

## **1918: DEFINING VICTORY**

### **WINNING THE WAR**

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There has been a wide variety of explanations put forward to explain why the Western Allies defeated Imperial Germany in 1918. Some are in the realms of fantasy—for example the view propagated by the German Army and the Nazi Party that the soldiers were stabbed in the back by a combination of Jews and communists on the home front. Others are partial. The Royal Navy believed that it was the blockade which had brought Germany down. So did military thinkers such as Liddell Hart, whose main concern in the inter-war years was to prevent Britain from ever again committing a mass army to Europe. On the other hand the Americans considered that it was their arrival in 1917 which had turned the tables. Australians and Canadians have tended to point to the respective contributions of their Army Corps as the vital factor.<sup>1</sup> Only New Zealand, it seems, has refrained from claiming that their infantry division won the war single-handed.

Many of these explanations are worthy of detailed investigation, but in this essay we wish to highlight two factors which have not received their due as war winners. The first is the obtuseness of the German High Command. The second is the innovative nature of British tactics on the Western Front in the latter half of 1918. To some, these factors might elicit some surprise. The general tendency in the literature has certainly been to portray the Germans as ruthlessly efficient militarists and the British as a byword for incompetence, but no great credence should be placed in these stereotypes.

First let us examine the actions of the German High Command in 1918. Two aspects of their performance are worthy of investigation—the offensives on the Western Front, and their various activities in the East.

Ludendorff's March offensive was launched on 21 March against the British on a 50-mile front between Arras and St Quentin. It was followed by a farther attack on the British in Flanders on 9 April and their offensives against the French in the Champagne and Chemin des Dames between May and June.<sup>2</sup> Prodigious amounts of territory were gained—unprecedented in Western Front experience. Consequently Ludendorff's efforts have received a good press. But the crucial question seems to be: why, after achieving such startling initial gains, did all his offensives fail to achieve decisive success? To answer this question we must look in more detail at the methods employed by Ludendorff that have so impressed generations of military historians.

In short Ludendorff's tactics can be reduced to two elements—concentration of force and innovative infantry tactics. In all his offensives he used some troops brought back from the East to supplement his Western forces in order to achieve a superiority over the defenders of about 2 to 1. More importantly, by concentrating as much as three-quarters of all German heavy guns on the Western Front against an area of attack, he achieved an artillery superiority of 3, 4 or 5 to 1. Then to maximise the impact of his infantry, Ludendorff developed new small-group tactics.

To implement these tactics he divided his divisions into shock troops, attack troops, and follow-up formations. The most skilled were concentrated into spearhead units called stormtroops. They were not to advance in coherent linear formations as of old, but were to penetrate deep into the British defences wherever opportunity beckoned, by-passing centres of resistance without waiting for the protection of forces on their flanks. The areas thus by-passed would then be taken out by the follow-up units.<sup>3</sup>

The huge number of guns available to Ludendorff allowed for a short bombardment of incredible ferocity, which it was hoped would also provide a degree of surprise to the battle. Rear areas, headquarters, and the enemy artillery would first be deluged with shells in an attempt to disrupt the command and communication system and to eliminate the main weapon of response. Then the guns would be turned on the zone defences of the defenders in an attempt to stun them just in advance of the main infantry assault.

Historians ever since have been mightily impressed with these tactics. In some respects they were certainly novel. If the main defences could be rapidly breached by this combination of overwhelming firepower and storm troopers, then the German infantry could reach open country and advance rapidly. There seems little doubt that a closer scrutiny reveals that Ludendorff's methods were reckless and desperately old-fashioned. To achieve the distant objective Ludendorff was specifying that there could be no question of full artillery participation beyond the opening stage. After the big guns had facilitated the initial rupture, they would soon be left well in the rear. Certainly Ludendorff enjoined his battery commanders to move their guns forward as swiftly as was practicable. But all experience had confirmed that this would not be very swift. And anyway, once the guns did get forward they would need time to establish the whereabouts of their own forces and of the targets they were required to engage.

All this meant that in the aftermath of initial success, the stormtroopers would have to exploit success with their own resources. It might be thought that the day had long since departed when a commander on the Western Front would seek to achieve his purposes largely by the actions of his infantry. Yet that, after the opening penetration, was what Ludendorff was contemplating. Unless his opponents were so unhinged by initial reverses as to prove incapable of a coherent response, Ludendorff would soon be offering up his last great reserve of manpower to heavy slaughter.

This scenario is more or less what came to pass. On successive occasions Ludendorff's artillery blasted a hole in the British or French line and employing the stormtrooper tactics broke out into open country, occasionally securing advances of 40 or 50 miles. All this confirmed the value of the stormtroop method in the opening phase of battle. But soon the crucial shortcomings in the method revealed themselves. The German attackers would quickly approach exhaustion. Casualties, especially in the elite stormtroop formations, had been heavy. The great mass of the artillery was still struggling to get forward. Increasingly, therefore, the infantry had only their light weapons to rely upon for fire support. On the other side of the line, the defenders would rush reserves and guns forward by rail. These came from the unattacked portion of the front—be it British or French or even in one instance from Britain itself.<sup>4</sup>

The inevitable consequence was that successive German on-rushes were successfully brought to a halt. There should be no surprise at this. Exhausted infantry supported only by the weapons they could carry had no chance of prevailing against fresh troops supported by an array of artillery and other weapons. The only surprise is that historians—determined, as they seem to be, to give the main role in modern mechanised conventional war to the infantry—have failed to notice the fatal flaw at the heart of Ludendorff's method.

