hutier's Eighteenth Army was now opening a serious gap in the British line and the mood at Supreme HQ was somewhat different to that of the first 24 hours of the offensive. Admiral Müller noted ironically that on the evening of 23 March:

His Majesty returned from Avesnes (Ludendorff and Hindenburg's forward HQ) bursting with news of our success. To the guard on the platform he shouted as the train pulled in: 'The battle is won, the English have been utterly defeated.' There was champagne for dinner. The communiqué was read telling of our great victory under the personal leadership of His Majesty the Emperor, a well-meaning lie by the Hindenburg-Ludendorff firm, which the German people will not believe for one moment.[11]

The generous accolade by Hindenburg and Ludendorff may well have been prompted by the ecstatic Kaiser's gesture in decorating Ludendorff with the Iron Cross with Golden Rays for the victory that he believed was at hand. It was, incidentally, the first time that it had been awarded for more than a century.[12]

But though the British Fifth Army had been sorely pressed and the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Armies had scored notable successes, the decisive breakthrough still eluded them. Despite the Kaiser's great optimism, *Kaiserschlacht* was by no means at an end, let alone won.

The ambivalent attitude of doubt then optimism among the German leadership as the *Kaiserschlacht* tide swept on was not shared by the British and French High Command. Both Haig and Pétain knew that the British were in trouble, and Haig was already rushing reinforcements from the northern sector of his front to plug the gaps in his defences. Though the British withdrawal continued in places as other sectors held firm, the BEF commander became increasingly concerned about the important road and rail centre at Amiens and the lines of communication to the ports beyond it.

Haig believed that only French assistance could guarantee that the desperate, though determined efforts of his men to prevent a German breakthrough would succeed. Contrary to the tales of many historians who suggest otherwise, Haig recommended that a 'battle conference' was held to consider and agree on a joint Anglo-French response to the German onslaught. He duly met his French counterparts on 26 March at Doullens. As a result, Marshal Ferdinand Foch was appointed as the Allied Generalissimo. Although Foch's authority was limited, his appointment did at least end the dangerous independence of the national commanders, ensuring closer cooperation between them, which undoubtedly strengthened British and French resolve.

By the next day, it appeared to the Kaiser, Hindenburg, Ludendorff and OHL that *Kaiserschlacht* was poised to at last achieve the desired breakthrough. On the face of it, the achievement, so oft quoted by those who imagine the German spring offensives of 1918 as the whisker away from victory, was extraordinary. In less than a week, Operation *Michael*, part one of the *Kaiserschlacht* proper, had punched a hole up to 40 miles deep into British territory.

But this great leap forward, the like of which had not been seen since 1914, was illusory. The successes had been most evident in the south and this was where Ludendorff had reinforced to exploit it.

There is no question that the front-runners in the 'Hindenburg Stakes' had advanced up to 40 miles beyond the front line that existed until the early hours of 21 March. Yet they were the front-runners and did not represent a general advance to anything like that depth. In most places north of Hutier's most successful penetration of the British line, the assault had gained fifteen miles at most, and achieved much less in the northern sector of the Somme region. Furthermore, the 40 miles gained were in the wrong place, for the direction taken was to the south west and not the sweeping wheel northwest, which was Ludendorff's original intention.

In the real world, Ludendorff could not hope to sustain this advance anyway because of the poor logistic tail that had struggled since the first day to sustain the ravenous demands of the German infantry and artillery as it pressed forward. The storm troop units had no integral logistic back up and relied on ammunition, food and water from the resupply of the attack divisions behind them. Logistic support across 40 miles of devastated countryside was a virtually impossible task for the German 'Q' branches and unit quartermasters without plentiful motorised and horse-drawn transport and huge engineer support in laying new road-track ways, railways and providing light railway rolling stock. Many of the transport columns that were organised and despatched towards the forward battle areas constantly ran the gauntlet of bombing and strafing by British aircraft.

On top of the massive logistical problems that existed, Ludendorff now had another fundamental flaw in the plan to contend with: how to exploit tactical success. He could not do it with either cavalry or tanks. Only nine tanks were used on 21 March – and five of those were captured British Mk IVs. Only seventeen of the lumbering

German A7V tank variant were built and their size (33 tons), crew of no less than 18 men and 'cross country' speed of around 2mph rendered them virtually useless anyway. The cavalry divisions were mainly on duty in Russia. As a result, the giant cracks in Ludendorff's assertion that strategy would take care of itself if the tactics worked were being exposed. It was noted that:

> As the year would show, the days of cavalry as an arm of exploitation on a modern battlefield were over; yet, feeble as it was, the cavalry was the only exploiting arm that existed. [For the Germans] to launch an offensive intended to win the war with none at all was not just foolish: it was criminal.[13]

Although it was not yet apparent, the tide was turning against Ludendorff. By the fourth week of March 1918, the British had been severely battered by the German offensive. But Ludendorff had not yet achieved his declared aim: complete breakthrough and the destruction of the British resolve to fight on.

On 27 March, the French Reserve Army under General Fayolle, to the south of the continued thrust into the guts of General Gough's Fifth Army, faced thirteen divisions of General von Hutier's Eighteenth Army. Hutier's attacking force had four rested divisions and was well supported by field and medium artillery. Fayolle had ten divisions, of which two were cavalry. Despite fierce resistance along the line throughout the day, Fayolle was forced back so that the German 206th Division managed to enter the road and rail centre of Montdidier.

On that same day in the BEF sector, the Fifth Army had a mere nine weak divisions against fifteen German divisions drawn from III Korps of Hutier's Eighteenth Army and XIV Korps of General Marwitz's Second Army to the north. Only six of the divisions had been first-line units on the opening day of Operation *Michael*.

The events of 27 March were a clear indicator of the problems of British doggedness in defence and breakdown in command and control that Ludendorff's plans had failed to take full account of, or had ignored. Such lack of foresight, based largely on a characteristically dogmatic approach, was costing the soldiers under the German High Command very dear. In an epic encounter at Rosières, south-east of Amiens, *General-Leutnant* Lüttwitz's III Korps planned to smash through the British defensive line held by Lieutenant General Watts' XIX Corps. By now, the British had learned and applied the hard lessons of the beginning of Operation *Michael* and the German attacks were more predictable than they had expected.

Consequently, from strong dug-in positions, field gun batteries continued to fire and hold their ground, and well-sited machine guns held their fire until the first German attacking waves were within a few hundred yards, then hit them with devastating fire. In front of Rosières, the British defenders refused to give ground, despite wave after wave of desperate German attacks. Even the elite 4th Guards Division was held up for over four hours by a 16th Irish Division, which was already weakened by 50 per cent casualties.

Lüttwitz's men must have been demoralised by such tenacity. But the troops of 208th Division, assaulting Harbonnières just south of the St Quentin to Amiens road, were incredulous when their attack was stopped by the 'death or glory' ride in a counter-attack by Brigadier-General Riddell, leading the remnants of his Brigade on a 'borrowed' artillery horse. By nightfall, though some German penetration had occurred, the British line had either been restored, or a new line had been consolidated against further attacks. Over 1,000 German prisoners were taken, with at least the same number dead and missing; rather more than the British losses in this sector on that day.

The German losses were as high as those suffered by the British, but many of the German troops killed were Ludendorff's irreplaceable storm troops. Those that were designated to take their place further weakened many of the infantry divisions that followed them into battle, were not fully trained for the role and thus inexperienced by comparison.

This stripping of 'ordinary' units to reinforce the depleted storm troop formations caused ever more resentment from commanders and the rank and file who remained in those units. Many complained that specialists, such as signallers, medics and transport personnel, were being transferred to front-line infantry units to make good the shortfall caused by those infantry battalions having to provide still more of the under thirty-fives for storm troop duties.[14]

Ludendorff's surviving troops were becoming exhausted by the intensity and unrestrained stress of battle. Also, they were running out of essential supplies such as food, water and ammunition. The shortages were already apparent even among units in the rear and HQ staffs. Edwin Kühns noted in his diary in the final week of March that:

> At this time, the food got worse. [Then] on Easter Sunday, we had nothing except half a loaf of bread per man . . . Everyone was miserable, as they were so hungry. A comrade brought a joint of horsemeat from a horse that had been killed, which we had to roast, but everyone had only about a quarter of a pound. That was the first horsemeat that I had knowingly eaten. It was very tough, but it tasted good.[15]

Still determined to achieve outright victory, Ludendorff launched Operation *Mars* on 28 March to trap the northern British armies by striking northwest from Arras. *Mars* was to be the crowning glory of the first week of the great offensive and it was designed to pull the hinges off the British defensive door, preparing the way for the German breakout and sweep towards the channel ports.

The normally cautious Rupprecht had great hopes for Operation *Mars*, and was moved to note in his diary: 'We stand immediately before the success of the final breakthrough.'[16]

But Ludendorff's plans had already begun to unravel. The storm troops were being lost against an increasingly tenacious British defence. The British and Dominion troops of the Fifth and Third Armies continued to fight and to hold on. When the German

bombardment lifted on the morning of 28 March and Operation *Mars* was launched, there was no thick, swirling mist to cover the German advance, the preparatory bombardment was not as concentrated as on 21 March and the infantry tactics were less sophisticated.

A total of 29 assault divisions were assigned, with 16 in reserve, on a 33-mile front, but 12 divisions attacked between Lens in the north and Hendecourt in the south, towards Arras. By this time Haig's troops knew what to expect and mowed down the German troops as they came forward.

> [When] the smoke cleared . . . 200 yards in front [of our trench] were the enemy in full view bearing down on us in a compact and huddled mass . . . I counted five lines, each . . . five deep . . . In an instant the rattle of rapid fire, a fire sustained almost continuously for an hour till rifles were red hot . . .[17]

With the exception of some progress on the right flank, the assault was an abject failure and some ground was actually lost to the 3rd Australian Division. Almost two years on, it could have been a re-run of 1 July 1916, but with a German massacre before the wire and under the deadly machine guns and artillery of the British defenders. Eyewitnesses described the fruitless German attacks:

> The Germans came on time after time with the greatest bravery, sometimes almost shoulder to shoulder, each time assured that it required but one more effort to break the British front, only to be held and then repulsed by the combined force of guns, machine guns and rifles.[18]

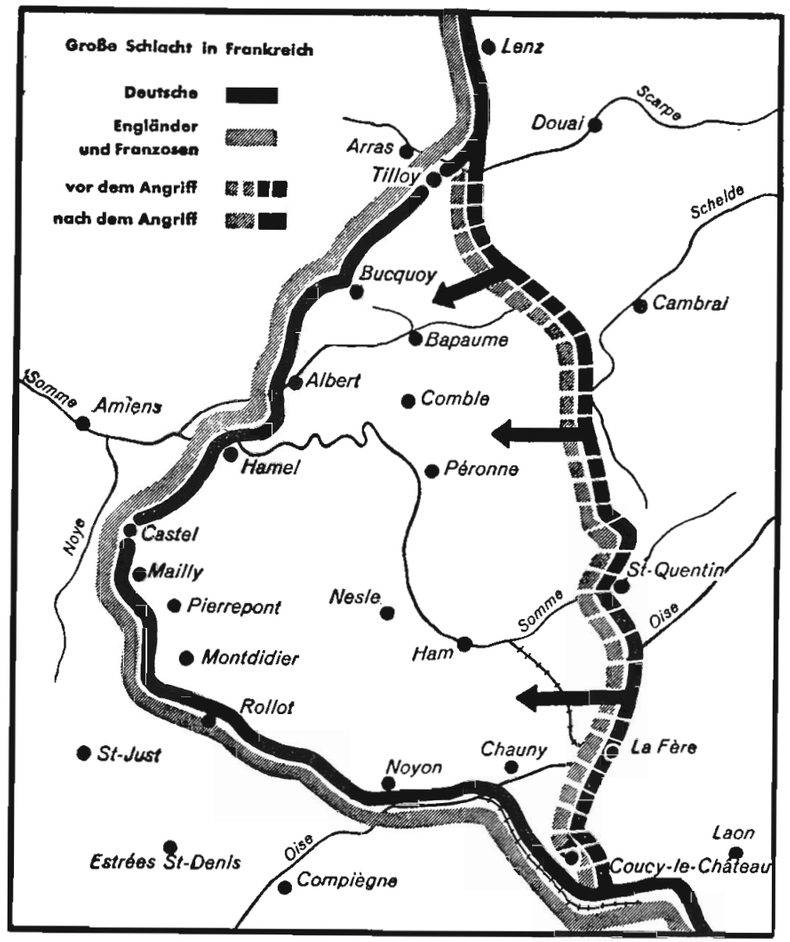
The assault divisions took massive casualties for little territorial gain and thousands more were taken prisoner. A follow-on assault, Operation *Valkyrie*, which was planned as an exploitation phase after a *Mars* success, was quickly cancelled. The God of War had changed sides and meted out terrible destruction on the hapless German infantry. It is significant that both the German and British official histories have little to say except to underline the slaughter, for slaughter it was.

The disastrous results of Operation *Mars* were matched by the stench of deception that began to waft across the battlefield. The German assault troops now realised to their horror, as they overran British supply depots, that their resources were poor by comparison. Drained by continual battle, but euphoric in their achievements to date, they began to lose much of their renowned self-discipline. On the same day that their comrades were being slaughtered near Arras, many who had attacked across the former Somme battlefield of 1916 reached Albert. The results were rather odd:

> Today the advance of our infantry suddenly stopped near Albert. Nobody could understand why . . . Our way seemed entirely clear [and] . . . our division was right in

> front of the advance, and could not possibly be tired out . . . As soon as I got near the town I began to see strange figures, which looked very little like soldiers, and certainly showed no sign of advancing, making their way back out of town. There were men driving cows before them on a line . . . Men carrying a bottle of wine under one arm and another one open in their hand . . . Men dressed up in comic disguise. Men with top hats on their heads. Men staggering. Men who could hardly walk . . . When I got into the town the streets were running with wine.[19]

Exhaustion led to indiscipline, albeit briefly, as the troops at Albert were soon ordered forward once more. But Operations *Michael* and *Mars* had failed to find the formula for the promised breakthrough. Amiens remained an elusive prize and the

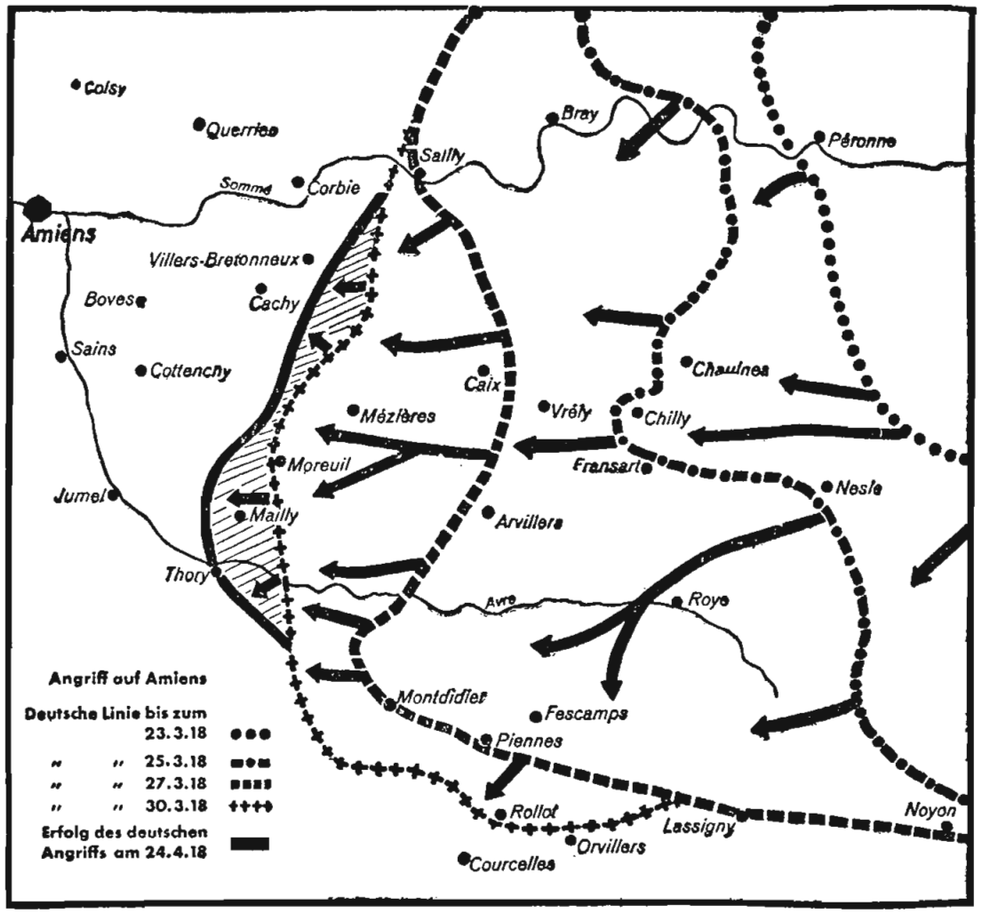


Kaiserschlacht: Die Michael Schlacht im März – Operation *Michael* and German gains made between 21 March and 5 April 1918. *(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)*

great advance had swung towards the south-west, rather than the north-west, capturing little more than the land devastated by the Somme battles in 1916 and the ground ravaged by the Germans themselves in their withdrawal to the *Siegfried Stellung*, or Hindenburg Line, twelve months before.

Fatigue, the psychological blow of the huge losses sustained and disillusion had all taken their toll by the end of March. By then, most units could go no further and they were forced to go on the defensive. It had been an extraordinary week; but the British, supported by the French, had held. The first crisis was over for the Allies at least.

For all the Kaiser's men, the end of March brought a depressing realisation that the promised swift victory, like that promised four years earlier, was one that may go begging. The momentum of each assault, and that needed to sustain the offensive were dependent on manpower and horsepower respectively. The lack of motorised



Kaiserschlacht – and the attacks towards Amiens up to 25 April 1918.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

transport made the movement of troops, weapons, ammunition (especially artillery ammunition), and other supplies more difficult to move between the railheads and forward positions. Even the horse-drawn transport was nowhere near as plentiful as it should have been to sustain an offensive on this scale.

The problem became progressively worse once the offensives were shifted from Picardy and the Somme to Flanders, then the French sectors. In short, German logistics support was an immensely complex problem at the beginning of *Kaiserschlacht*. Within a week it had become a monstrous and ever-present nightmare.

Ludendorff's most precious and finite commodity, the German soldier, was the motor and dictated the mobility of the German Army throughout the offensive. The pace of the advance was thus entirely dependent on stamina and the speed of the advance on foot. Ludendorff had precious few tanks, no armoured cars and negligible cavalry, and so relied heavily on his storm troops and attack divisions to develop and maintain the momentum of each assault. The horrendous casualties among the storm troops in particular merely highlighted the differences between the elite assault units and the other divisions.

Although the *Michael* offensive had forced huge gaps in the British Fifth Army line and advanced up to 40 miles in places, it was at great cost and for little, if any, strategic advantage. General Gough had been a most prominent British casualty when relieved of his command, but his battered divisions had not broken. Within a week, Ludendorff had lost in excess of 250,000 men in an offensive that had promised so much on the first day, but was doomed once it became clear that the British refused to crack.

British casualties in the same period were 178,000, but almost half were prisoners of war, and the French had lost around 77,000. But the German casualties were excessively high. Such losses would be unsustainable if the rate continued.

Losses were one thing, but failure to crack the British defences open had led to a fateful downturn in morale. On 30 March, attacks on the left flank by the Second Army were as ineffective as those during the abortive Operation *Mars*. One Regiment of the German 18th Division involved on 30 March recorded:

> There was little time for preparation, poor artillery support and the English machine guns were so well hidden that they could not be knocked out. [Overall] the power of the attack was exhausted. Spirits sank to zero. The division suffered a reverse the like of which it had not yet experienced.[20]

Ludendorff needed to consolidate and maximise the strength that remained. But logic and cool thinking were not qualities that he had in abundance after the failure of Operation *Michael*. Despite fixing on another major offensive in the Lys/Flanders sector to the north, as March turned into April, he attempted to revive the offensive on the Somme by seizing Amiens.

Officially, Ludendorff sought to exploit his southern flank and sweep into Amiens before the British or French could consolidate their defences in front of the city. The

Seventh, Eighteenth and Seventeenth Armies would hold on to their gains and stand fast until the Second Army had pushed on to Amiens.

The Second Army's attempt failed: its leading assault wave, including the 9th Bavarian Reserve and Guards *Ersatz* Division, was blocked and then driven back in front of Villers-Bretonneux, some 10 miles short of Amiens, by the Australian 9th Brigade and British 14th and 18th Divisions. German accounts reported that:

> The Bavarian Division was forced to withdraw in the face of strong counter-attacks . . . [and] the Guards Ersatz Division, on its left, had reached Cachy (just south of Villers-Bretonneux), but also lost the ground that it had gained that afternoon.[21]

Crown Prince Rupprecht noted on the evening of 5 April:

> Orders were issued on the evening of the 4th [of April] to continue the attack on the 5th, but it was then discovered that the Allies had offered 'a particularly obstinate resistance' . . . and it was no longer possible to throw the enemy back . . .[22]

German operations on 5 April led the Kaiser's generals to ponder on another costly disappointment. Rupprecht was forced to concede that:

> The final result of the day is the unpleasant fact that our offensive has come to a complete stop, and its continuation without careful preparation promises no success.[23]

Ludendorff had admitted by this time that, by the end of 4 April, 'The enemy's resistance was beyond our strength,' and, bizarrely, given the butcher's bill in German casualties, that: 'We must not get drawn into a battle of attrition [as this] would not suit our strategic or tactical situation.'[24]

Rupprecht's impressive Chief-of-Staff, General Hermann von Kuhl, summed up the opening fortnight of the German spring offensive by stating that:

> Strategic success was illusory with 'Operation *Michael*' [and *Mars*] . . . the great tactical success had cost heavy sacrifices, some ninety divisions in all having to be engaged. The conclusion of the fighting left our troops . . . in very unfavourable positions, which led to extraordinary wastage.[25]

But Ludendorff called it a 'brilliant feat', which had cost much of the cream of his specially trained storm troops and first-line divisions. It had cost him personal loss also, as his youngest son Erich was shot down on 23 March and he had personally identified the body.[26]

The next throw of the dice would be where perhaps *Kaiserschlacht* should have been launched in the first place: Flanders and the Lys valley.

CHAPTER 13

FRIEDENSSTURM – THE GREATEST MYTH OF THE WAR

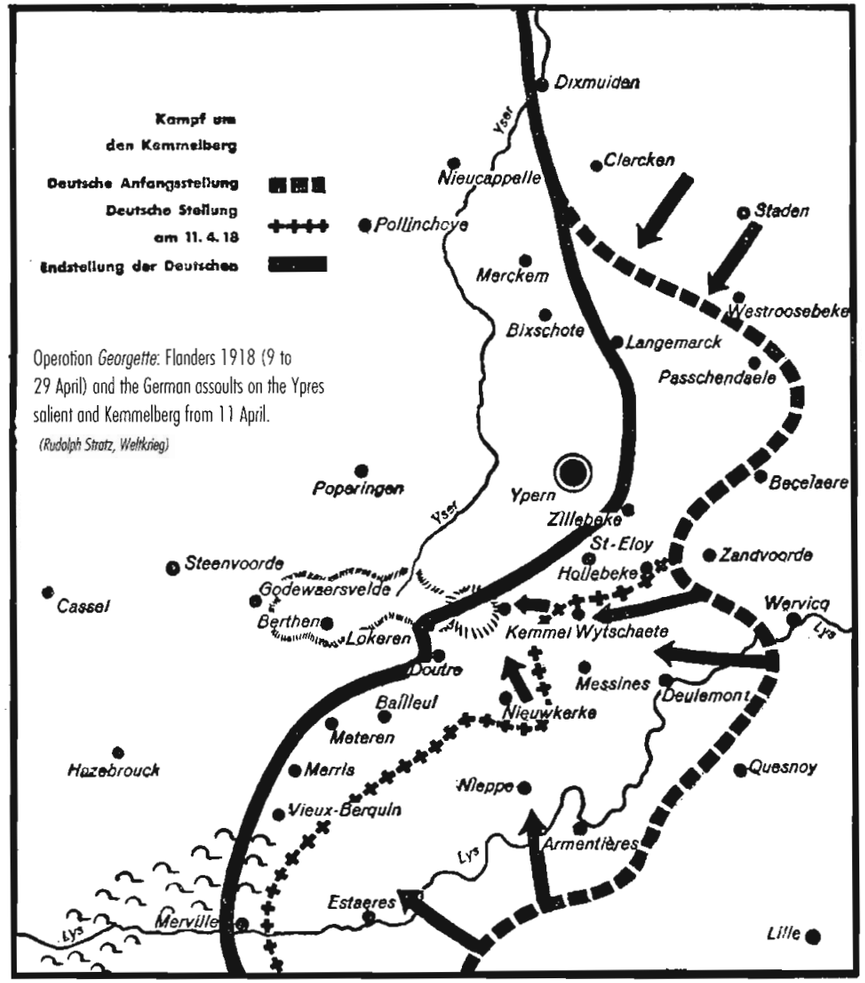
APRIL–JULY 1918

With the bloody debacle of Operation *Mars*, *Kaiserschlacht* was effectively finished in the Somme and Scarpe sectors. In spite of this catastrophe, Ludendorff was still convinced that the British must remain the main target. He hurriedly prepared to mount yet another offensive, this time in the area of the River Lys and around Ypres in the north of the British sector. Ludendorff's sense of humour was still intact, for the March offensive that had seen the failure of the main element of *Kaiserschlacht* now had an overarching name for the following offensives, *Friedenssturm*, or the peace offensive. *Friedenssturm* would lead to peace; but not quite the way Ludendorff had planned.

Preceded by Operation *Archangel* as a diversionary attack in the French Aisne sector on 6 April, Operation *Georgette* was to take place in Flanders, and aimed to capture the vital railhead at Hazebrouck and then cut off the BEF from its supply routes and rear areas as far as the coast. The operation was renamed *Georgette* rather than *George*, its original codename: plans had to be scaled down, as the German losses in March had been so heavy. *Georgette* was to be launched on 9 April, Ludendorff's 53rd birthday.

The German Sixth Army, under General Ferdinand von Quast, was ordered to attack between Armentières and Givenchy to tear the British defences apart and advance north-west to the important road and rail junction at Hazebrouck. On 10 April, General Sixt von Armin's Fourth Army was to assault the Ypres salient sector, and wrest the Messines ridge from British hands. Armin was determined to finally pinch out the 'Salient' where his Fourth Army had suffered so badly during the Messines and Third Ypres/Passchendaele campaign the previous year.

The German plan appeared sound, but the British defences were stronger here than had been the case on 21 March and not surprisingly many of the German divisions



Operation *Georgette*: Flanders 1918 (9 to 29 April) and the German assaults on the Ypres salient and Kemmelberg from 11 April.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

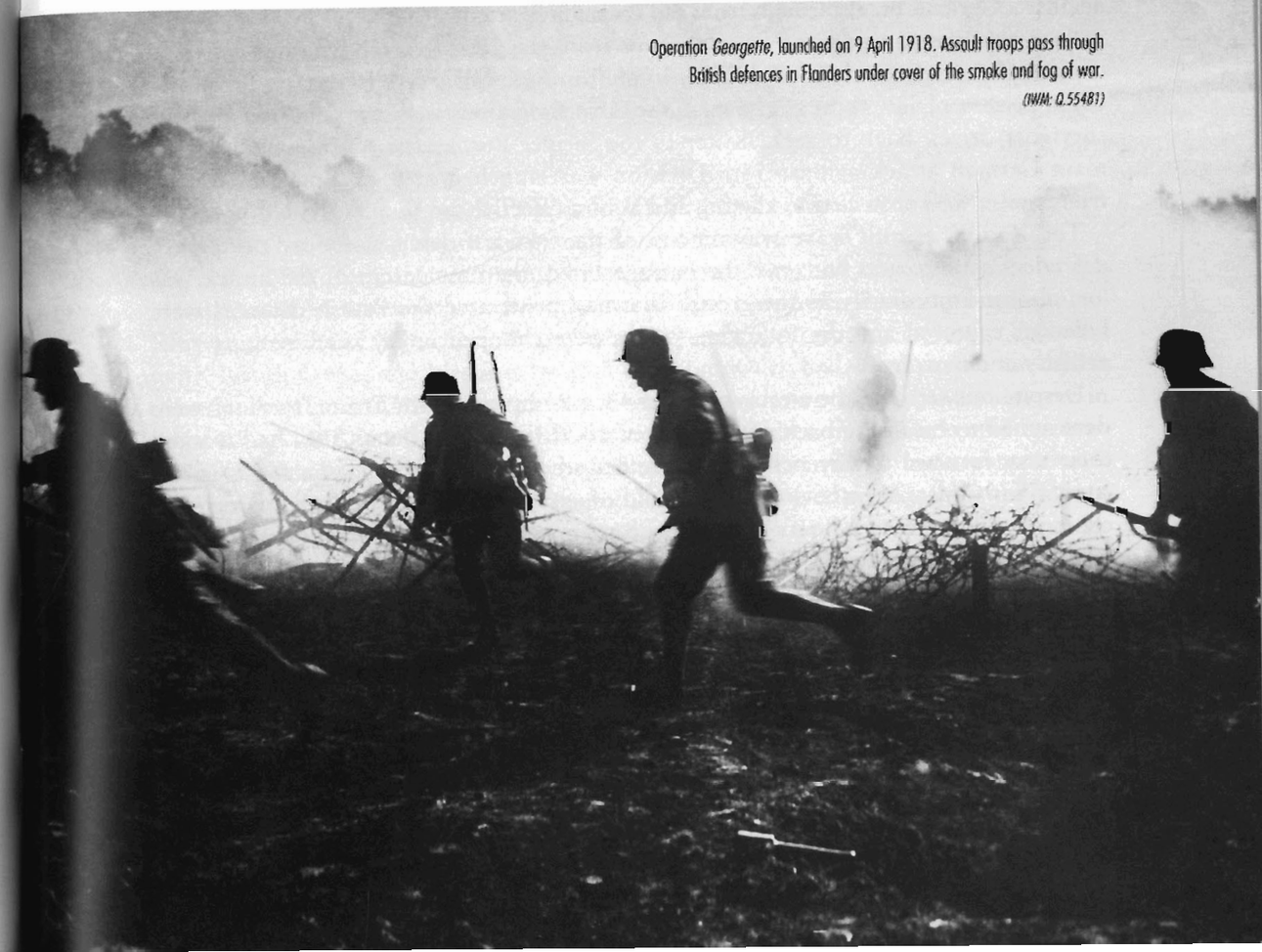
were inferior to those used in Operation *Michael*. Fifty per cent of the assault units tasked for *Georgette* were hastily trained, but second echelon 'trench' as opposed to 'attack' divisions. The one German advantage was that the BEF in this sector was desperately short of reserves to plug any gaps that may be forced in the British line.

Von Quast had eight attack divisions in the first assault wave and six in the second against four British divisions – from north to south the 34th, 40th, 2nd Portuguese and 55th – defending the sector between Armentières and Bethune. None of the fourteen German divisions had taken part in the March offensives and were brought into action after retraining for the assault from a period at rest out of the line. The 43rd Reserve Division, which faced 55th Division in the south of the attack sector, had come from Russia.[1]

The offensive was mounted on 9 April as planned and opened with the typical Bruchmüller bombardment. A familiar pattern soon emerged. As with Operation *Michael*, the attack was made through thick fog and, with the damage and further obscuration caused by the massive bombardment, the German offensive began with some excellent progress, which included brushing the dispirited 2nd Portuguese Division aside and advancing up to three and a half miles towards Hazebrouck by the end of the first day. The 1st Bavarian Reserve Regiment of the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division attacking in the Portuguese sector recorded in its war diary that: 'The trench garrisons surrendered after only feeble resistance.' The 141st Regiment of the 35th Division reported:

> First system taken without resistance. In the second our first prisoners were taken. 9.45 a.m., stiff resistance at strongpoint V captured and 70 Portuguese taken [prisoner].

The 42nd Division, assaulting the line on the left flank of the Portuguese defence and the right-hand units of the 40th Division, broke through all the hostile positions



Operation *Georgette*, launched on 9 April 1918. Assault troops pass through British defences in Flanders under cover of the smoke and fog of war.
(IWM: Q.55481)

and cut an uninterrupted swathe to Estaires and Bac St Maur on the River Lys. By the afternoon, the leading units were across the river and preparing to advance still further. Its progress, and that of the 1st and 8th Bavarian Reserve Divisions to its left, depended on equal success by the German attacks to their south.

The hapless Portuguese were unwittingly providing Ludendorff with an early birthday present, but elsewhere the promise of breakthrough was left cruelly unfulfilled. As the German 42nd Division swept all before it, the German assault was about to be stopped in its tracks by the bloody-minded determination of one British division near Givenchy.

The British 55th Division was deployed on the extreme right of the British sector facing the German onslaught, its troops dug in and up against the German IV Korps, with three divisions, the 18th Reserve, 43rd Reserve and 4th *Ersatz* Divisions, in the leading assault waves.[2] The divisions attacked under the impression that they were facing a 'tired British division . . . only fit for holding a quiet sector of the line'.[3] They were soon put to rights. The 55th Division was fully prepared to meet any attack and, in stark contrast to their Portuguese neighbours, every man was aware of his responsibilities in resisting the German thrust. As the battle developed to their left, the men of the 55th Division formed a defensive flank to shore up their own defences against a German breakthrough from the Portuguese sector.

At 9 a.m., large groups of assault troops from the 18th Reserve Division appeared close to the newly established defensive flank on 55th Division's left. As soon as they could be seen plainly through the mist, the advancing Germans were cut down and the survivors driven back to seek shelter in the former Portuguese positions. When the main German attack against 55th Division was launched at 8.45 a.m. the German troops were well protected by the fog and a most effective creeping barrage.

The leading assault wave was on top of the forward defences before the British defenders could react. But once the barrage lifted, the momentum of the attack was lost almost immediately as the groups that had penetrated the British defences were killed or captured and the following waves were chopped up by machine-gun, rifle, artillery and mortar fire.

Despite this setback, the attackers of the 43rd Reserve and 4th *Ersatz* Divisions were determined to break the back of 55th Division's defence. By 10 a.m. they had worked their way forward to Givenchy church and were close to the canal on the Cuinchy road. They appeared to be on the threshold of success, but the pendulum swung once again over the next two hours as the British strongpoints held out and counter-attacks drove back the desperate German efforts to hold on to their gains.

By midday the British defenders had largely restored the situation. Further attacks continued in the afternoon and some German troops managed to infiltrate beyond the main defences and close in on field artillery in action, only to be killed or driven back by the guns firing point-blank at them. The German assaults were beaten back time after time, and when the fog began to clear, the disastrous nature of the attack on the

55th Division became apparent as the wire in front of their defences was seen festooned with dead and dying German troops. The final act came with the capture of no less than 640 Germans trapped within the network of British barbed wire and left with no choice but to surrender. Two German battalion commanders and their tactical staff groups, over a hundred machine guns and automatic rifles and over 620 officers and men, including a band with its instruments, were taken.[4]

This motley crew of German troops and two COs from battalions of the 4th Ersatz Division was the last 'main event' within the 55th Division's area. Operation *Georgette* had mixed results by the end of its first day, but in the south, it had been stopped in its tracks by a well-trained, disciplined and stubborn defence. German accounts acknowledged their failure against 55th Division, although not always accurately. Rupprecht noted on the evening of 9 April:

> In Givenchy, the 55th Division, a particularly good Scottish [*sic*] division, offered obstinate resistance.[5]

The last word on this day and this German 'difficulty' had to go to Ludendorff himself, who wrote that:

> In the evening [in the north] we were advancing towards Armentières, had reached the Lys and we were approaching the Lawe. In the direction of Béthune we made little progress. On the left, at Givenchy and Festubert, we were held up. The result was not satisfactory.[6]

The 55th Division had spoiled Ludendorff's birthday as surely as it had been spoiled in 1917 on the opening day of the British Arras offensive.[7]

On the 10th, General von Armin's Fourth Army launched its assault against the blood-soaked Messines ridge, where the British had blown the formerly 'impregnable' German defences of Wytschaete Bogen apart in June the previous year. It was defended by IX British Corps, and Messines by 25th Division, which had taken part in the British offensive here in 1917. The Fourth Army attacked with two Korps, XVIII Reserve in the north and X Reserve in the south, each with two divisions in the first assault waves.

The preliminary bombardment began at 2.45 a.m. and the main assault was launched promptly at 5.15 a.m. through thick mist and over previously laid pontoon bridges across the Lys. The 17th Reserve Division, of XVIII Korps, captured Messines and then some of the ridge as they advanced beyond the village, but the leading battalions were rapidly stopped near Wulverghem by stiff British resistance and then counter-attacks. Units of the 49th Reserve Division (of Fourth Army reserve) were sent in to support the 17th Reserve Division and held a defensive line against the British counter-moves between Hill 63 and the southern end of Messines across the Douve valley for the rest of the day.

Dominion and Belgian dead since 1914. But they were frustrated once again when the British reluctantly, though wisely withdrew from Passchendaele to a tighter defensive perimeter around Ypres and smashed all German assaults against the town.

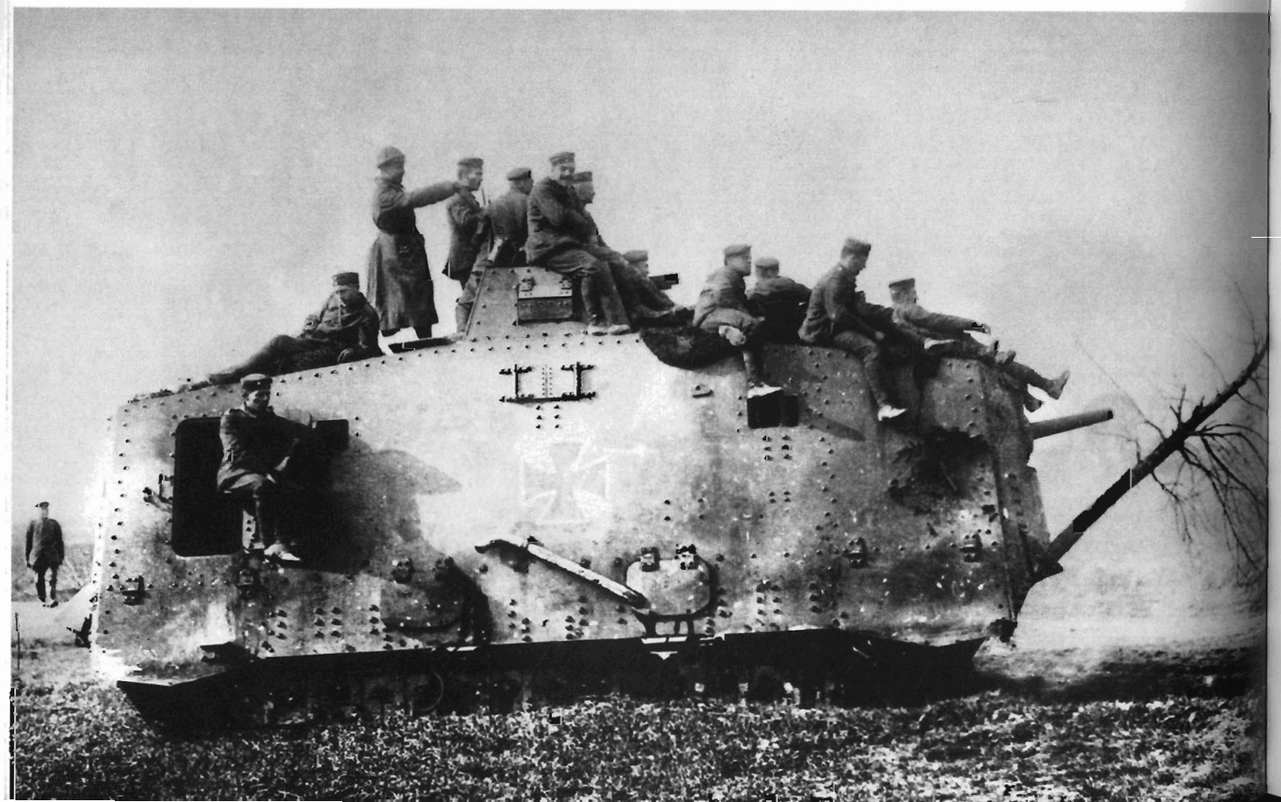
By the final week in April, Operation *Georgette* was looking perilously close to failure and Ludendorff's frustrations were manifest. He was still obsessed by his desire to beat the British, but once again, they had proved that they could tough it out against his best efforts to dislodge and destroy them. Now the French were making their mark in support of their ally as his forces were becoming exhausted and severely depleted. However, he had one or two more cards up his sleeve; the time had come to play them.

While the ebb and flow of the Lys offensive reached the final stages, the Somme provided the headlines on 21 April. Baron Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's greatest ace, knight of the air and commander of the famous 'Flying Circus', was finally shot down and fatally wounded.

His death sent shock waves through the German Army and air arm alike, for he was a great inspiration to those serving at the front and to the German people. Although he had been wounded previously, his fellow pilots and the soldiers on the ground imagined him immortal, and he was a true hero of the Fatherland.

The manner of his death was controversial, as his 'kill' was claimed both by Captain Albert Brown of 209 Squadron RAF and Australian Lewis machine gunners. The ground fire was most probably Richthofen's *coup de grâce*, and when his body was

The monstrous German A7V tank with some of its eighteen crew in April 1918. *(IWM: Q. 37. 343)*



recovered he was buried with full military honours at Bertangles British military cemetery accompanied by an Australian Honour Guard.

A frustrated Ludendorff renewed his efforts in the south. By 24 April his troops had reached the village of Villers-Bretonneux, ('Villers-Bret' to its British and Australian defenders), less than ten miles from Amiens. 'Villers-Bret' had been the scene of a failed assault on 4 and 5 April immediately before *Georgette*.

The German attack on Villers-Bretonneux included the very first tank versus tank engagement in the history of warfare, featuring British Mk IV tanks and one of the few German A7Vs.

The A7V had a crew of eighteen, was armed with one 57mm gun and six machine guns. It had a top speed of a mere 3mph. In comparison, the ubiquitous British Mk IV had a similar speed, a crew of eight, and came in two versions: the 'male', armed with two 6-pounder naval guns and two machine guns, and the 'female', armed with just four machine guns.

On the edge of the wood of Bois l'Abbé, one and a half miles south-west of Villers-Brettoneux, was a section of British Mk IV tanks, a 'male' and two 'females', that were deployed to support the dug-in infantry. Suddenly an A7V lurched into view and the British tanks moved forward to engage it.

The British section commander, Lieutenant Frank Mitchell, in the 'male' Mk IV, fired at the German A7V, but missed and the German tank kept on coming. The A7V then halted and opened fire, hitting both 'female' tanks, which were forced to withdraw. But Mitchell's tank continued to advance. After a brief but hot exchange of fire the A7V was hit and the damaged German monster then withdrew.

The abortive tank attacks were part of Ludendorff's increasingly desperate attempt to find a way through the British defences. As battle raged in Flanders, German resources had been diverted for another thrust towards Amiens. German assault units occupied much of Villers-Bretonneux on 24 April. But the main German attack on Villers-Bretonneux was then decisively crushed by British and Australian troops in a brilliant counterattack. Villers-Bretonneux and Amiens would not be threatened again. On 8 August, it would be the scene of Ludendorff's nemesis: his 'Black Day'.

Back in Flanders, the final bloody days of Operation *Georgette* were played out and yet again, the German effort came to nought, for the main objective of Hazebrouck lay out of reach.

A major turning point in the war was reached on 29 April, before the Allied offensives and even prior to Ludendorff's next major effort on the offensive against the French. For it was on 29 April that he tacitly acknowledged that he had failed to achieve his principal aim: to destroy the British Army in France and Belgium. Legends, half-truths and myths have grown out of the German attempts to crush the BEF before knocking France out of the war, not least of which is the false observation that Ludendorff's main aim was to split the British and French armies, rather than seek principally to annihilate the BEF's fighting capability.[9]

Hindenburg (far left), the Kaiser and Ludendorff (right) at Avesnes, German forward HQ for the offensives against the British, in April 1918. *(IWM: Q.45.326)*

Ludendorff had made fundamental mistakes, not least of which was to suggest that his strategy would take care of itself as long as he had the tactics right. Though successful to a degree, the storm troop tactics were largely self-defeating once the British learned to deal with the increasingly predictable German infiltration methods and the subsequent main advance by the attack divisions.

Ludendorff failed to learn another critically important lesson from his predecessor. In 1916 Falkenhayn concluded not only that the Western Front was the main theatre of the war, but also that Britain was the arch-enemy and the 'soul' of Allied resistance against the Central Powers. Most importantly, he was already certain that the German Army was not strong enough to defeat the British and force their withdrawal to the Channel ports while simultaneously pinning the French to the south of the River Somme. This was a major reason for Falkenhayn's decision to attack the French at Verdun rather than the British in another sector of the Western Front in early 1916. The events of 1916 bore out Falkenhayn's views, for the British Army proved a formidable counter to the German Army, after a bad start, on the Somme.

With the exception of Liège in August 1914, Ludendorff's experience of the offensive and open warfare had come only from the Eastern Front. However, with the temporary advantage of transferring a million men from that theatre of war in early 1918, he decided to ignore the lessons of 1916 and 1917 and was conceited enough to believe that he could destroy the British Army in place and that French capitulation would follow like night follows day. The success of *Kaiserschlacht* hinged on surprise and overwhelming penetration of the British sector on a limited front to tear the defences apart and trigger paralysis of command and resistance from the British. It was a pipe dream, and like the Schlieffen Plan in 1914, it took little account of the quality of the enemy facing the German onslaught.

When the Somme and Lys offensives failed, some German commanders in the field and influential people back home lay the blame at the feet of the troops. This was later encapsulated in an article that asked why the great spring offensive had petered out after a few days after showing so much promise at the outset. It suggested that:

> The key to the riddle must be sought principally in the psychological and physical condition of the troops. The best of the old German Army lay dead on the battlefields of Verdun and the Somme . . . As time passed, the picture gradually changed for the worse . . . the number of peace-time officers in a unit grew smaller and . . . they were replaced by young fellows of the very best will, but often without sufficient knowledge. At the same time, the old corps of NCOs rapidly disappeared, so that finally the difference between NCO and private soldier vanished, very much to the detriment of discipline.[10]

This analysis does not ring true, for if the loss of experienced officers and NCOs was the only criterion for an Army's failure, the British and French would have been fatally weakened as well. The root of the problem was not so much the German soldier as the tactics imposed and the leadership at the highest level.

The fundamental responsibility for the failure of *Michael*, *Mars* and *Georgette* was the impossible mission given to the German troops by Ludendorff. His original plan was, like the Schlieffen Plan, too ambitious and took too little account of the enemy. Ludendorff, a gambler who believed that strategy would fall naturally out of successful tactics, seemed to choose the most unimaginative and dogmatic approaches to his stated aim of breaking through British lines and then destroying the BEF.

Rather than seeking the weakest points of the British sector, he launched attacks against Arras (*Mars*) and Ypres (*Georgette*), which met fierce, well-organised and highly effective defences and cost the German assault troops dear. Though battered, the British were unbowed and had emerged from the opening German offensives confident that they could match the best that the German Army could offer in the future.

After *Georgette* there was an inevitable lull as both Ludendorff and the Allied commanders took stock. By the end of April, the German offensives against the British sector on the Somme, around Arras and in Flanders had resulted in almost 350,000 casualties.[11] The BEF had taken 240,000 casualties, of which around half had become PoWs, and the French 92,000 killed, missing, wounded and PoWs.

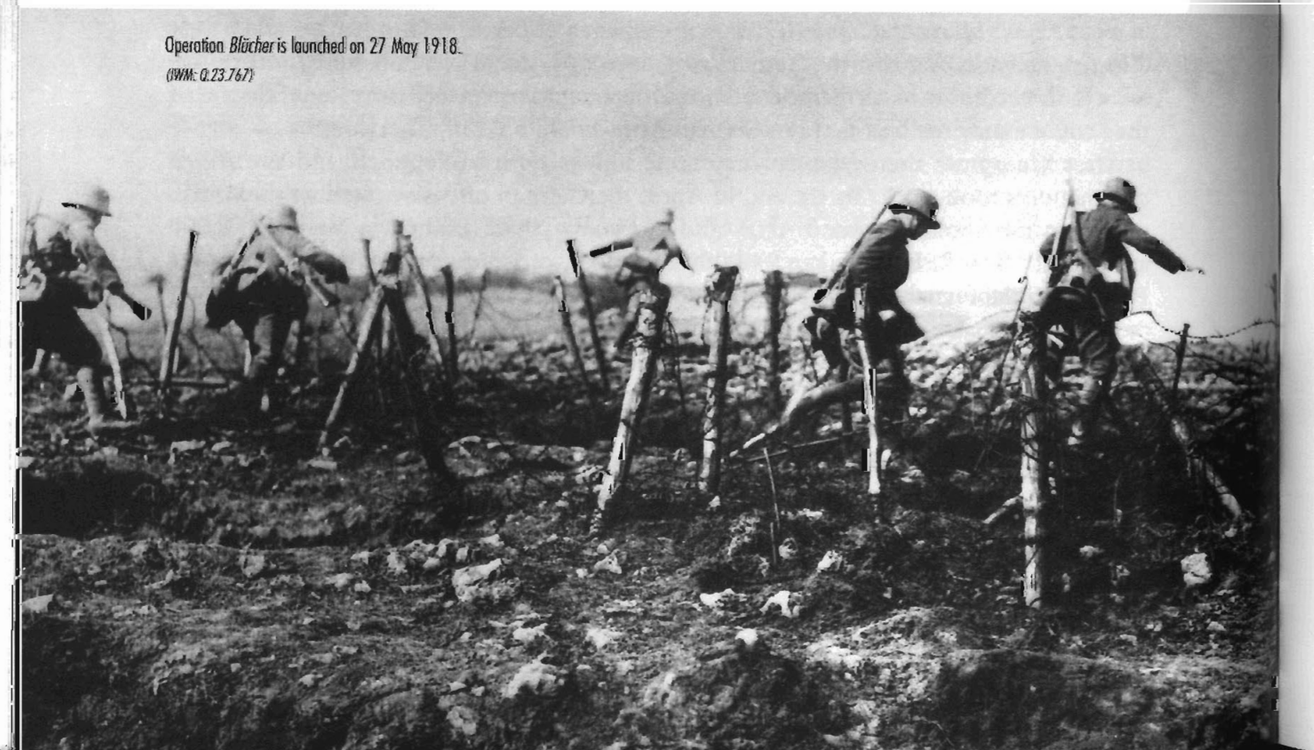
But the 'parity' between enemies hid the fact that the Germans had lost most of their first line storm troops and specially trained attack division personnel. They were irreplaceable: their slaughter and the failure of the breakthrough tactics against the increasingly stubborn British and Dominion forces left Ludendorff on the horns of a dilemma. Worse, the German manpower crisis was hardly matched by a similar prospect for the Allies. The Americans were coming: and they would soon be coming in an ever-rising tide. By 1 May 1918, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) had

430,000 men in France and US divisions were around 28,000 strong; almost twice the establishment of British, French or German divisions at this stage of the war. By the end of May, the total rose dramatically to 650,000.

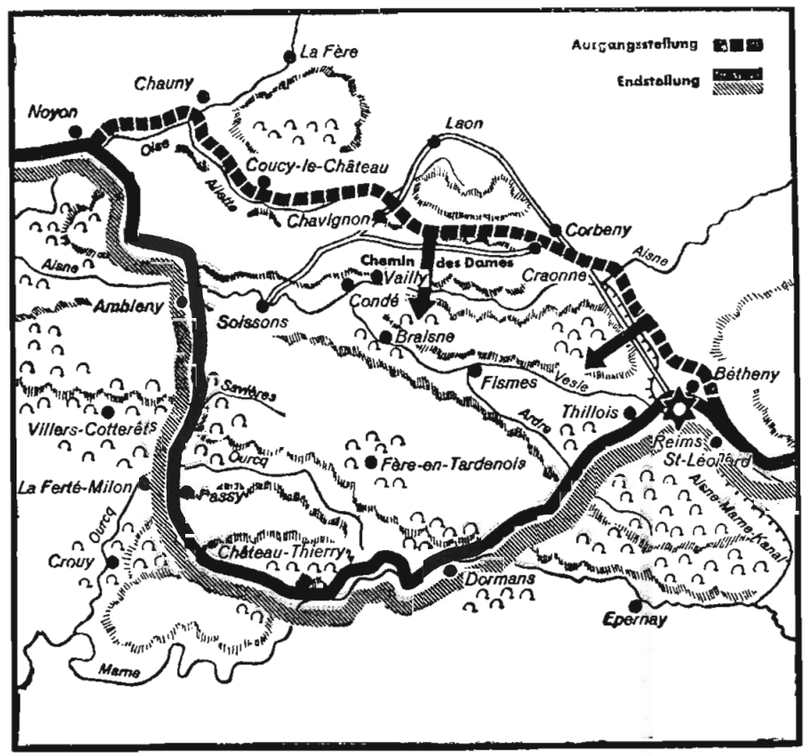
Coupled with this unpalatable fact, Ludendorff recognised that over the past weeks of the offensive there was a significant contrast between the dogged British spirit in adversity and the rapidly deteriorating quality and discipline of his assault troops. The failure of *Michael* and *Mars* had lowered general morale and led to some divisions attacking only after some serious coercion during Operation *Georgette*. The widespread examples of looting and drunkenness among the units that captured British supply dumps and houses in French villages with well-stocked wine cellars during Operation *Michael* underlined the problem of morale.

These breaches of the 'Prussian tradition' to carry out orders without question and the legacy of the huge casualty bill since 21 March were worrying signs, and serious concerns were put to Ludendorff by his commanders and staffs. Crown Prince Rupprecht and General Fritz von Lossberg, chief-of-staff of Fourth Army, stated that there might be little value in persisting with further offensives, and although Ludendorff disagreed, he did concede that dwindling manpower and *matériel* made it impossible to carry out two simultaneous large-scale offensives. Delay between one offensive and another were not only logical but also crucial to allow time for the redeployment of the 'battering train' and concentration of the forces required.

With these considerations in mind, Ludendorff fixed his attention next to a hastily conceived 'Plan B' for defeating the BEF on the Flanders plain. The concept was one of



Operation *Blücher* is launched on 27 May 1918.
(IWM: Q.23.767)



Blücher – Ludendorff's first throw of the dice against the French sector, Chemin des Dames/Champagne, 27 May to 3 June 1918.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg)

the 'indirect method'. He aimed to draw the French south in a series of smaller scale attacks and separate them from the BEF. The British would be isolated and vulnerable, with their backs to the sea, as well as the wall. The German offensives would now turn on the French and Ludendorff chose to invoke the talisman of Wellington's victory against the French at Waterloo, Marshal Blücher, to open *L'Affaire Française*.

Operation *Blücher* was launched against the Chemin des Dames, where the French Nivelle offensive had come to grief almost a year before. With a month's gap between *Georgette* and *Blücher*, OHL had studied and applied many of the lessons learned from *Michael*, *Mars* and *Georgette*. The key was revision of the artillery's role, especially in the effectiveness of the creeping barrage to protect the assaulting infantry. Infiltration tactics made it very difficult to apply flexible fire plans, so one practical change was to allocate an artillery battery to each infantry regiment, making it 'under command' and committed to providing timely indirect fire for that regiment. Much effort had gone into specialist training for fresh troops who were incorporated into the assault divisions and storm troop tactics were modified for the different terrain and French defensive layout.[12]

General von Boehn's Seventh Army faced the French Sixth Army under General Duchêne, augmented by five divisions of the British IX Corps, sent to this sector to recuperate after fighting in both the March and April offensives. With the evil irony that besets some in war, three of these divisions were in the front-line when the offensive crashed into the forward positions on 27 May.

German trench mortar (Minenwerfer) brought into action during Operation *Blücher*.
(Allen Collection)

Ludendorff's choice of the Chemin des Dames was sound, for the layout of the French defences here invited catastrophe. General Duchêne committed what by 1918 was cardinal sin, by packing his forward positions with troops, although the Allied doctrine had changed to flexible, or elastic, defensive tactics. If the German attack was preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment, Duchêne's front line units would be smashed before the assaulting German infantry went over the top. It was; and many French and British defenders were annihilated as feared.

The reason? Boehn was given all the assistance for Blücher that had been noticeably absent during the April offensive in Flanders. Thus, the Seventh Army's assault divisions had the benefit of a preliminary 160-minute hurricane bombardment of 4,000 guns; another classic orchestration by Colonel Georg Bruchmüller, or *Durchbruch-müller* ('Breakthrough-Müller') as he was now known by the German troops. The German barrage began at 1 a.m. (2 a.m. German time) on 27 May and 'was of a violence and accuracy that in the opinion of the most seasoned soldiers far outdid any other barrage that they had experienced'.[13]

The concentration of fire was even greater than that on 21 March and the initial bombardment was a mix of gas and high explosive (HE) at maximum rate of fire. The next phase targeted front-line trenches and belts of barbed wire alongside counter-battery (CB) work, and then rear area targets such as railheads, troop billets and HQ/communication centres were hit with heavy and medium barrages. Finally, the French and British defenders were rocked by drumfire from virtually all the guns as Zero Hour approached.[14]

At 3.40 a.m. seventeen German attack divisions, with the storm troop units in the van and protected by creeping barrages and heavy machine gun fire, rushed forward to assault the Chemin des Dames. The troops of Duchêne's Sixth Army were taken completely by surprise and then stunned by the violence of the whirlwind artillery bombardment.

It was a day of extraordinary success for Boehn and almost unmitigated disaster for Duchêne. The French defences were rolled back to the River Aisne by mid-morning and by the afternoon a huge gap had appeared where the best part of eight French and British divisions had held the line a few hours before. The Aisne bridges behind the forward defence had not been demolished and by evening, the Germans were across the river, had swarmed across the next ridge and reached the River Vesle.

Boehn's leading assault units advanced a staggering 10 to 12 miles by the end of the first day. Compared with the qualified success of the opening day of Operation *Michael*, *Blücher* was an unequivocal triumph.[15] By the end of the next day, Soissons was in German hands and by 3 June, Ludendorff's leading divisions had reached the Marne – the scene of so much heartbreak for German ambitions in 1914. Now it seemed that retribution was in the offing, for the Kaiser's men were only 50 or so miles from Paris and their offensive appeared unstoppable once again.

Operation *Blücher*'s achievement was beyond even Ludendorff's expectations. He was convinced once again that the war was there to be won and decided to reinforce this success, rather than stick with the plan to simply draw French reserves away from the British sector in the north before then launching his decisive blow in Flanders. Plan A (*Kaiserschlacht*) had become Plan B (*Blücher* and other planned French diversionary attacks to mask a decisive offensive in Flanders) and was now in danger of becoming

Operation *Gneisenau*: machine-gun crews brought into action. *(Postcard, Allen Collection)*

Plan C (smashing the French Army and marching on Paris). Ludendorff's increasingly ambivalent nature was there for all to see. It was not a pretty sight. Plan C was about to run into a new obstacle – and a new enemy.

Operation *Blücher* raised Ludendorff's hopes, but the momentum of the offensive was stopped around Chateau Thierry, where the American 2nd and 3rd Divisions supported the French counter-attacks. On 6 June, the 2nd US Division cut the German advance back at Belleau Wood. Though not major actions in the whole scheme of things, the Germans had been served notice: the Americans were not only coming, but they were spoiling for a fight.

Operation *Blücher* had been a spectacular effort and General von Boehn had achieved a brilliant advance. But, as during Operation *Michael* in March, the Germans had boxed themselves into a bag: a deep salient. It was a logistic nightmare, as the bulge in the line across damaged roads and rail links made it more and more difficult to resupply and reinforce the troops at the tip of the German thrust into the French guts. A British officer serving in the sector had traced the advance by the changing line of German observation balloons:

> The great sweeping semi-circle in the sky marked out the German position and suggested its dangers in an extraordinarily clear and graphic manner. The possibilities of a counter-offensive, thrusting at either angle of the bulge, was inevitably brought to mind.[16]

Ludendorff had little choice after 6 June other than to call a halt to *Blücher* and, in an attempt to expand the salient, consolidate the line and divert more French reserves, he brought in General von Hutier, who had provided the illusion of success with the 40-mile penetration of the British defences in March, to launch a new offensive.

The next blow, Operation *Gneisenau*, was to fall in the French sector towards the Matz between Montdidier and Noyon on 9 June. Hutier's Eighteenth Army assaulted on a 21-mile front against the French Third Army, whose commander General Humbert had not quite grasped the in-depth defence methods and made the same mistake of having too many troops forward. Once again, early results looked promising for Hutier and Ludendorff as the first day ended with an advance of 6 miles, and 8,000 French prisoners. But the momentum slowed more quickly this time than in Operation *Blücher* and the French High Command anticipated and dealt with the now all-too-familiar German tactics. On 11 June five French divisions, backed by terrific artillery and low-flying aircraft strafing sorties, carried out the inevitable counter-attack and the German offensive ground to a halt once more.

Operation *Blücher* had sorely pressed the Allies, for the amazing success in its first days had put the German Army once more within a Big Bertha's range of Paris.[17] But they had come through it, and now with increasing American support, whereas Ludendorff's vision of a decisive breakthrough had faded into a distant horizon.

Battle of the Marne: German medics attend to a wounded soldier, July 1918.
(IWM: Q.55374)

With *Gneisenau* and *Blücher* spent, Ludendorff was faced with a further bill of another 130,000-plus casualties, again many of the best of the rest of his forces, and even the achievement of 60,000 Allied prisoners and 850 guns could not soften the blow. After all, as the British had proved in March and April, guns, ammunition and other lost *matériel* could be swiftly replaced. Manpower could now be made good with the lifeblood of American troops pouring into Europe. But Ludendorff was finding it increasingly problematic to replace his lost weapons and *matériel* – and virtually impossible to make good the loss of men.

Most worryingly, as the whole German offensive effort was systematically torn apart, Ludendorff's nerve was unravelling too. The apparition of Helmuth von Moltke (who had died in 1916) and the Marne debacle in September 1914 appeared to stalk Ludendorff. The parallels of the promise of victory dashed by poor strategy and unexpected, fierce enemy resistance then and now, almost four years later, haunted him. His 'Grand Plan', a massive gamble from the outset, was crumbling before his very eyes.

Somehow, he continued to believe that a success in the French sector would set up his forces for a final crack at the British in Flanders, but now even pipedreams were looking dodgy. Nevertheless, like Don Quixote he determined to finish the business in the south with another tip at the French windmill. The ironic twist in the tale came when he fixed on an offensive in the Marne sector. To prepare for a major assault by no less than 43 infantry divisions either side of Reims, 5,000 guns under the baton of another *Bruchmüller* symphony inundated the French defences and the assault troops moved up to their jumping off positions for this 'final blow'.

The Second Battle of the Marne (*Reims-Marneschutz*) began at 12.10 a.m. on 15 July, but this time there was no glorious early success; rather it started badly and went rapidly downhill thereafter. The French Fourth Army, under General Gouraud, knew of the German plans and carried out a pre-emptive artillery counter-barrage onto the trenches packed with German assault troops before they had a chance to move. When they did attack, they were caught left and right and the offensive was almost over before it began. Any brief success was illusory once more, and one German officer who had come through the last four years was moved to write on this day that:

> I have lived through the most disheartening day of the whole war . . . Our guns bombarded empty French trenches . . . in little folds of the ground . . . lay their machine gun posts, like lice in the seams and folds of a garment, to give our attacking force a warm reception . . .[18]

The game was up. The German offensive soon became desperate defence when the French launched a massive counter-offensive on the Marne on 18 July. The ghosts of 1914 had decided to pay Ludendorff and all the Kaiser's men a final, fatal visit.

CHAPTER 14
COURAGE, ENDURANCE, DEFEAT

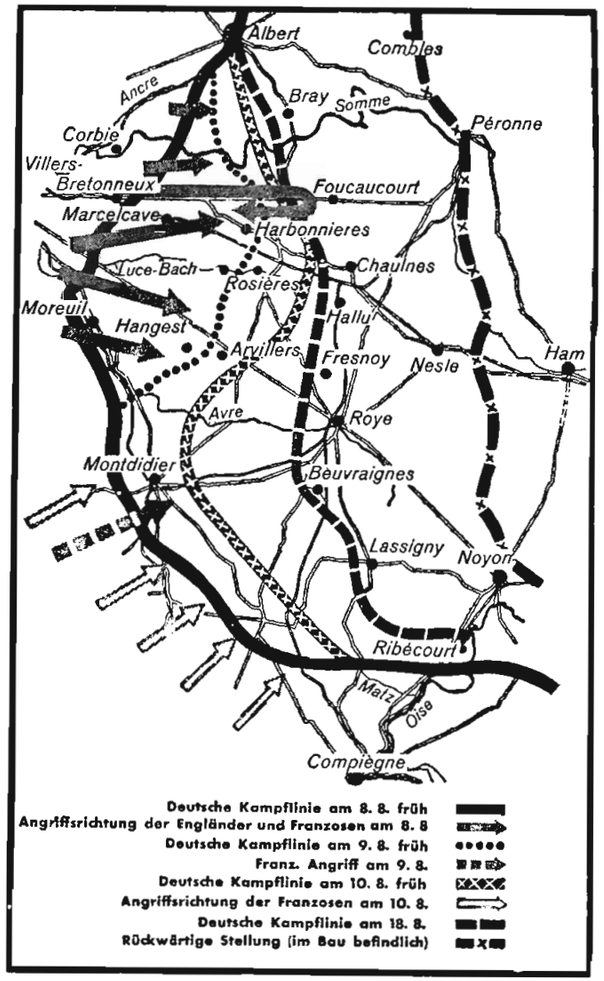
AUGUST–NOVEMBER 1918

By the end of July 1918, with his final offensive repulsed, and his own men being relentlessly mauled, Ludendorff finally realised that the war was no longer winnable. Haig, Foch, and the Allies took to the offensive. In August, the British, French and American armies mounted a series of rolling attacks that ruptured the German defensive line. The most stunning blow came at Amiens on 8 August. It would be Ludendorff's 'Black Day' for the German Army, and after this even he realised that there was no way back. The war would have to be ended, at Germany's cost. The British, Australian and Canadian assault on the German Second Army near Amiens on 8 August was a model of deception, surprise and combined arms operational excellence.

Signals (radio) deception duped the German defenders before the battle and 'predicted' artillery fire guaranteed that there would be no warning of the attack to come. An accurate, devastating bombardment crashed down on the unsuspecting enemy to open the onslaught at 4.20 a.m., and simultaneously the infantry, tanks and air force were launched against the Second Army's positions. A total of 372 Mark V and 72 'whippet' tanks, 800 aircraft (of which 376 were fighters) were in the van and worked brilliantly alongside the advancing infantry. By lunchtime, the Allied success was virtually complete.

The true nature of Ludendorff's 'Black Day' was affirmed by the official German account, which noted that:

> As the sun set on 8 August on the battlefield the greatest defeat since the beginning of the was was an accomplished fact . . . The total loss of the formations employed in the Second Army is estimated at 650 to 700 officers and 26,000 to 27,000 other ranks. More than 400 guns, besides a huge number of



Amiens, 8 August 1918: The 'Black Day' for the German Army and notice to Ludendorff and Hindenburg that the war would be lost.
(Rudolph Stratz, Weltkrieg, p. 361)

machine guns, trench mortars and other war material had been lost . . . More than two-thirds of the total loss had surrendered as prisoners.[1]

By September three Allied Army Groups stood poised to strike: the British in the north, the French in the centre and south and the Americans facing the St Mihiel salient and the Argonne. The American Army Group's first task as a unified force was to eradicate the German Salient, or bulge in the line, at St Mihiel, which they did on 12 September. As one offensive lost its momentum, another would open, giving the Germans no time to reorganise between each Allied assault. The Allied supremo Ferdinand Foch, ordered 'Everyone to the fight', inspiring the Allies to press on to victory.

Most of the Kaiser's men were now utterly resigned to the prospect of defeat and despair. That they fought on in places with such tenacity and in such good order never ceases to impress and amaze many that either witnessed it then or consider it today. But it was a truly awful experience. Soldiers bemoaned their plight:

> Our artillery is fired out . . . We have too few horses. Our fresh troops are anaemic boys in need of rest, who cannot carry a pack, but merely know how to die. By thousands. They understand nothing about warfare, they simply go and let themselves be shot down . . . The summer of 1918 [has been] the most bloody and the most terrible . . . Every man here knows that we are losing the war . . . Still the campaign goes on – the dying goes on.[2]

Ludendorff, Hindenburg and an ever weaker Kaiser held on to the reins of power and the German Army simply held on, amazingly and against the odds.

General Pershing's U.S. First Army carried out its initial independent action on 12 September, when it successfully pinched out the salient at St Mihiel and then planned to seize the Meuse-Argonne sector on 26 September. His task was to assault the strong German defences, break through and thrust then towards Sedan. This entailed overcoming the Hindenburg Line. The terrain here was steep, thickly wooded and formidable. It favoured the defence and Pershing was left with no option but to make a frontal attack.

At Meuse-Argonne, 600,000 American and French troops in two armies would attack side-by-side, supported by 2,700 guns of all calibres, over 500 tanks, principally the Renault light tank, and 1,000 American and French aircraft to augment the offensive.

General Max von Gallwitz planned to exploit the Germans' defensive skills to the full and ensured that the Meuse-Argonne defences, with their well-positioned trench systems, concrete bunkers and deep dugouts, were developed to present a major obstacle to any Allied offensive. By late September 1918, four lines of prepared positions, fourteen miles deep, faced the Americans at Meuse-Argonne and the most daunting was the Kriemhild Line in the rear.

At midnight on Thursday 26 September 1918, Pershing's 2,700 guns fired the first salvo of a massive artillery bombardment. It lasted for four hours, stunning the German defenders of the Meuse-Argonne sector. Shortly after dawn, the American infantry stormed across no-man's-land, supported by incessant artillery fire.

Most of the German defenders had survived the American barrage and they now rose out from their deep dugouts to meet the onslaught. However, Gallwitz was at first

German retreat during the Allied '100-days' campaign. 21cm Howitzer battery in action, October 1918.
(IWM: Q.23.813)

concerned that the American attack might be only a diversion. The weight that Pershing threw behind his assault soon made Gallwitz change his mind. He ordered his troops to counter-attack, which they swiftly did. The German resistance then hardened as their defence tactics began to come into their own. German machine guns were brought out from the dugouts and started to cause havoc among the 'doughboys'. Tank and infantry cooperation was becoming impossible, and as the tanks attacked German bunkers and trenches, they became more vulnerable to the German artillery.

Pershing's army also began to suffer severe resupply problems, caused in part by the difficult landscape and muddy conditions. In many places, the US troops were forced to go into hasty defence to protect themselves against increasingly heavy German artillery fire.

At the beginning of October Pershing desperately regrouped his forces in an effort to break the stalemate at Meuse-Argonne. When the Americans attacked again on 4 October, they did so without a preliminary bombardment. Pershing's men clawed their way forward, despite heavy casualties and by 12 October they were tantalisingly close to assaulting the last bastion of Gallwitz's defence, the Kriemhild Line.

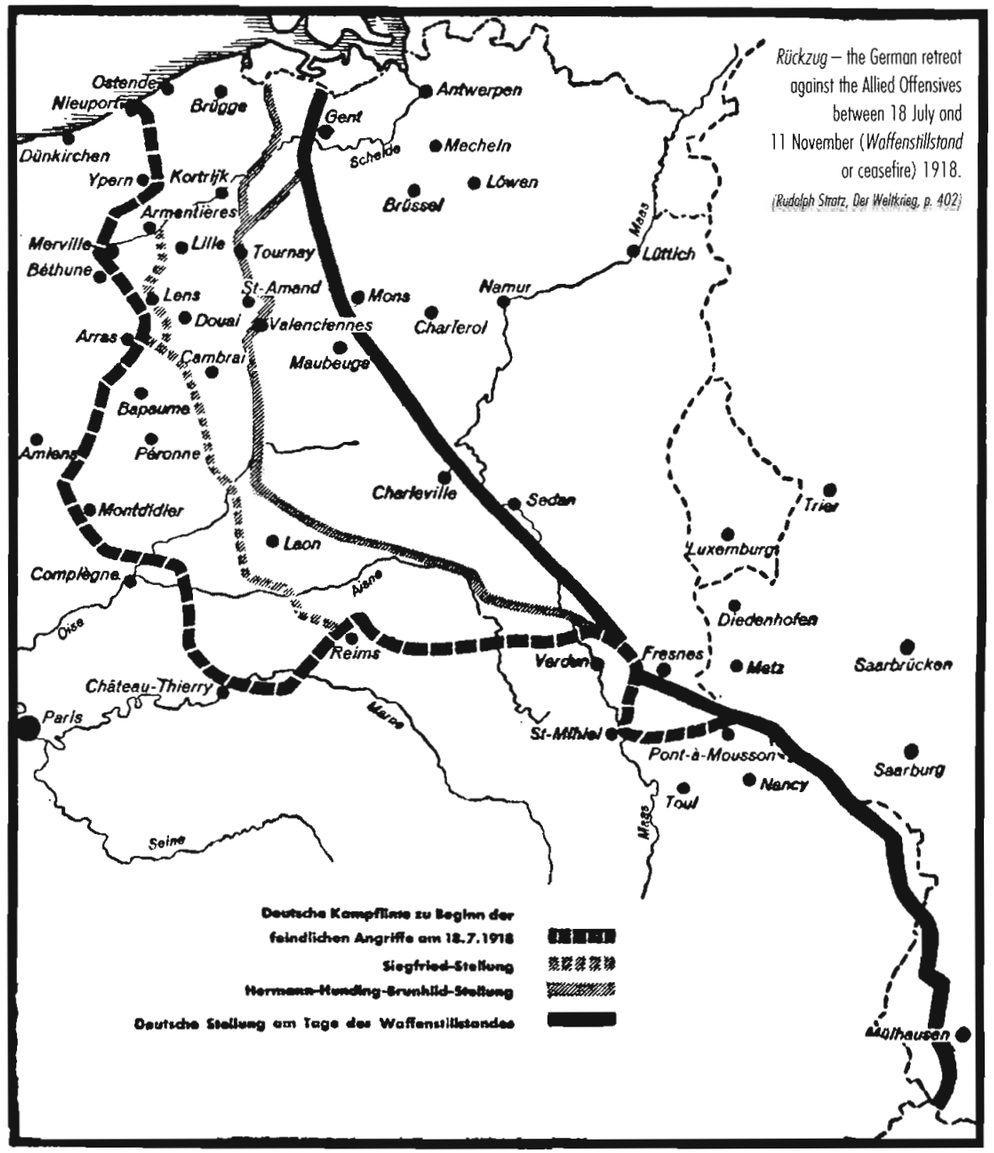
The final assault on the Kriemhild Line began on 14 October. For three days and nights, the gruesome struggle between the gallant 'doughboys' and the still resolute German defenders continued. With the advantages of increasing fire support, the Americans began to make headway and the German defences started to buckle.

The 'doughboys' were finally beginning to clear the Kriemhild Line. On 16 October Brigadier-General Douglas MacArthur, commanding 83rd Brigade of the US 42nd 'Rainbow' Division, led his men from the front to capture one of the last German redoubts. The Germans began to surrender in droves.

The Kriemhild Line was at last in American hands. Pershing had finally reached the line that he had planned to capture almost a month before, and had advanced on towards Sedan. All that there remained to do was final mopping-up operations.

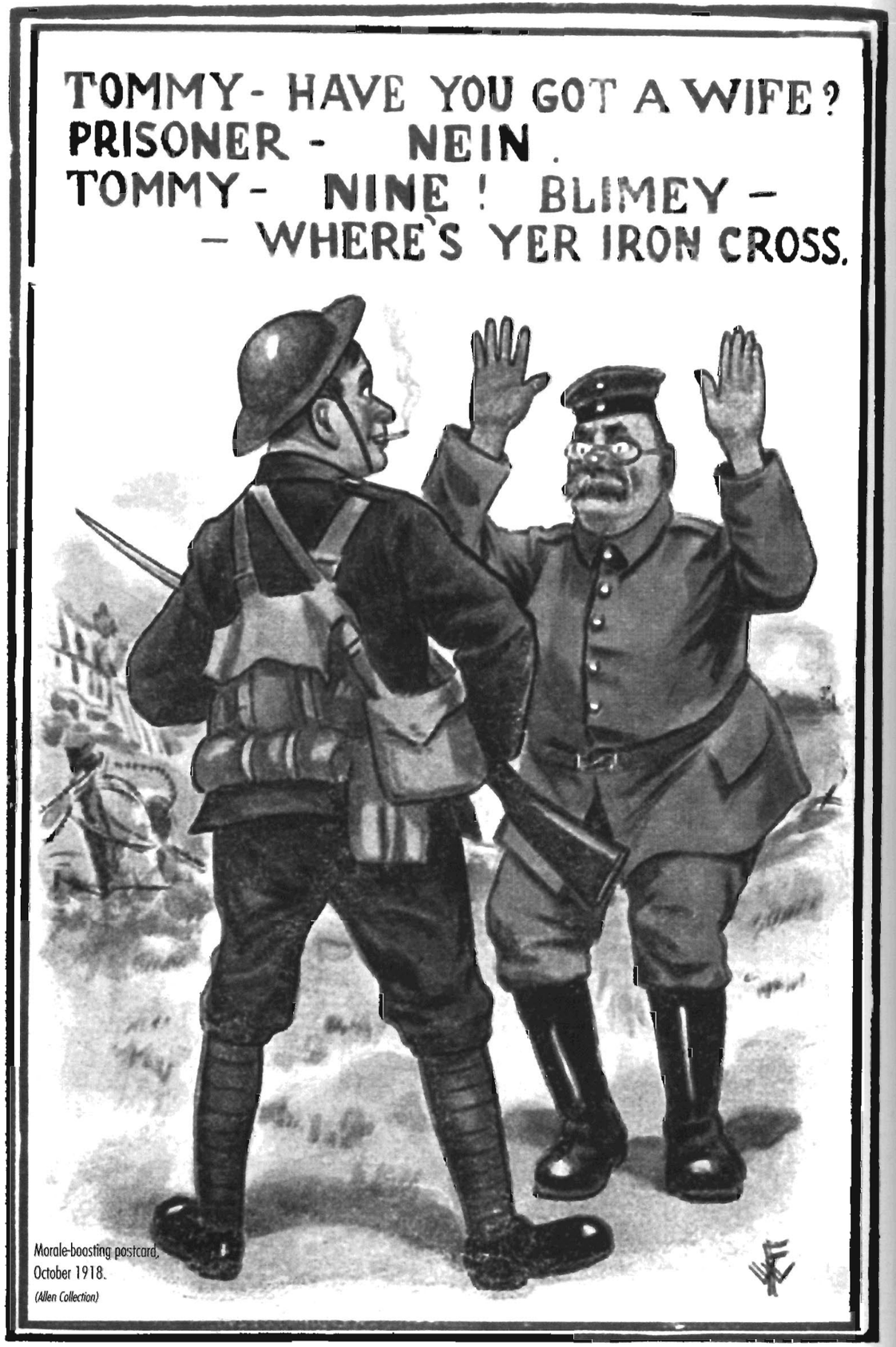
The titanic struggle had cost Gallwitz's Army Group 80,000 casualties, killed, wounded and prisoners. But the American success had been wrought at a high price too. During the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the Americans had suffered 117,000 casualties; almost 40 per cent of the total American losses for the war.

By early October the relentless Allied assaults had broken through the Hindenburg Line and forced the Germans back over 50 miles. As the advance continued, German morale dropped to a dangerous level across much of the Front. German troops facing the 28th Infantry Brigade/9th Scottish Division decided that they had had enough before the next phase of the offensive continued in the Ypres sector on 20 September. It was recorded that a number of Germans had surrendered to the sentry posts that night and that more would have crossed no-man's-land had their NCOs not prevented them from doing so. Commenting on this incident, the Brigade Commander noted that: 'The enemy's morale must have dipped; one has rarely heard of such a thing happening before an action . . .'[3]



Rückzug – the German retreat against the Allied Offensives between 18 July and 11 November (*Waffenstillstand* or ceasefire) 1918.
(Rudolph Stratz, Der Weltkrieg, p. 402)

It was true, then. Despite their determined efforts, the Kaiser's men were exhausted and could no longer sustain a coherent defence. By now, almost one million Germans had been killed, wounded or captured. It was evident to every one of the Kaiser's men that the pendulum had swung dramatically against them. Edwin Kühns recorded in his diary on 7 October:



Morale-boosting postcard, October 1918.
(Allen Collection)

> On 7 October our days were up. We were in retreat. We had to take over three [telephone exchange] stations [between Valenciennes and Maubeuge] . . . We were just days here when one formation after another arrived until, in the end, the village was overflowing. As well as these [troops] there were refugees . . . the market square was full of them and they had to remain for the night . . . Many died.[4]

The Allied offensives continued throughout October and, although some pockets of resistance remained, the German Army was effectively finished. With her armies crumbling and with unrest at home, Germany sued for peace and the Kaiser abdicated. Ludendorff, a broken and bitter man, had no choice but to resign in late October.

The nightmare of the First World War had finally ended.

Between March and July 1918 Haig and Foch passed their sternest test. By the end of the first fortnight of the German onslaught, both knew that the Allies could hold on and this they had done with cool heads, supported by the extraordinary courage, skill and adaptability of the men under their command.

Some of the 400,000 German prisoners taken after 18 July 1918.
(IWM: Q22281)

In contrast Ludendorff, having initially failed to make a decisive breakthrough, saw no other option but to continue his attacks. Thereafter, each renewed offensive set a desperate, costly pattern of fleeting initial success, containment and then bloody failure. Though some apparently enormous gains were made, their importance was illusory. Not one town or city was captured of tactical or strategic importance and no breakthrough had been achieved.

The cost, on the other hand, was enormous. In the final nine months of the war, the German Army had lost over one million men. Almost 400,000 were taken prisoner by the Allied armies in the period of the sustained advance since 18 July 1918, the offensive known popularly as the '100 Days': 188,700 by the BEF and a further 139,000 by the French, with the balance captured by U.S. (43,300) and Belgian (14,500) armies; a grand total of 385,500.[5]

In that period in the BEF sector alone, the Germans had faced no less than nine separate, but continuous battles, which served to keep them on the back foot and make it impossible to ever really regroup as they had successfully done after Allied attacks in the past.[6] The Allies had suffered heavily too. For example, the BEF sustained around 375,000 casualties in total between August and November. But the Allies had both the resources and the manpower to be able to turn the tide, which they had done in a comprehensive manner.

Ludendorff, Haig and Foch had been tested to breaking point in 1918. It was Ludendorff, not the C-in-C of the BEF and French supremo who had failed that test. His deception at the beginning of the year, which led his men to believe that they were capable of sustaining an all-out offensive against the Western Allies, who were overwhelmingly better equipped for sustained operations, and his nervous breakdown after Amiens guaranteed Germany's failure.

At the end, all the Kaiser's men had been out-fought and inexorably ground down by a combination of the courage, determination and bloody-mindedness of the Allied soldiers, well-coordinated, planned and executed all-arms offensives, and an overwhelming superiority in logistic support and *matériel*. *Materialschlacht* had brought them to their knees.

Regardless of the *Dolchstoss*, or 'stab-in-the-back', theory in Germany after the war and both historical myth and emotive perception in more recent years, the irrefutable fact is that the First World War was a military defeat for the main enemy in the main theatre of war – Germany.

But military victory has seldom guaranteed lasting peace. So it would be in the aftermath of Armistice.

CHAPTER 15

DOLCHSTOSS: VERSAILLES AND THE DIABOLICAL LEGACY

Reconciliation (November 1918)
When you are standing at your hero's grave,
Or near some homeless village where he died,
Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done
And you have nourished hatred harsh and blind.
But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find
The mothers of the men who killed your son.

Siegfried Sassoon

In 1914 the Schlieffen Plan had proved to be a paper tiger. Any chance of success was wiped out by poor control at the highest level of German Army command, the unexpected gallantry of the Belgians, the suicidal élan of the French Army and the professional doggedness of the BEF. Simultaneously, unexpectedly swift mobilisation by the 'Russian steamroller' in the East and an offensive towards East Prussia led to General von Moltke's decision to despatch two additional German Army Corps from the Western to the Eastern Front. All combined to slow, then stall the German war machine rolling through Belgium, then France.

The depleted German force fighting the Belgian and Anglo-French forces no longer had the necessary impetus to achieve its original objectives. The Allies fought them to a standstill between 6 and 10 September during the 'Miracle on the Marne'. Moltke was sacked for his dilatory, indecisive conduct of the war in its first weeks and was replaced by General von Falkenhayn.

The Marne was followed by the series of attempted outflanking manoeuvres (popularly but inaccurately known as the 'Race for the Sea') and, by the winter of 1914, to static, principally defensive trench warfare, the antithesis to German, or Prussian, military tradition.

'The curse of the Marne' would come back to haunt each of the commanders of the German Army who were to follow the unfortunate Moltke. 'The curse of the Marne' encompasses the inherent pattern of indecisiveness and then loss of command authority that were characteristic of Moltke in September 1914 on the Marne, Falkenhayn in his conduct of the Verdun and early phases of the Somme campaign in 1916, and finally Ludendorff with the *Kaiserschlacht*, the German spring offensives of 1918.

The German Army fought with great skill and tenacity throughout the war on the Western Front. Its soldiers certainly had the professional potential, doggedness and motivation to achieve victory in the West, just as they did in the East. But Germany not only lost the war, but was also humiliated and ruined as a result. So why did the highly regarded, generally competent and resolute German Army fail in the main theatre of war, the Western Front, in the First World War? The reasons are fundamental and diametrically opposite to widely held perceptions.

The first factor was that of command. On the Western Front, the German Army was committed to five major offensives between August 1914 and July 1918. These were the German invasion of France and Belgium under the Schlieffen Plan; the first battle of Ypres in 1914; the second Ypres offensive in April and May 1915; the Verdun offensive between February and July 1916; and finally the series of German 'Peace' or *Friedenssturm* offensives between March and July 1918. Ultimately, each one of these offensives failed to achieve their stated objectives, but added further enormous cost to the ever-dwindling pool of German manpower – the reality, not the myth.

Despite the almost overwhelming tide of popular perception that 1916 was a year of senseless slaughter on the Allied side, the combined effects of the German Army's experience of the 'Mill on the Meuse' at Verdun and the desperate defence of the Somme throughout 1916 forced Ludendorff and Hindenburg to voluntarily withdraw up to 20 miles in places under Operation *Alberich* in March 1917 to occupy the *Siegfried Stellung* or Hindenburg Line. This policy rather diminished Ludendorff's own view that: 'The offensive is the most effective means of war: it alone is decisive.'

In fact, if 1916 saw the loss of most of the battle-hardened veterans of the old 1914 German Army, 1917 was perhaps the real turning point of the war, as vital cogs in the First World War machine clicked into place, forcing a fateful decision on Ludendorff by the year's end. These were the psychological effect of America's declaration of war on 6 April, the gathering pace of revolution and finally, military capitulation in Russia. On the Western Front, Ludendorff was encouraged by mutinies in the French Army presaged by the debacle of the Nivelle offensive in April/May. But simultaneously, the German Army had to endure the grinding and costly defence against the British at Arras, Vimy Ridge, Messines, 3rd Ypres and the opening phase of Cambrai.

By the end of 1917, however, Russia was out of the war, French military resolve remained questionable and America lacked significant strength in Europe. Ludendorff realised that this combination of events had left him with a diabolical choice. The fateful decision was made, ironically, at Mons on 11 November 1917. He planned for a major offensive in the early months of 1918. The main aim was to crush the British Army, and then encourage an isolated French Army to sue for peace, before the Americans could deploy its vast manpower reserve to the Western Front. Ludendorff admitted that the offensive strategy was a high-risk gamble, a final card to play in the dreadful game of this war. If the gamble failed, Germany would lose the war . . . The gamble was doomed to fail.

The fact remains that Britain and France forced the German Army on to the back foot for the majority of the war on the Western Front. Its strong defences bore ample witness to their desire to stay put, conducting a defensive strategy rather than seeking a more offensive stance.

Overall, the German High Command had obviously paid little heed to the maxim that:

> . . . An army which thinks mainly in defensive terms is doomed. It yields initiative and advantage in time and space to an enemy – even an enemy inferior in numbers. It loses the sense of the hunter – the opportunist.[1]

In short, when their stated aims were frustrated by unexpected British and French resistance in 1914, 1915, 1916 and 1918, each of Germany's supreme commanders vacillated, panicked, or found it impossible to adapt to the changing situation. This, in turn, diluted the power of the German army. The soldiers were betrayed by their leaders and sacrificed on the altar of vanity and hubris.

The change of Commanders-in-Chief from Joffre, to Nivelle, to Pétain and finally Foch had a deleterious effect on the French Army, and also on the relationship between the French and the British, including Field Marshal French. But the British stood firm with Haig as C-in-C for the majority of the war.

The Allied military commanders always had to answer to their political masters, whereas from 1916 onwards, Ludendorff and Hindenburg were the heads of a military dictatorship in Germany. The Kaiser was marginalized and then all but ignored by the military leadership. From early 1917, Ludendorff had virtually free rein to conduct the war as he wished and became de facto leader and dictator.

The second factor is that of the much-vaunted General Staff. Unlike the British Army, the German General Staff system allowed more junior officers authority, unthinkable in the Allied Forces. In some cases it proved to be brilliantly successful, for example in the case of *Oberst* (and later General) Fritz von Lossberg, who became Germany's military defensive expert. But even in this case, the fact that he became known as 'Ludendorff's fireman' proved that German tactical doctrine was not working at the operational and tactical level.

On the other hand, there were notable and highly significant failures – most notable of which was *Oberst-Leutnant* Richard Hentsch, who was given full authority to order General von Bülow's Second and General von Klück's First Armies to retreat during the Battle of the Marne. It was a directive confirmed by Moltke on 11 September 1914, and it presaged the first major defeat of the German Army in the war.

The significance of this interference, coupled with Moltke's obvious loss of authority and his command in mid-September 1914, cannot be overstated. The German campaign of 1914 was founded on the concept of a swift and decisive victory in the West by the 40th day of mobilisation. When the plan was altered and the strategy shifted by Moltke, Germany's first great gamble of the war failed.

The Schlieffen Plan was the only German recipe for success. Once it failed there was no 'Plan B'. As Holger Herwig noted:

> . . . the Battle of the Marne revealed the shortcomings of the Prussian General Staff system. Moltke . . . chose simply to issue general directives and to leave the actual campaigns with his army commanders. Neither Bülow nor Klück was up to the task . . . And that a mere Lieutenant-Colonel from Staff Headquarters could redirect the entire operations of the two most senior commanders in the German army, both in the rank of Colonel-General, speaks volumes for the critical over-dominance of the 'demi-gods' of the General Staff.[2]

The third factor is one of crucial importance – that of logistics. As the war ground on, the German Army was increasingly limited by its inability to provide its troops with the resources that were vital to the war–winning strategy.

Much of this was due to the effectiveness of the Allied naval blockade of Germany, which presaged great hardship of the Home Front and helped to ensure that any serious thought of equipping the German Army with massed tank formations and especially masses of motorised transport, was at best fanciful.

In March 1918, these logistic limitations, imposed on the German Army attempting to press home its advantage during the vitally important early days of the offensive in the West, were obvious. Unlike the British, and to some extent the French, the German Army relied more and more on its dwindling reserves of manpower. Furthermore, when German troops overran the Allied supply dumps and hitherto untouched French and Belgian population centres, they found food, wine and other supplies denied to them for months, if not years.

Such discoveries led to serious breakdowns in both discipline and morale, although it is vital to underline here that, contrary to the view of some, this was not the major factor in the ultimate collapse of the German offensives in 1918. Rather, this was an indicator that the soldiers of the German Army had been deliberately misinformed about the apparently parlous logistical state of the Allied forces as well as their own.

When turning to the offensive it had always failed because of fatal flaws in the planning and conduct of each campaign.

German soldiers might well have felt as through they had been 'stabbed in the back' when the end came in November 1918. But the dagger had been thrust there by their own military masters and *not* by the politicians who were to become the 'November criminals' on which the *Dolchstoss Theorie* would thrive. *Dolchstoss* was by no means a universally accepted notion. Most ordinary officers and men who had fought and come through the dreadful experience of this war were determined to put the prospect of future violence aside.

But Germany was a place of violence in the months immediately after Armistice. After months of recuperation from serious wounds, a German officer was almost a victim of the chaos of this 'revolution'. Home with his parents after leaving hospital, he was jeered by Communist agitators for wearing his Army uniform. Suddenly, the mob shouted, 'Kill the dog, Officer scum, bloodhound!' He was chased, but managed to find a place of refuge as the crowd stormed by. He later wrote:

> I stood here for some time, deep in thought. I was not angry with the goaded people . . . just boundlessly sorrowful . . . 'So this is the gratitude of my native country for those four terrible years.' . . . Since that hour, I have never worn the uniform.[3]

Men like Albert Mühmelt, who had survived but lost two brothers during the

Ein unbekannter Deutscher Soldat – an unknown German soldier.
(Ian Passingham)

war, were just relieved to have seen it through. He would carve out a new life for himself and his family after the war – and bitterly oppose the revival of German militarism under the Nazi régime.

The First World War affected the German Home Front in ways unimaginable before 1914. Hunger became the main factor for the majority of the population and food shortages had appeared as early as autumn 1914. They became critical in late 1915, but the 'Turnip Winter' of 1916/17 was a dreadful experience from which Germany could never hope to recover.

Food riots became as commonplace as the interminable queues, which became the centres of rumours, distrust and suspicion. Horsemeat replaced beef and pork and a plethora of *Ersatz* products threatened to poison consumers with chemical derivatives. By 1916 there was little coal and items that had been taken for granted in the summer of 1914 such as soap, natural fats, butter, cheese and eggs. Hoarding, smuggling and the black market drove a wedge through social structures and between the urban and rural populations, as well as the rich and poor.

As a result of the dire state of the German economy and widespread privation, general health deteriorated dramatically. Civilian mortality doubled, then trebled, between 1914 and 1918. Infant mortality doubled in the final eighteen months of the war. Tuberculosis (TB) and the decimating influenza pandemic struck more easily in Germany because of the generally poor state of health.

Ultimately and inevitably, all these conditions combined to destroy the fabric of a formerly orderly and united society and undermined Germany's very legitimacy. The war rent the traditional home asunder.

Above all, the Allied naval blockade cruelly exposed Germany's myths of self-sufficiency and governmental and administrative efficiency. As the demands of the war grew ever greater after the first few months of the conflict, those on the Home Front were forced to fight the burgeoning enemies of social disintegration, hunger, disease and death. The Versailles' Treaty would merely compound the problem and give the Weimar Republic no realistic hope of an honourable revival in the Fatherland.

German defeat in the field, and starvation and revolution at home were terrible consequences of the 'great adventure' that all the Kaiser's men and the German people were now paying for. But the casualties at the Front and deaths from privation at home were dwarfed worldwide by the insidious influenza pandemic (known as *la grippe*), which killed an estimated 27 million people globally; two and a half times the number of servicemen and civilians killed as a result of the First World War.

Though the particular strain of the disease had been germinating for years, its virulence was enhanced by the unique set of factors: the unsanitary conditions of life in the trenches; the generally poor diet of millions of people across Europe and the Near East and the ever-increasing crowding of towns and cities worldwide. These all combined in early 1918 and provided the 'Spanish 'flu' with limitless breeding grounds.

The disease ran its course from spring 1918 to the middle of 1919, reaching its peak

Reichsarchivzweigstelle Dresden

IV Nr. 101/479/1075

Bei Rückfragen ist diese Bescheinigung beizufügen

Dresden-N15, den 20. August 1934.
Arsenalhauptgebäude, Eingang Tor A, Königsbrücker Straße
Fernruf 544 47

Militär-Dienstzeitbescheinigung*)

über den ehem. Grenadier Albert Georg M ü h m e l t ,

geboren am 21. 2. 1897 in S c h a b e n a u - Breslau - Pr.

1. Dienstverhältnisse:
a) vor dem Kriege: keine.

b) nach Eintritt der Mobilmachung: 3. 4. 1916 b. 1.Rekr.-D. I.Ers.-Btl. Gren.-Regt. 101 eing.
17. 8. 1916 z. 1. Komp. Feldr.-D.23.R.D.
8. 12. 1916 z. 12. " Gren.-Res.-Regt. 100
16. 11. 1917 z. 5.(Gen.)Kp.II.Ers.-Batl. Gren.-Res.-Rgt.100
27. 4. 1918 z. 1. Komp. Ers.-Batl. Gren.-Regt. 100
30. 4. 1918 z. 12. " Gren.-Res.-Regt. 100
14. 10. 1918 in englische Gefangenschaft geraten.
Entlassen: 10. Oktober 1919 vom Durchgangslager Hamelburg.

2. Gefechtshandlungen bzw. Aufenthalt im Kriegsgebiet:

(Anordnungsgemäß erfolgt für jedes Jahr nur Angabe einer Kampfhandlung oder eines zweimonatigen Aufenthalts)

1914:
1915:
1916: 23.8.1916 – 15.3.1917 Stell.-K. im Artois;
1917:
1918: 3.5.– 28.6. Kämpfe zw. Arras und Albert.

3. Beförderungen:

4. Orden: Eisernes Kreuz zweiter Klasse am 31. 10. 1917 verliehen.

5 Bemerkungen: Am 26.9.1917 dch. A.G. am linken Arm verwundet.

Vorstehende Angaben stimmen mit der Kriegs~~rangliste~~/Stammrolle Bd.Nr. 101/479/1075 überein.

I. A.

*) Militärpässe werden bestimmungsgemäß nicht mehr ausgestellt.

Vordr. 86 a

REICHSARCHIVZWEIGSTELLE DRESDEN

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Service Record of Albert Mühmelt.
(Farley Family Collection)

Albert Mühmelt (back row, right with one cross above his head) as a prisoner of war under British care in November 1918.
(Farley Family Collection)

in the final autumn of the war. Almost 50 per cent of its victims were within the 15–35 age-group. Consequently, thousands of men who had come through the bloody experience of the conflict were struck down by the deadly 'flu' in the final weeks of the war, or soon after. On the other hand, thousands of loved ones who had waited stoically for the return of their husband, father, brother or friend were themselves infected and died before seeing their loved ones again. Whether a soldier had fought for God and the King or for the Kaiser believing *Gott mit uns*, it was difficult to believe in a God when this final cruelty in a world already horribly scarred by war took another loved one from a person at this terrible time.

The influenza carried other complications in its wake, such as pneumonia and its debilitating effects. It also exacerbated the effects of other medical problems, leading or contributing to heart disease, tuberculosis, miscarriages and many other ailments. Therefore, it would be impossible to give an entirely accurate total figure of those struck down globally. What is irrefutable is that over 13 million Germans, one in five of the population, suffered from the disease and between 10–15 per cent died in the pandemic period of influenza or similar symptoms.[4]

An estimated 1,808,545, but probably 2 million, German servicemen were killed in action during the First World War, with a further 4,250,000 wounded. The German total of around 6 million battle casualties compare with 5 million French casualties (1,385,000 of whom were killed) and 2,700,000 British/Dominion casualties (around one million dead) on the Western Front (total worldwide of 947,085 dead from total casualties of 3,260,581). This represents 6 million against approximately 8 million casualties overall. Over 1,300,000 German troops were killed in France and Belgium alone. These statistics are remarkable on the Allied side, rather than the lower German casualty bill when compared with the French and BEF total, when one takes into account the fact that the German Army was on the defensive on the Western Front for most of the war and the Allies had to maintain an offensive posture.

Let us never forget that Germany had invaded and occupied most of a neutral country – Belgium – and violated that neutrality in the first instance, as well as invading France. The courage and skill of the BEF and French Army in the late summer and autumn of 1914 prevented the predicted German victory and thereafter, the Germans had the advantage of choosing the ground on which they would defend their ill-gotten gains in the West.

The number of American troops killed was 115,660 out of a total casualty figure of 325,876; the Russian Army lost over two million dead and a minimum of a further 5 million wounded between August 1914 and November 1917. However, it should be borne in mind and in context that 80 per cent of those who served in the British and Dominion forces in the First World War survived and, above all, that the Western Allies – i.e. France and Britain supported by her Empire forces – won the war on the ground. The great importance of the USA entering the war in April 1917 and thereafter was the psychological, rather than purely military, factor.

The achievement of the Allies was that they overcame a formidable enemy in the main theatre of war – the Western Front – in the First World War. The main theatre of war in the Second World War after 22 June 1941 was undoubtedly the Eastern Front where over 10 million Soviet servicemen died in order to defeat the bulk of the German armed forces by May 1945.

In the early years after 1918, artists and writers predicted that the new, democratic Germany of the Weimar Republic would spring from the ashes of the *Weltkrieg*. But its fragile growth would find little sustenance from a soil poisoned by defeat and

humiliation. It would spring up, briefly, but soon be consumed by its crippling economic burden, the failure of a toothless League of Nations, a global financial recession and the growth of extremist ideology, all of which would sink fledgling democracies like Germany across Europe without trace.

Perversely, by 1933, Germany was desperate for a new way, a new faith and a new messiah to revive the Fatherland and make it great once more. National Socialism appeared to provide all three: and most German people were prepared to believe in the new vision. However, under Adolf Hitler, and like the Kaiser's dream a generation before, it was to become a living and bloody nightmare. The 'Führer' would lead the Fatherland into an even deeper abyss than the one into which it fell in 1918.

Gefreiter Adolf Hitler.
(Rudolf Sitatz, 'Weltkrieg)

APPENDICES

I German Ranks and Equivalents 1914–1918

German Rank	Nominal Command/Equivalent Rank
General Officers	
Generalfeldmarschall	Group of Armies/Field Marshal
Generaloberst	Army/Colonel-General
General der Infanterie/Kavallerie or }	Corps/General of Inf/Cav/Arty
General der Artillerie }	
Generalleutnant	Division/Lieutenant-General
Generalmajor	Brigade/Major-General
Regimental Officers	
Oberst	Regiment/Colonel
Oberstleutnant	Second-in-Command of Regiment/Lt Col
Major	Battalion/Major
Hauptmann	Captain – Inf, Arty & Engrs
Rittmeister	Captain – Cav, Air service, Train (i.e. logistics units)
Oberleutnant	Lieutenant
Leutnant	Second Lieutenant
Feldwebelleutnant (not commissioned)	Sergeant Major Lieutenant
Offizierstellvertreter	Acting (Probationary) Officer
Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)	
Fähnrich	Ensign
Oberfeldwebel*	Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM)
Feldwebel*	Coy Sergeant Major (CSM)
Wachtmeister*	Battery/Squadron CSM
Vizefeldwebel*	Colour Sergeant (Inf, Foot Arty & Engrs)
Vizewachtmeister*	Staff Sergeant (Cav, Field and General Art Logistic units)
Sergeant	Sergeant
Unteroffizier }	Corporal
Oberjäger }	Corporal in Jäger battalion
Obergefreiter	Bombardier (Arty)
Gefreiter	Lance-Bombardier or Lance-Corporal (Inf other arms cf. Arty)
Schütze, Grenadier, Jäger, etc	Private (German title depends on type of Regiment in Inf units)

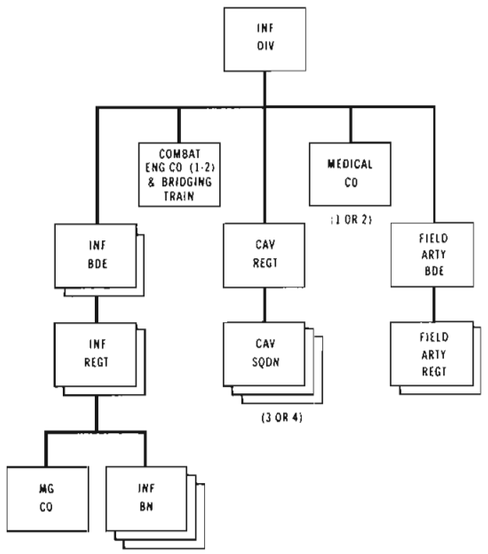
* = All NCOs marked with * were entitled to wear a sash (*Portepee*) to signify senior NCO rank and were classed as *Portepeeträger* (literally: 'sash-wearers').

Source: General Staff GHQ BEF, *Handbook of the German Army in War: April 1918* (London/Nashville, IWM/Battery Press).

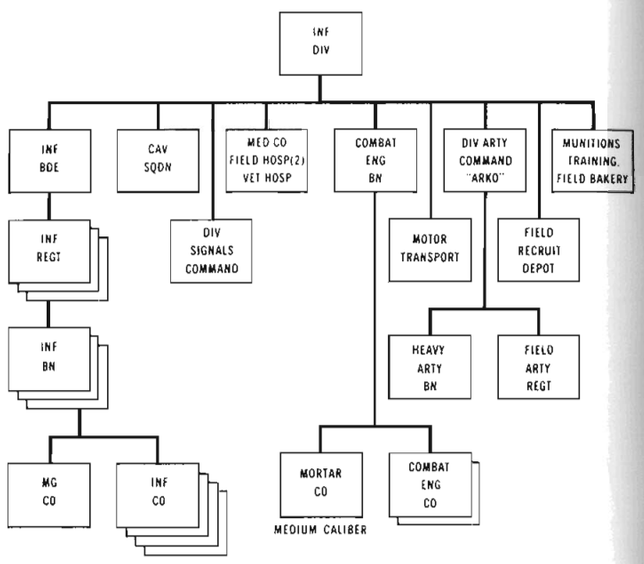
II German Infantry Division Order of Battle (ORBAT) 1914 and 1918

Note
A German infantry division usually consisted of two brigades, each of three regiments. The regiment comprised three battalions, so therefore equated to a British brigade, rather than a regiment. 'Regiment' in the British Army is normally the honorary title of a number of battalions recruited from the same area, for example: 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Scots Guards Regiment.

German Infantry Division, 1914



German Infantry Division, early 1918



German Infantry Division, 1914 and early 1918.
(Contemporary Diagram)

III German Army Weapons: Characteristics & Ranges 1914–1918

Infantry Weapons

Mauser Gewehr 98/Bayonet 98/05
The standard German rifle throughout the First World War was the bolt-action, high-velocity 7.92mm Mauser-produced *Gewehr* 98. A magazine-fed repeating rifle, in common with the standard British Lee-Enfield SMLE (short magazine Lee-Enfield) and French (*Lebel* 86/93 or *Berthier* 07/15) rifles, it had an effective range of 300 yards for the average infantryman and 500–600 yards as a 'squad' weapon when firing at a mass target.

The German bayonet was the 98/05, which had a fourteen-inch blade.

Snipers
German snipers usually fired the *Gewehr* 98 fitted with a 'X4' telescopic sight. Special ammunition was manufactured, but in the latter part of the war, this was generally unavailable.

Machine Guns
The German Army was issued with the infamous belt-fed MG08 7.92mm medium machine gun with a cyclic rate of fire of 600 rounds per minute and a range of around 2,000 metres. The MG08 and British Maxim or Vickers machine guns were used with great skill throughout the war and have been cited as the main killer on the Western Front. This dubious honour goes hands down to the artillery, which was responsible for almost 60 per cent of the casualties suffered throughout the war, compared with around 30 per cent from machine gun and rifle fire. But the machine gun often held up major attacks and inflicted heavy casualties on both sides.

From 1916 onwards the German infantry, including assault/storm troop detachments, were issued with the belt-fed model MG 08/15 light machine gun, which was designed to match the British Lewis light machine gun as a more portable infantry section weapon in preference to the more cumbersome MG 08. By 1918 there were six MG 08/15s per German infantry company.

The most innovative of the small arms brought into the German arsenal was the magazine-fed, short-muzzled 9mm Bergmann sub-machine gun, which was used extensively by storm troops during the offensives of 1918.

Grenades
Grenades, or 'bombs' as they were popularly known, were for close-quarter fighting and ideal weapons for trench clearing on both sides. The most famous hand grenade of both world wars was the German *Stielhandgranate*, or 'stick-grenade'. Based on a thin metal can-like explosive-filled head, it had a hollow wooden handle for the fuse. The Tommies knew it as a 'potato masher' because of its shape. The characteristic handle helped to give it extra range and accuracy than the British and French equivalent grenades, but it was not as lethal, as it relied more on blast than on fragmentation effect.

The other principal German hand grenade was the *Eiergranate*, or 'egg-grenade', so called because of its shape. Though its range was even greater than that of the stick-grenade, it too had a relatively poor effect unless thrown into a confined space, such as a sap or dugout.

Mortars
The German Army was equipped with light, medium and heavy *Minenwerfer*. Front line units were also armed with the smaller *Granatenwerfer*, or grenade thrower. The 250mm (25cm) heavy mortar had a mortar bomb weighing over 200lb, with an explosive charge of over 103lb and a range of over 500 yards. Its effects were devastating, leaving a huge crater on impact. German mortar rounds were often known as 'Moaning Minnies' on account of the noise that they made when fired. The one advantage of the mortars was that they could be spotted in flight and troops could at least attempt to take evasive action.

Flamethrowers
The Germans had two models in the early part of the war: the *Kleinflammenwerfer*, with a range of 18 metres, carried by one man; and the *Gross-flammenwerfer*, elevated by two men. The light-weight self-igniting *Wex* was used from 1917.

Field Artillery

77mm: 1896 n/A. and F.K. 16 Field Guns

The 77mm *Feldkanone* field gun was the staple field artillery weapon of the German Army and equivalent to the outstanding French quick-firing 75mm *Soixante-Quinze* and British 18-pdr field guns. There were two models, the 1896 n/A (*Feldkanone* 96 n/A. & F.K. 16, *Feldkanone* 1916 pattern). Maximum ranges were between 6,500 and 11,264 yards, depending on type of shell and charge used. It used HE, shrapnel, smoke, 'star' shell flare and gas shells. With its flat trajectory, it was an excellent quick-fire weapon in support of infantry and after 1916 it was utilised as a formidable anti-tank weapon.

10.5cm (105mm): 98/09 Light Field Howitzer

The *leichte Feldhaubitze* 98/09 (l.F.H. 98/09) was based on the 1898 pattern field howitzer, but entirely remodelled and mounted on a shielded recoil carriage. By the end of the war there were three variants; the 98/09 pattern, 1916 version (l.F.H. 16) and the *Krupp* (l.F.H. Kp.). It used HE, shrapnel, smoke, 'star' shell flare and gas shells. Maximum ranges were between 7,655 and 11,210 yards, depending on type of shell and charge used.

Medium and Heavy Guns

The proportion of guns to howitzers in the German foot artillery was approximately 25 to 75 per cent respectively. The guns in most common use were the 10cm (4.1in), 13cm (5.3in), 15cm (5.9in) guns and 24cm (9.4in) naval gun. The calibres of the heavy howitzer batteries were more standardised, comprising the 15cm (5.9in) and 21cm (8.3in) howitzers.

10cm Gun

There were four patterns of the 10cm gun; 10cm gun, 10cm gun '04, 10cm gun '97 and 10cm gun '14. Ammunition used was HE and shrapnel. Maximum ranges varied from 11,264 to 12,249 yards.

13cm Gun

The 13cm gun was a long-range high-velocity, quick-firing (QF) gun. It fired HE and shrapnel and had a maximum range of 15,748 yards for percussion (HE) charge and 15, 311 yards for timed fuse discharge (shrapnel).

15cm Heavy Field Howitzer

Half of the German foot artillery was equipped with the 15cm heavy field howitzer (*schwere Feld Haubitze*, or s.F.H.). There were four variants: original (s.F.H.), 1902 pattern (s.F.H.02), 1913 pattern (s.F.H.13) and Long 1913 pattern (lg. s.F.H.13). It used HE, smoke and gas shells. Maximum ranges were between 6,616 and 9,296 yards, depending on the type of ammunition and howitzer variant fired.

210mm Howitzer (Mortar)

The 210mm/21cm Howitzer or heavy mortar had three patterns: 1902 pattern 21cm *Mörser*, 1910 pattern *Mörser* and the 1917 pattern long mortar, or *lange Mörser*. The 21cm *Mörser* fired HE and gas and had a maximum range of 8,400 and 11,155 yards, depending on type of charge and variant used.

Other Guns

Older patterns of guns, some of huge calibre and range, were used by the German Army during the First World War (including captured guns). The most commonly used were the 9cm field gun, with a maximum range of 7,109 yards; the 12cm heavy gun, with a maximum range of 7,984 yards; the 15cm *Ringkanone* with a maximum range of 8,640 yards and the 15cm 'long gun', with a maximum range of 10,936 yards. Of the largest calibres, the 35.6cm coastal defence and 38cm guns were the most commonly known. The 35.6cm gun had a maximum range of 50,300 yards and the 38cm gun had a maximum range of 46,000 yards.

Aircraft

Albatros Series

A number of variants existed, but chief among these was the *Albatros DIII Vee-Strutter*. The *DIII* was armed with two machine guns, had a speed of 110mph, a ceiling of 18,000 feet and a flight endurance time of over two hours. It was a versatile and formidable fighter and was used by forward combat squadrons, including von Richthofen's. *Albatros DIIIs* had a significant role in inflicting the terrible British RFC losses during 'Bloody April' in 1917.

Fokker Series

Dutch aircraft designer Anthony Fokker produced some of the best German aircraft of the war, most notably the *DVII* and most famously the *Fokker DrI* triplane. The *DVII*, a single-seat biplane, had a ceiling of 15,000 feet and an endurance time of 90 minutes and was armed with two fixed 7.92mm *Spandau* machine guns. It was first deployed with von Richthofen's *Jagdgeschwader (Jasta)* I. It had an 185bhp BMW engine and its design gave it an extraordinary ability to apparently 'hang' in the air where other aircraft would normally stall. The single-seat *Fokker DrI* was designed to counter the threat of the British Sopwith triplane series of

fighters. Armed with two 7.92mm machine guns, it was small, but highly manoeuvrable. Werner Voss scored 10 victories in a *DrI* in September 1917 alone, and Richthofen was flying his famous red *Fokker DrI* when he was shot down and killed on 21 April 1918. The *DVII* and *DrI* followed earlier 'E-Type' single-seater fighters that were brought into service and flown throughout 1915 and 1916.

Junkers Series

The *Junkers DI* was the first all-metal fighter to appear over the Western Front. The *DI* was a single-seater, had a ceiling of around 15,000 feet and could climb to that height more rapidly than virtually any other aircraft. The two-seater *CLI*, a fighter with a dual role as a ground attack aircraft, was introduced in the latter stages of the war and was unable to make the impact that it might have done in greater numbers. The *JI* entered service in 1917 and became a useful close air support aircraft for the infantry, especially during the German spring offensives in 1918.

Pfalz Series

There were a number of *Pfalz* variants, but their principal function was as a dual-roled fighter-scout aircraft. Armed with two 7.92mm machine guns, it was a single-seater with an excellent performance record. The best example of the *Pfalz* range was the *DXII*, with a speed of 180mph and a ceiling of 18,500 feet. The DXII was very sturdily built and this gave it an impressive manoeuvrability that allowed the pilot scope for high altitude patrolling and then steep attack dives that took many Allied pilots by surprise.

Tanks (Armoured Fighting Vehicles/AFVs)

The only tank manufactured by Germany in the First World War was the lumbering A7V. The A7V had a crew of eighteen and was armed with a 57mm gun and six machine guns. It weighed 33 tons and had a maximum cross-country speed of 2–3mph. Only 17 were built and they were of little use to the German Army, whose troops preferred to capture and commandeer British and French tanks where they could, rather than have faith in their own leviathans.

Source: *Handbook of the German Army in War, April 1918.*

IV Selected Biographies

General Erich Ludendorff 1865–1937

Erich Ludendorff was born in Kruszwenia, near Posnan (modern Poland). He was the son of a landowner, but came from a relatively modest background compared with many of his military peers. He was educated at the military school at Gross-Lichterfelde, Berlin, and commissioned into an unglamorous infantry regiment, but quickly established himself as a professional, intelligent and ambitious young officer.

Ludendorff's determination and irrepressible energy marked him out from his contemporaries. General Helmuth von Moltke, the German Army Chief of Staff, who was to command the German Army in 1914, ensured that Ludendorff rose steadily through the ranks.

With the onset of war, Major General Ludendorff played a leading role in the capture of the seemingly impregnable Belgian fort at Liège during the German invasion of the West. For this, he was awarded the *Pour le Mérite*, Prussia's highest military honour. Later in August 1914 he became Chief-of-Staff to Hindenburg on the Eastern Front and assisted in forging the decisive victories against the Russian army in 1914 and 1915.

In August 1916, as the battles of Verdun and the Somme raged on the Western Front, Ludendorff and Hindenburg became the joint heads of the whole German Army. The German casualties of almost a million men in these two battles were so large as to be almost insupportable. Ludendorff and Hindenburg swiftly decided that the only course was to shorten the German line and give up some of the territory held since 1914. In March, they withdrew their hard-pressed forces to the newly prepared defences of the Hindenburg Line, but not without controversy, as Ludendorff was the principal architect of the scorched earth policy that devastated much of the hitherto undamaged territory behind the then German lines.

Despite his undoubted moral courage, Ludendorff had become arrogant, inflexible and prone to panic when military operations did not go according to plan. After the failure of the German offensives in 1918, he became a broken man, and following the further disaster of the Allied attack at Amiens on 8 August he knew that Germany's only practical course was to sue for peace. He was removed from command in October 1918 and replaced by Walter Groener.

Disillusioned by the circumstances of Germany's defeat and his own disgrace, Ludendorff gave his support to a former army corporal, believing that Adolf Hitler's extreme nationalism represented the only way for Germany to regain its honour. Ludendorff took part in Hitler's abortive *putsch* in Munich in November 1923, and was tried for treason, but acquitted. Not until it was too late did he realise that Hitler was about to lead Germany once more into the abyss. Ludendorff died, fearful for his country's future, in 1937.

Field Marshal Paul Ludwig Hans Anton von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg 1847–1934

Paul von Hindenburg came from a family of the traditional Prussian military aristocracy. A handsome and determined individual as a boy, he became a military cadet, excelled in his peer group and was commissioned at eighteen into the elite Prussian Foot Guards.

He fought with distinction in both the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars, and was decorated for bravery in 1870. Following the latter war, he continued to follow a military career and rose steadily through the ranks. Count von Schlieffen, the mastermind behind German strategy in 1914, was due to retire in 1904, and Hindenburg, now a full general himself, was tipped to replace him. However, during the final exercise of the annual military manoeuvres in 1905, he had the misfortune to defeat the Kaiser. Realising that this was not good for his career, Hindenburg resigned. He later wrote: 'My military career had carried me much further than I had dared hope. There was no prospect of war at the time . . . so I applied to retire.'

Although still an active patron of the military, including the Franco-Prussian War Veterans' Association, Hindenburg was frustrated by his

inactivity in retirement. But he hardly expected to be recalled for active service when war erupted in August 1914. By the third week in August, General von Moltke, the German Army commander, realised that things were not going well against Russia. He appointed General Ludendorff as the new Chief-of-Staff in East Prussia, with Hindenburg as the commander of the German Eighth Army. Under this new team, with the brilliant staff officer Colonel Hofmann providing the plan, the German Eighth Army trounced two Russian armies at Tannenberg (August 1914) and Hindenburg was given the accolade 'Hero of Tannenberg'. The magnitude of the Russian defeat so early in the war caused psychological damage from which her army never fully recovered.

Hindenburg was promoted to field marshal and became a national icon. Tannenberg also forged the partnership between Hindenburg and Ludendorff, which would oversee Germany's military strategy for the last two years of the First World War. But from early 1917, Hindenburg's influence was diminished as Ludendorff grasped the reins of power. The situation continued until the last month of the war. After the Armistice and Versailles, Hindenburg's credibility remained so high among the ordinary German people that he became President of the Weimar Republic.

He later attempted to limit the burgeoning power of Hitler, whom he disliked intensely, but was forced to make him Chancellor in January 1933. Hindenburg died at 87 in August 1934. He was buried at a newly erected shrine near Tannenberg, the scene of his greatest triumph, with full ceremony. It was an ironic twist of fate that Hitler was the architect of Hindenburg's solemn and respectful funeral ceremony. With Hindenburg's death, Hitler gained absolute power and set Germany on a course that was to prove even more disastrous than that of 1914–18.

General Erich von Falkenhayn 1861–1922

Erich von Falkenhayn was born into an aristocratic but impoverished family, which had a strong military tradition. Thanks to Kaiser Wilhelm's patronage, he enjoyed a rapid rise to military power. The Kaiser had been particularly impressed by Falkenhayn's reports when acting as a liaison officer in China during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. He succeeded General von Moltke as the German Army's supremo in September 1914. This was just as the Allies brought the German invasion of France to a halt.

Falkenhayn was withdrawn and unpopular, a paradox of ruthlessness and indecision. By early 1916, he had demonstrated both traits. On the one hand, he had restored the German Army's fighting power after its failure to overcome the French and British in the first few weeks of the war. On the other, he had enraged Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff by his hesitancy on the Eastern Front, halting the German offensive just as a decisive victory seemed within reach. This emotive cocktail would be a significant factor in Falkenhayn's handling of Verdun and the early phases of the Somme campaign, and a major factor in his downfall.

He was forced to resign in August 1916 after the costly failure of Verdun and growing hostility to his leadership. He was replaced by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who had enjoyed considerable success on the Eastern Front. In September 1916 Romania joined the war on the Allied side and Falkenhayn was sent to crush this new threat, which he did with great ruthlessness. He was then sent to help the Turks recapture Mesopotamia, and tried to do the same in Palestine. Both missions proved abortive.

Falkenhayn spent the last months of the First World War commanding an army in the Baltic State of Lithuania. He died in 1922.

Field Marshal Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke (the Elder) 1800–91

Helmuth von Moltke was born into a well-established Prussian aristocratic family at Parchim, Mecklenburg. His father emigrated to Denmark when he was a small boy and he was educated at the Royal Cadet Corps School in Copenhagen. Although commissioned into the Prussian Army in 1822, he was forced to resign because of ill-health, but was able to return to military duty ten years later, when he joined the Prussian General Staff. He was instrumental in the modernisation of the Turkish Army in the 1830s and became aide-de-camp to the future Kaiser Friedrich III in 1835.

Moltke was appointed chief of the Prussian General Staff on the eve of the Wars of Unification in 1858. He then reorganised the Prussian Army, which had been thoroughly rearmed with modern weaponry. He soon recognised the vital role of railways in the rapid movement of troops and resources to and from the battlefield, which he exploited in the ensuing conflicts.

His strategic planning was instrumental in the run of victories against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and, most spectacularly, France (1870–1).

His achievements earned him rich rewards from the Kaiser and from 1871, a grateful fledgling German nation. His triumph at Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War had led to his elevation to both Count (*Graf*) and Field Marshal.

Von Moltke remained chief of the general staff until 1888 and died in 1891. He was succeeded as Chief of the General Staff by Waldersee, Schlieffen and then his own nephew and namesake.

General Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von Moltke (the Younger) 1848–1916

Helmuth von Moltke was born into the same distinguished Prussian military family as Field Marshal von Moltke, who had modernised the Prussian Army prior to the Franco-Prussian War and was the architect of the German Army after 1871. The younger Moltke was his uncle's adjutant in 1882 and later succeeded General von Schlieffen as Chief of the General Staff in 1906. He inherited the Schlieffen Plan for the invasion of France and containment of Russia, which he implemented at the outbreak of war in August 1914.

Moltke soon lost control of the armies under his command and as a result the Schlieffen Plan rapidly unravelled, and any chance of a swift, decisive victory disappeared. The German Army was defeated at the Battle of the Marne (6–12 September 1914). Moltke, an ill and broken man, was removed from command on 14 September and replaced by General von Falkenhayn. He never fully recovered from the trauma of the opening weeks of the war and died in 1916.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria 1869–1955

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria was a rare example of a prince appointed to high responsibilities in the field who demonstrated great talent as a commander throughout the First World War. As the Bavarian Army retained its independence from the remainder of the Prussian-dominated German military establishment, it was particularly appropriate that the largely Bavarian-manned Sixth Army should be commanded by Bavaria's Crown Prince, Rupprecht.

He was promoted Field Marshal and to command of his own Group of Armies after success as GOC Sixth Army in 1914 and 1915. By September 1916, with the succession of Hindenburg and Ludendorff to Supreme Command, he commanded 'Army Group Prince Rupprecht'. Rupprecht's great strength was his determination to speak his mind and censure both Falkenhayn and (especially) Ludendorff, for their poor leadership decisions. He most publicly threatened to resign when Ludendorff ordered a 'scorched earth' policy during the German withdrawal to the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line). Despite leading his Army Group with considerable resolve during the *Kaiserschlacht*, he was one of the first senior German Army commanders to realise that the war was unwinnable and that Ludendorff's plans for victory were doomed. However, he remained loyal to his men and his responsibilities until the end of the war before retiring to private life in Bavaria.

A staunch critic of Hitler – and Ludendorff's support for the Nazi Party in the 1920s – he left Germany during the Second World War and did not return until late 1945. Conversely, he retained an empathy and respect for the British Army and the British people throughout the First World War and beyond. This was perhaps partly because he and his mother Marie Thérèse, who died in 1919, were linked by Jacobite 'succession' to the British throne. Rupprecht died peacefully in 1955.

General Max von Gallwitz 1852–1937

Max von Gallwitz had an impressive and distinguished record of military and combat service. He joined the elite Prussian Guards in 1870 and made his mark as a fearless young officer during the Franco-Prussian war of that year. When war broke out in 1914 he led a Guards Division and was soon promoted to the command of an army.

General Gallwitz was forthright and loyal only to those whom he believed had Germany's best interests at heart. He despised the strategies of the former head of the German Army, General Falkenhayn, and actively supported his removal. He fully endorsed the new command of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, pointing to their successes on the Eastern Front as proof of their genius.

Gallwitz brilliantly routed the Russians in May 1915, where the Tsarist armies 'melted like snow' before the relentless German advance.

In the autumn of 1915 Gallwitz was transferred to Verdun on the Western Front to command 'Army Group Meuse'. Despite his skill as a commander, his Army suffered some 70,000 casualties for an advance of a mere two miles against Verdun in the spring and summer of 1916. But even the German losses at Verdun were to pale against the bloody suffering of the Germans on the Somme later that year, where Gallwitz commanded another Army Group.

Despite the heavy losses he incurred, Gallwitz's reputation remained high. He continued to command on the Western Front, principally against the British, until the German spring 1918 offensive. When this attack failed, he was given his own composite Army Group 'Gallwitz' to defend the vital Meuse-Argonne sector.

Gallwitz's military career ended soon after the Armistice. Though 69 years of age, he went into politics and assisted his mentor Hindenburg in the task of rebuilding Germany under the Weimar Republic. Like Hindenburg, he had no time for Hitler and the Nazi Party, and was convinced that the 'Austrian Corporal' would lead Germany to disaster. Gallwitz spent his final years writing his memoirs and a history of the Prussian Guards, dying two weeks before his 85th birthday, in 1937.

Oswald Boelcke 1891–1916

Oswald Boelcke was the architect of German air tactics and the first national hero as a 'knight of the air'. By the end of 1915, he had shot down ten enemy aircraft and was equally active in the skies over Verdun in early 1916. He was a pioneering air warfare tactician and encapsulated his methods in the ten principles of his *Dikta Boelcke*, which became the professional bible of the German air arm. In July 1916 he was given command of the *Fokker*-equipped *Jasta* II, one of the new dedicated fighter squadrons. Undefeated in the air, he was killed in a freak accident on 16 October 1916 when he collided with a fellow *Jasta* II pilot. Despite his premature death, he remained an inspiration to German airman who continued to regard him as 'the father of air fighting'.

Rittmeister Baron Manfred von Richthofen 1892–1918

Manfred von Richthofen was born in Breslau (now Polish Wroclaw) in 1892, two years before his brother Lothar. He began his military career as a cadet in 1909 before joining the elite Uhlan cavalry regiment as a trainee officer. In August 1914, he was sent to the Eastern Front, but soon found himself on the Western Front where he won the Iron Cross Second Class for courage under fire. In May 1915 he transferred to the German Air Service and returned to the Russian front after qualifying as an observer. In autumn 1915 he trained as a pilot. He qualified in March 1916 and joined *Kampfgruppe* 2 on the Verdun front. Despite another spell in the East in the summer, Richthofen was recruited to the newly formed *Jasta* II under the talented Oswald Boelcke on 1 September 1916. Thereafter, he swiftly established his reputation, was awarded the coveted *Pour le Mérite*, and by July 1917 he was one of the leading air aces on the Western Front.

On 17 July, he escaped death by a whisker when he was shot down and wounded in the head by British FE2s of 20 Sqn RFC. However, by August he was back and claiming more kills. During the German offensives of March and April 1918 his famous 'Flying Circus' (*JG1*) was in the thick of the fighting and he claimed a further seventeen Allied aircraft, bringing his tally to eighty.

But on 21 April 1918, his luck finally ran out and he was shot down, some still argue in controversial circumstances. His body was recovered and he was buried with full military honours at Bertangles British Military Cemetery on the Somme. His brother Lothar survived the war, but was to die tragically in 1922. Von Richthofen's death was a profound shock to both the troops and the German people. He had been a talisman – and many imagined him immortal. The cruel reality of war and the Red Baron's death led to many Germans believing that the war was lost well before the final German offensives petered out in June and July 1918.

Max Immelmann 1890–1916

Max Immelmann was one of the early great air aces and nicknamed the 'Eagle of Lille' after the area of operations in which he flew. Immelmann began as an aerial artillery observer and then moved on to reconnaissance duties. When the *Fokker E1* fighter appeared on the Western Front, Immelmann and the aircraft seemed made for each other. On 1 August 1915 he claimed his first 'kill' in the fighter – a French pilot – and he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Like Boelcke, Immelmann was a leading exponent of aerial tactics and he became notorious among Allied pilots for his audacious 'Immelmann Turn', a half loop and roll that put him above any opponent who had attacked his aircraft from the rear. By early 1916 he had claimed fourteen kills and appeared invincible. But his impressive combat record came to an abrupt end on 18 June that year when he was shot down and killed by FE2bs of 25 Sqn RFC shortly before the opening of the Somme offensive.

Werner Voss 1897–1917

Werner Voss began his short but brilliant flying career as an observer during the Somme campaign in the summer of 1916 and by November had qualified as a pilot and joined *Jasta* II. As most of

the troops who had fought through the bloody summer and autumn months of the Somme battles took stock through the winter, Voss was hard at work. He shot down his first enemy aircraft, a British BE2c, in November 1916 and by January 1917 his tally had risen to 22 'kills'. In no time he had earned a reputation similar to that of Baron Manfred von Richthofen and seemed destined to match it. This respect was enhanced by still more success during the Nivelle offensive in which he downed several French aircraft. In July 1917 he returned to the Somme in command of *Jasta* X. He was just 20 years of age.

By the third week in September 1917 he had a staggering 48 kills in a mere 10 months at the 'sharp end'. On 23 September, eager to add to his tally, his patrol ran into one of 56 Sqn RFC led by Major James McCudden VC, DSO*, MC*, MM. In the ensuing dogfight, Voss was hit and his aircraft plummeted to the ground. As with the 'Red Baron', Voss was highly respected by friend and foe alike.

V Der Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (German War Graves Maintenance Association)

Soldiers' graves are the greatest reminder to us all of the price of peace; their meaning will remain forever.

Albert Schweitzer

Background

The *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräber-fürsorge*, founded in December 1919, provides a similar service to that of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission by maintaining the German military cemeteries (and the few memorials) worldwide for both world wars, and assisting relatives to find and often visit the graves of their loved ones.

Between 1 August 1914 and 1 January 1915, the German Army suffered 695,000 casualties, of whom 145,000 were killed. At the time, it was a shocking and staggering statistic, for it was five times the total loss incurred during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1. By November 1918, 1,930,000 German officers and men were dead, an additional 100,000 officially missing and over five million left crippled or scarred by war. The vast majority of Germany's dead fell or were lost without trace on the Western Front. Over 2,000 German military cemeteries, many with mass-burial sites and memorials to the missing, were dotted across France and Belgium.

After Versailles it was agreed that much of the land occupied by German cemeteries would be handed over to the French and Belgian authorities on the basis that the interred German soldiers were reburied in concentration cemeteries. In 1925 a treaty was signed between Weimar Germany, Belgium and France formalising this arrangement. Until then, the German dead lay scattered in 678 burial places in Belgium and 1,500 cemeteries in France.

Many were exhumed and concentrated in major sites such as Langemarck and Roeselare in Belgium, Fricourt, Vermandovillers and Maissemy in the Somme region and Neuville St Vaast near Vimy Ridge in the Artois region of France.

In 1954 a new convention granted the home authorities more land and the remaining German cemeteries (178 in Belgium and *c.* 500 in France) were transferred to a final total of 26 cemeteries (plus one exclusively for Second World War dead at Recogne-Bastogne) in Belgium and 277 burial places in France. Today, the 27 cemeteries in Belgium contain the remains of 170,000 German officers and men and the 277 French sites represent the last resting place of around 400,000 German dead.

There are German military cemeteries for the dead of both world wars in over eighty countries worldwide.

Gefallen für Deutschland im Weltkrieg

After 1954 the dead from 128 cemeteries were transferred to Langemarck, Vladslo and Menen (Menin). Largely unidentified remains were buried in mass graves, *Kameradengräben*, in these sites, although the record of names that were known from smaller cemeteries and then re-interred here are usually shown on commemorative plaques around the mass burial place. Graves are marked with black metal crosses, black metal plaques fixed to a stone slab, or headstones similar to the British style, but with a flat or inverted 'V' shaped top. A few headstones will be seen in many of the First World War German cemeteries with the 'Star of David' to mark the graves of Jewish soldiers, a perfectly natural parallel with similar markings in British military cemeteries and a difference respected until the advent of the National Socialist era.

Fricourt military cemetery on the Somme is the only German cemetery on or near the British part of the 1916 battlefield, as this was the only site given by Allied authorities for the burial of German dead in this area. The dates shown on the crosses and *Kameradengrab* nominal rolls reflect the heavy fighting here in 1916 and 1918. Given the huge German casualties on the Somme in both campaigns, it seems surprising that a concentration cemetery such as Fricourt does not hold thousands more remains.

Sadly, this mismatch merely highlights the fact that many thousands more were buried where they fell, or were lost during the ebb and flow of battle here. Consequently, their bodies were never recovered and they remain in their 'muddy graves' beneath the former Somme battlefield.

Where an officer or soldier is identified each headstone/grave marker gives name, rank, regiment and dates of birth and death. Unlike in British cemeteries, where every effort is made to bury individual officers and men, there are usually several German dead buried beneath each cross or gravestone, the comrades' grave, which symbolises the spirit of comradeship in death as well as life. Unidentified soldiers, 'known unto God' in English parlance, have a simple inscription, usually either *Unbekannt; Gefallen fur Deutschland* (Unknown; fallen for Germany) or most commonly *Ein Unbekannter Deutscher Soldat* (An unknown German soldier).

The landscaping of each cemetery is generally in stark contrast to those designed by prominent British architects post-1918. In addition to the usual black crosses and plaques, cemeteries tend to have a canopy of trees, normally oak, a traditional German symbol of strength and courage, although others are also used. Some entrances, such as the one at Langemarck in the Ypres salient, have a 'blockhouse' style design, and may have remnants of German bunkers within the site. The overall impression tends to be dark, a sense of brooding and a disquieting feeling of unrest, rather than a reassuring notion of peace as in the British cemeteries.

Respect for the Dead on Either Side of the Wire

During 1914–18, British servicemen who died of wounds in France or Belgium in German captivity were usually buried in German military cemeteries and British units repaid the compliment. Equally, German and British airmen shot down and killed over enemy lines were typically laid to rest in enemy territory with due military respect. The most famous example of such protocol was the interment of Manfred von Richthofen in the British CWGC Cemetery at Bertangles on 22 April 1918, the day after his death.

Therefore, British military and some communal cemeteries contain a number of German graves maintained in the same way as any other burial place in each site. The vast majority of these men were prisoners of war (PoWs) who usually died of wounds and whose bodies were buried and remain undisturbed next to those of British and Dominion soldiers as common victims of war. While Germany was divided, West Germany paid the full maintenance costs of the German graves in British military cemeteries, though the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) did not contribute to the costs at any time in its forty-year history.

Sadly, with few notable exceptions, French cemeteries contain other Allied dead, but no German burials, although the Ossuaries at the French memorial and burial sites at Notre Dame de Lorette (Artois) and Verdun contain the unidentified remains of German and French soldiers killed and intermingled during the horrendous battles fought there in 1914/15 and 1916 respectively. It is a poignant but equally macabre recognition of the mutual sacrifice of French and German troops at both charnel houses during the First World War. American cemeteries are exclusively for American dead.

Care and Maintenance of the German Military Cemeteries

Further improvement, landscaping and continual maintenance began with a programme established by the former West German government in the early 1970s giving students from its own country and later other Western European nations 'working holidays' to France and Belgium to carry out these tasks. This has become a well-established tradition and continues to the present day.

The work in many cemeteries, most notably at Langemarck, was not fully completed until the latter part of the 1980s.

Examples of Main German Military Cemeteries (and Memorials) in Belgium and France[1]

BELGIUM

The four largest German military cemeteries are:

Menen: 'German' end of the Menin Road. 47,864 burials.
Langemarck: Ypres salient. 44,294 burials, of whom 24,916 are interred in the *Kameradengrab*.
Vladslo: Dixmude-Torhout Road. 25,644 burials.
Hooglede: Roeselare-Ostend Road. 8,247 burials.

FRANCE

Main cemeteries for First World War German military dead only are:

Neuville St Vaast/Artois: 36,793 burials plus 8,040 in *Kameradengrab*: 44,833.
St Laurent-Blagny/PdC: 7,069 burials plus 24,870 in *Kameradengrab*: 31,939.
Lens-Sallumines/Pas de Calais (PdC): 8,207 burials plus 7,439 in *Kameradengrab*: 15,646.
Cambrai/Nord: 7,989 burials plus 2,746 in *Kameradengrab*: 10,735.
Vermandovillers/Somme: 9,455 burials plus 13,200 in *Kameradengrab*: 22,655.
Fricourt/Somme: 5,056 burials plus 11,970 in *Kameradengrab*: 17,026.
Rancourt/Somme: 3,930 burials plus 7,492 in *Kameradengrab*: 11,422.
Maissemy/Aisne: 15,478 burials plus 7,814 in *Kameradengrab*: 23,292.
Sissone/Aisne: 10,699 burials plus 3,995 in *Kameradengrab*: 14,694.
Soupir/Aisne: 5,125 burials plus 5,958 in *Kameradengrab*: 11,083.
Servon-Melzicourt/Marne: 3,621 burials plus 6,526 in *Kameradengrab*: 10,147.
Souain/Marne: 2,464 burials plus 11,322 in *Kameradengrab*: 13,786.
St Etienne-à-Arnes/Ardennes: 7,541 burials plus 5,000 in *Kameradengrab*: 12,541.
Consenvoye/Meuse: 8,609 burials plus 2,537 in *Kameradengrab*: 11,146.
Thiaucourt: 8,715 burials plus 2,970 in *Kameradengrab*: 11,685.

German Military Burial Sites in the United Kingdom

Cannock Chase/Staffordshire: 2,143 burials from the First and 2,796 from the Second World War: 4,939.
(There are 111 burials from the Second World War only at St Peter Port, Jersey.)

Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Information and Contact Addresses

Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V., Werner-Hilpert-Strasse 2, 3500 Kassel, Germany.

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GLOSSARY

Abwehrschlacht — German term for the 'defensive battle'.

Alleyman — British/Dominion nickname for a German soldier (from the French: *Allemagne*).

Anzac — Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (term used generically for all Australian or Kiwi troops).

Arty — Artillery.

Barrage — Artillery bombardment.

Battery — Artillery sub-unit, an equivalent level to that of an infantry company. Commanded by a major in the British/French armies; normally by a captain in the German Army.

Bde/bde — Brigade. A German bde normally consisted of two regiments of three battalions each; a British bde comprised three battalions, an approximate strength of 3,000–5,000 men.

BEF — British Expeditionary Force, abbreviation used throughout the war.

Bn/bn — Battalion. A tactical unit of three or four 'rifle' companies, plus a HQ Coy/Bn HQ. Usual strength was 700–1,000 men.

Bomb — Common term for a hand grenade.

Boche — Derogatory French term for a German and adopted by other Allies. Sometimes spelt 'Bosche'.

Bombardier — Royal Artillery rank equivalent to Corporal.

Box barrage — Artillery barrage used to protect troops carrying out a limited attack, such as a trench raid.

Bunker — Term for well-protected German position, often built of reinforced concrete and designed to provide shelter from artillery fire for HQs, medical stations/posts and forward troop concentrations.

Cable — Telephone land-line, buried to protect it from shell fire whenever time allowed.

Cage — Prisoner of war (PoW) cage: fenced and guarded prisoner holding area close to the front line.

CB — Counter-battery fire: artillery bombardment to destroy or neutralise specific enemy artillery batteries.

C-in-C — Commander-in-Chief.

CO — Commanding officer (usually of a battalion or equivalent).

Company/coy — Company. A tactical sub-unit, an infantry coy consisted of 4 platoons plus coy HQ; a total of 120–50 men.

Corps — (German *Korps*). A formation usually consisting of three or four infantry divisions, with supporting arms such as arty, engineers and logistic units attached.

Creeping barrage — Artillery bombardment designed to protect advancing infantry by extending its range at given intervals to allow attacking infantry to close with the enemy under this 'curtain' of fire, which keeps the enemy's heads down. Introduced by both sides on the Western Front from September 1916, it was an improvement on the more rigid system known as the 'lifting barrage'.

CT — Communication trench: narrow, sometimes covered, trench dug at an angle to a front-line/second-line trench to provide concealed access.

Direct fire — Small-arms, machine-gun, tank and gun fire that is observed by the firer and therefore aimed directly at the target.

Division/Div — Division German: tactical formation of two or three infantry regiments or brigades, depending on the operational requirement, with arty, engineers and other supporting arms and services under command. Approximate strength: 12–17,000 men. Allied: tactical formation of three infantry brigades (BEF) or three infantry regiments (French/US), with arty, engineers and other supporting arms and services under command. Approximate strength: 17–20,000 men (exceptionally, US divisions in 1918 were often 25,000 strong).

Dreckfresser — 'Mud/dirt eater' – German slang for an infantryman.

Drumfire — Artillery barrage fired by each gun in succession, rather than a salvo (simultaneous firing of the guns). Given its name because of the drum-roll sound of its effect.

Duckboard — Wooden palleted plank used to cover trench floors.

Dugout — Shelter made in the wall of a trench, ranging from a small alcove to large underground rooms.

Ehrenkreuz (Cross of Honour) — President *FM* Paul von Hindenburg established the Cross of Honour shortly before his death in 1934 as a belated remembrance and recognition of 'the imperishable deeds of the German people . . . for all participants as well as for widows and parents of those who fell or died of wounds or as prisoners of war were reported missing and have not since been traced'. It was a bronze cross with two swords passing through it and with '1914–1918' on the reverse side of the medal.

Eiergranate — German egg-shaped grenade.

Eingreif — German independent counter-attack unit, normally used at regimental and divisional level and specifically trained for counter-attack tactics.

Eisen Kreuz (Iron Cross) — The Iron Cross was introduced by Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1813. Its familiar shape was based on a black iron cross, edged with silver and with a spray of oak leaves in the centre. The crown and royal cypher are on the upper arm of the cross and 1813, 1870 or 1914 are emblazoned on the lower arm.

Festung — German term for fortress/defended locality such as a village.

FM — (General) *Feldmarschall* (German Army)/Field Marshal (BEF).

Feldzug — Military campaign.

Fire trench — Front line trench.

Five-nine — British term for German 5.9in shell.

Flammenwerfer — Flamethrower.

Fritz/Fritzie — BEF term for German troops.

GHQ — General headquarters.

GOC — General, officer commanding (usually brigade/division or above).

Gruppe — German equivalent to a corps or reinforced battle group (*Kampfgruppe*). May be used in context as equivalent of a section or detachment.

Hauptstellung — Main position; main emplacement.

HE — High explosive.

HQ/Hqrs — Headquarters.

Hun — Allied slang for German soldier.

Indirect fire — Artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, which is not observed by the firers, but predicted or observed and adjusted by forward observation officers.

Interdiction — Long-range artillery fire and aerial bombing to destroy or neutralise enemy lines of communication, troop concentrations and supply dumps, isolating front-line troops from rear areas.

Jerry — German.

Jump-off — To jump off was to begin an attack. Jumping-off positions, or jump-off lines were equivalent to the later term start line (SL) and line of departure (LoD).

Kamerad — German for comrade/friend. Used as a gesture of surrender.

Kameradengrab — Mass grave.

Minenwerfer — German trench mortar: also known as 'Moaning Minnie'.

NCO — Non-commissioned officer, ranks from lance-corporal to

	warrant officer class one/ regimental sergeant major.
No-man's-land	Territory between respective front lines.
OC	Officer commanding (a company or equivalent).
ORBAT	Order of battle: a unit or formation's establishment for operations.
OHL	*Oberste Heeresleitung*: German General Headquarters.
Pickelhaube	German helmet, with characteristic spike, worn until 1916.
Pillbox	Reinforced concrete machine-gun or field gun post.
Pioneer	German (military) engineer.
Platoon	(German *Zug*). Infantry sub-unit comprising three or four sections. Section (*Gruppe*) of 8–10 men is the smallest tactical fighting group. Platoon normally commanded by a junior lieutenant in the BEF, but usually a SNCO in the German Army.
Poilu	French infantryman: *poilu* = 'hairy one (on account of moustaches/beards).
Pour le Mérite (Blue Max)	Highest German award for individual gallantry in action. The decoration was based on a Maltese cross in blue enamel edged with gold and four golden between the limbs. On the upper arm of the cross was a letter 'F' in gold surmounted by a crown and on the three other arms *Pour le Mérite*. It was known as the 'Blue Max' by German air aces.
PoW	Prisoner of War.
Redoubt	Strongly fortified position in a trench system, with a labyrinth of tunnels and alternative defensive positions within it.
Regiment	German: three battalions; French and US forces: three battalions; BEF: cavalry unit equivalent to infantry battalion, or honorary title for infantry units, such as 'Hampshire Regiment'.
Register	Confirming fall of artillery or mortar rounds by firing 'trial' shots to observe them and adjust them on to a target.
RFA	Royal Field Artillery.
RFC	Royal Flying Corps.
RGA	Royal Garrison Artillery.
Salient	Bulge in front line that protrudes into enemy territory. The Ypres salient (*Ypern Bogen*) was the most notorious and enduring 'salient' for both sides during the First World War.
Sap	Narrow trench dug at an angle from an existing trench for a number of tasks in no-man's-land. Used for listening/ observation posts, machine-gun and mortar positions, as a covered approach to a dugout or even a covered approach across no-man's-land prior to an attack.
Schützengrab	German for trenchs.
Sicherheits-besatzung	German front line and main defensive garrison.
SOS	Emergency procedure using telephone, or flares of pre-determined colour (often red) fired by both sides to call down a protective barrage on one or a number of pre-registered target areas to disrupt an enemy attack.
Stalhelm	German steel helmet worn from 1916 on and the archetypal shape for both world wars, known by British and Dominion troops as the 'coal scuttle' or 'Jerry pot' helmet ever since.
Stielhandgranate	Stick grenade; known to British troops as a 'potato masher'.
Stollen	Deep dugout and/or mine tunnel.
Stosstruppen	Local counter-attack troops of a sub-unit within a German division defending the front line.
Strafe	Bombardment or hail of fire, most commonly associated with the actions of fighter pilots of the last eighteen months of the war.
Stunt	A soldier's term for an attack.
Sturmtruppen	German 'storm troops'. Most associated with infiltration and specialist attack troops, their tactics developed in 1916 and especially in the latter part of 1917 and for the German offensives of 1918.
Zero	Zero Day – the day that the attack/offensive starts. Zero Hour – the exact time at which an attack or offensive begins.

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24 See *BOH*, 1915, vol. II, p. 178.
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26 Regt 26: Part ii, pp. 295–6. See also *BOH*, 1915, vol. II, pp. 180–1.
27 Extract from the diary of a captured German artillery officer.
28 Heinz, *Loretto*, pp. 165–6.
29 Blücher, *An English Wife*, p. 100.
30 Quoted in John Ellis's account of life on the Western Front, *Eye Deep in Hell, The Western Front, 1914–1918* (London, Croom Helm, 1976), p. 68.
31 Walter Rathenau, *Berliner Tageblatt*, newspaper No. 368, 25 December 1915.
32 Blücher, *An English Wife*, p. 100.
33 Von Moser, General, *Das militärish und politisch Wichtigste vom Weltkrieg* (1926) and *BOH*, 1915, vol. I, p. 25.
34 Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg, 1914–1918, Neunter Band* (Berlin, Mittler, 1933). Note that the casualty figures for the German Army during the war were compiled from formation ration strength and casualty returns that were provided every ten days, or three times a month, compared with British unit daily returns. Consequently, German soldiers who were walking, or slightly wounded would not be included in the casualty lists, as they would have remained with their unit and on the ration strength and have returned to duty within the ten-day reporting period. It is important to bear this in mind when comparing casualty totals for the respective battles.

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2 Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p. 271.
3 Ibid.
4 Operation *Gericht*: Judgment, or execution place.
5 From the diary of a German soldier of the Brandenberg Regiment.
6 'Nous sommes dans un pot de chambre et nous y serons emmerdés!': 'We are in a chamber pot and about to be crapped on!' (General Ducrot, during the Franco-Prussian war).
7 Horne, Alistair, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (London, Penguin, 1962, 1993), p. 97.
8 Henri Barbusse, quoted in *Eye Deep in Hell*, p. 63.
9 Ellis, *Eye Deep in Hell*, pp. 63–5.
10 Guillaime Apollinaire, 1880–1918. Born to a Polish mother and Italian father, he lived in Paris for most of his life and became a writer, journalist and social commentator. He joined the French Army in 1915 and served at Verdun and Champagne before a near-fatal shrapnel head-wound warranted his discharge in late 1916. He died on 9 November 1918 as a victim not of the war but the 'Spanish 'flu' pandemic.
11 Senger und Etterlin, Gen Frido von, *Neither Fear Nor Hope* (London, MacDonald, 1963), pp. 20–1.

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1 Jack, *General Jack's Diary*, p. 152.
2 Heinz, *Loretto*, p. 73.
3 Original letter and family background: courtesy of Mrs Renate Farley, daughter of Albert Mühmelt.
4 Blücher, *An English Wife*, pp. 136–7.
5 See *BOH*, 1916, vol. I, p. 317.
6 Rupprecht, Kronprinz von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch, 1914–1918* (Berlin, Mittler, 1929).
7 Ibid., entry for 14 June 1916.
8 Rupprecht cites the reliable sources and intelligence picture that was building up in his diary throughout June 1916. Falkenhayn, however, makes no reference to these intelligence assessments except that an offensive was expected, though he doubted that the French could mount an attack of any strength because of their preoccupation with Verdun (Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p. 240). More pointedly, his account of the Somme battle appears written to give the reader the impression that the date and sector were known by him all along; ibid., p. 261.
9 91st Reserve Regiment History, p. 209.
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12 *Reserve Regiment No. 119 Regimental History*, part of *Erinnerungsblätter deutsche Regimenter* (German Regimental Recollections) series (Oldenburg, Gerhard Stalling, 1918).
13 See: Reichsarchiv, *Schlachten des Weltkrieges; Somme Nord* (Oldenburg, Stalling, 1919, vol. I); and Gerster, M., *Die Schwaben an der Ancre* (Heilbron, Salzer, 1920).
14 *BOH*, 1916, vol. I, pp. 450–2 for British VIII Corps ('over 14,000') and German casualties of 119th Reserve Regiment (total 292), 121st Reserve Regiment (total 560), both of 26th Reserve Division; and 169th Regiment (total 362) of 52nd Division.
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17 Gerster, M., *Die Schwaben*, pp. 108–9.
18 Ibid.
19 Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, p. 179.
20 See: *Weltkrieg* (GOH), Band 10, pp. 353–60 and *Somme-Nord*, Vol. I.
21 This incident is an interesting indication of Falkenhayn's character, for he was aware of

the proposal to withdraw but did nothing to prevent it. Though it is possible that he used the retirement as the example on which he based his fateful edict that withdrawal was not an option, it is more likely that his action in removing Grünert and then Pannewitz were spiteful acts after he had been proved wrong about the sector that the Allies had chosen to attack. (See: Rupprecht, *Kriegstagebuch*, entry for 3 July 1916.)

22 General Falkenhayn, *Weltkrieg*, Band 10, p. 355.
23 Pannewitz was also removed from his Corps command by Falkenhayn and replaced by General von Quast on 5 July.
24 A captured copy of Below's Order of the Day is held in FM Sir Douglas Haig's Papers for 4 July 1916.
25 Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, p. 181.
26 In archetypal style, German soldiers were pulled out of the charnel house known already as the 'mill on the Meuse' only to be dropped into a greater mincing machine soon to be equally cursed by German infantrymen as the 'mill on the Somme'.
27 Rupprecht, *Kriegstagebuch*, vol. II, p. 51.
28 General Fritz von Below, GOC German Second Army, Somme Sector 1916, Memorandum January 1917 to OHL, captured document; quoted in Baring, Maurice, *Flying Corps Headquarters 1914–1918* (London, Buchan & Enright, 1920), p. 199.
29 Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, pp. 198–9.
30 Blücher, *An English Wife*, pp. 152–4.
31 Hindenburg, FM Paul von (trans. F.A. Holt), *Out of My Life* (London, Cassell, 1920), p. 217.
32 *Weltkrieg*, Band 11, 1916, Vol. II.
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34 Blücher, *An English Wife*, p. 154.
35 Reichsarchiv Monograph, 1928.
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37 *BOH, 1916*, vol. II, p. xvi.
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3 Feldman, Gerald D., *Army, Industry and Labour in Germany, 1914–1918* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 270–2.
4 Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labour*, pp. 322–4.
5 Herwig, *The First World War*, pp. 293–6.
6 Blücher, *An English Wife*, p. 166.
7 Ludendorff, *War Memories*, vol. I, pp. 307–8.
8 Jack, *General Jack's Diary*, pp. 200–1.
9 Mangin, General Charles, *Lettres de Guerre, 1914–1918* (Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1950), pp. 168–9.

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2 Blücher, *An English Wife*, p. 167.
3 Brown, Ian, 'Not Glamorous But Effective: the Canadian Corps and the Set-piece Attack, 1917–1918' (London, *Journal of Military History*, No. 58, 1994, pp. 421–44).
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6 Ibid.
7 Named Chemin des Dames in recognition of the fact that it was a favourite riding haunt of King Louis XV's daughters.
8 See *Weltkrieg*, Band 12, pp. 307–8.
9 Ibid., p. 351.
10 Ibid., pp. 403–4.
11 Binding, *Aus dem Kriege*, pp. 158–9.
12 Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, p. 264.
13 *Weltkrieg*, Band 13, pp. 20–30.
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Chapter Eleven

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3 *BOH*, 1918, vol. II, p. 64.
4 Ludendorff, *War Memories*, pp. 458–9.
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6 Ibid.
7 Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p. 182.
8 Second Army Report dated 16 November 1917; *Weltkrieg*, Band 12.
9 Rupprecht Group of Armies HQ Report for 18 November 1917; *Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch*; *Weltkrieg*, Band 12.
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12 Kühns, Edwin Valentine (trans: Kühns, Joy), *The Diary of a Young German Soldier, 1917–1918* (London, Avon Books Ltd, 1998), p. 17. Kühns was born on 14 February 1899, hence Valentine, in Kolonie Brinsk, Stralsburg, West Prussia. His family then moved to Thorn (now Torun, Poland) on the River Vistula (Weichsel). He entered teacher training in Thorn, but was then called up, aged 18, in 1917 as a Reservist in the Telephone Section with Inf Regt 141 and 'Division 5'. He served on the Western Front in the Arras-Cambrai sector and was involved in the 'Great Tank Battle' at Cambrai in November/December 1917. After further service throughout 1918, he returned to Thorn and took up teaching as he had planned to do before the war. He died in 1996.
13 See Jones, *War in the Air*, vol. IV, p. 232.
14 FM Haig mentioned this event in later despatches, reporting the heroic exploits of a badly wounded young German artillery officer who had manned his gun alone when all those around him were casualties and knocked out a number of British tanks before he was killed at his gun. The facts are that the German defence of Flesquières was shored up by the courage of German gunners from a number of guns who pulled their 77mm field guns out of their defensive pits to destroy the tanks. Kruger did man his gun alone, but did not destroy the British tank force alone! See Zindler, Oberleutnant E., *Die Tankschlacht bei Cambrai 1917 (Panzer Abwehr der 54th Division am 20ten November 1917)* (Wissen und Wehr, May 1937).
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1 Kühns, *Diary*, p. 27.
2 Feldwebel Max Schultz; quoted in Middlebrook, Martin, *The Kaiser's Battle; 21 March 1918: The First Day of the German Spring Offensive* (London, Penguin, 1978), pp. 121–2.
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5 Ibid., p. 256.
6 Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, pp. 331–2.
7 Ibid., pp. 309–22 for detailed analysis and calculation of casualties. I would recommend this as a more accurate picture of the casualties of 21 March 1918 than *Weltkrieg*, vol. 14, or the British official histories (*BOH*).
8 Ibid.
9 *BOH*, 1918, vol. II., p. 464.
10 Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?*, pp. 343–4.
11 Ibid., p. 344.
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14 Kühns, *Diary*, p. 31.
15 Ibid., p. 43.
16 Rupprecht, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, p. 361.
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19 Binding, *Aus dem Kriege*, pp. 209–10.
20 'Regt No. 86' of German 18th Infantry Division: quoted in *BOH*, 1918, vol. II, p. 101.
21 Goes, Hauptmann G., *Der Tag X. Die Grosse Schlacht in Frankreich 21 März–5 April 1918* (Berlin, Kolk, 1920), p. 182.
22 Rupprecht, *Kriegstagebuch,* vol. II, pp. 370–2.
23 Ibid., pp. 371–2.
24 Ludendorff, *War Memories*, vol. II, p. 600.
25 Kuhl, Gen von Hermann, *Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918* (Berlin, Deutsche Verlag, 1921), p. 137.
26 Ludendorff, *War Memories*, pp. 600, 602.

Chapter Thirteen

1 *Weltkrieg*, Band 14, 1918.
2 Although these assault divisions were supported by the 44th Reserve and 16th Divisions in the second assault wave, they were also backed up by a further four divisions, namely the 12th, 48th, 240th and 216th Reserve.
3 Quotation taken from captured orders from the German assault units on 9 April.
4 It was reported that the detained German military band was due to play its regiment into Béthune after its fall (*BOH*, 1918, vol. II, pp. 175–6).
5 Rupprecht, *Kriegestagebuch*, p. 375, and also Account from *Die Bayern im grossen Kriege, 1914–1918* (Bavarian Official History).
6 Ludendorff, *War Memories*, vol. II, p. 607.
7 For full details of the circumstances of the Portuguese debacle at Neuve Chapelle and 55th Division's heroic and devastating defence around Givenchy on 9 April 1918, see *BOH*, 1918, vol. II, pp. 156–89.
8 Haig, Despatches.
9 See Kitchen, Martin, *The German Offensives of 1918* (Stroud, Tempus, 2001) as a recent example, and also US 'Historians' especially.
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14 *BOH*, 1918, vol. III, May–July 1918, pp. 48–9.
15 Terraine, John, *The Great War* (London, Hutchinson, 1965), p. 342. See also Kitchen, *The German Offensives*, p. 139.
16 Boraston and Bax, *The Eighth Division in War*, 1914–1918, p. 223.
17 About 50 miles.
18 Binding, *Aus dem Kriege*, p. 234.

Chapter Fourteen

1 German monograph: *Die Katastrophe des 8 August 1918* (Oldenburg, Stalling).
2 See Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, pp. 183, 185.
3 Jack, *General Jack's Diary,* p. 268.
4 Kühns, *Diary*, pp. 47–8.
5 Jack, *General Jack's Diary*, p. 298.
6 The nine battles listed by Marshal Ferdinand Foch were: Amiens, 8–13 August; Bapaume, 21 August–1 September; Scarpe (Arras), 26 August–3 September; Havrincourt and Epéhy, 12–18 September; Cambrai and the Hindenburg Line, 27 September–5 October; Flanders, with the Belgian Army, 28 September–14 October; Le Cateau, 6–12 October; the Selle, 17–25 October; the Sambre, 1–11 November. French and American offensives complemented these advances between Soissons and the Meuse-Argonne, so that the Allies had all but destroyed any cohesive German resistance by 11 November 1918.

Chapter Fifteen

1 David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them.*
2 Herwig, *The First World War,* p. 106.
3 Heinz, Max, *Loretto*, pp. 315–16.
4 By comparison, 30 per cent of the US population, some 20 million, were infected and 3 million (7 per cent) of the British population became victims in the same period.

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IAN PASSINGHAM was educated at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and Keele University, serving in the British Army for 18 years before leaving as a major to pursue a career as a professional historian and defence analyst. The author of *Pillars of Fire* (Sutton), he leads battlefield tours to the Western Front for the celebrated 'Holt's Tours'.

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