This brings us to the second colossal blunder made by the German High Command in 1918—their activities in the East. The German endeavours in the West between March and June 1918 might be taken as an indication that at least the German High Command was single-minded in devoting all its attention and resources to that theatre. Yet this was not the case. During 1918 about one million men (50 divisions) were stationed on the Eastern Front. And for much of this time they were not just holding the line against the Bolsheviks, they were actually undertaking offensive operations.

The need to keep so many troops in the east arose out of an aspect of the German High Command that has largely escaped attention. Ludendorff and his acolytes, it should be noted, were not just military functionaries. They were also determining the foreign policy of their country. That policy was one of aggressive expansionism. So when the Bolsheviks entered into negotiations with the German military, they found themselves confronted with draconian demands.

When the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was finally signed by the Bolsheviks on 3 March 1918 its main provisions included the severing of Finland, the Ukraine, Lithuania, Courland, Livonia and Poland from Russia and the placing of these new states under German tutelage. At a stroke Russia lost 90 per cent of its coal reserves, 50 per cent of its industry, and 30 per cent of its population.<sup>5</sup>

The military implications of all this needs to be emphasised. To enforce his programme of aggrandisement against Russia, Ludendorff had to station 50 divisions permanently on the Eastern Front in 1918. Thus one million men were tied to a region where their foes had been thoroughly defeated and from which no military threat now emanated. To enforce this force all 50 German divisions at present in the East would be retained there. And they were not to remain idle. Soon the collapse of puppet regimes in the various states set up under this Treaty saw the Germans advancing deep into the Ukraine and the Crimea. In July the objectives were extended to include the Baku oilfields in the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

On 18 August (10 days after Ludendorff had stated that the German army had suffered its blackest day in the west) he ordered that the small British force which had subsequently occupied Baku be expelled. On 10 September, as the Allies were assembling for the assault on the Hindenburg Line, this proposed action at Baku was accomplished by German troops. In late September Ludendorff gathered a team of specialists to proceed to Baku to get the oil flowing. Two days later he announced to the Kaiser that the war was lost.<sup>7</sup>

And this was at a time when the decisive battles of the war were being fought in the west. Had a less predatory eastern policy been adopted, it has been estimated that the Germans could have moved at least 500,000 troops from Russia to the Western Front. Yet, so implacable was Ludendorff's determination to achieve expansion in the east that he carried through his policy to the detriment of the war in the west. The folly of allowing the military to dominate all aspects of policy in Germany could not be better illustrated.

As it happened, just three weeks after Ludendorff's last great offensive ground to a halt in the west, the British Fourth Army spearheaded by Canadian and Australian troops dealt the Germans a savage blow at the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918. The Fourth Army advanced eight miles on a 15,000 yard front, captured 400 guns and inflicted 27,000 casualties. The losses were comparatively light.<sup>8</sup>

Did the key to this success lie in the dash shown by the Colonial infantry? No it did not. On the Somme two years before Australian and Canadian soldiers had fought with considerable élan. In terms of major advances, they had achieved precisely nothing at a very high cost indeed. On that dismal battlefield, support in the form of accurate artillery protection had not been developed. By 1918 it had. By then the men who could ensure that infantry could live on the battlefield were far removed from the front line. They were to be found back at Corps or Army headquarters hunched over trigonometrical and meteorological tables. These were the men who could ensure that the new location devices developed to find the enemy guns—known as sound ranging—could pin point them before zero hour without prior attempts to find the range.<sup>9</sup>

In that preliminary ranging had almost always given away the intention to attack, these developments in the employment of artillery helped to restore surprise to the battlefield. So when the bombardment came down on the morning of 8 August, most German guns were blanketed or destroyed. At one stroke, the main impediment to the infantry and to the progress of the tanks was eliminated.

The other great opponent of the infantry, the machine gun, was dealt with by further elements of the weapon-system. The creeping barrage of high explosive shells kept down the heads of the machine gunners and other defenders until they could be set upon by the troops advancing just behind the barrage. Those missed by the barrage were eliminated by outflanking movements of troops equipped with mortars, Lewis guns, and rifle-grenades. Finally, the tanks—400 of the more reliable Mark V variety—unimpeded by hostile artillery, helped keep casualties down by themselves dealing with pockets of resistance and by causing, in some instances, enemy troops to flee the battlefield.

It is important to note the wide-spread applicability of this weapons system. Once the British, by employing a combination of big guns, mortars, machine guns, tanks and aircraft, had devised a method of dominating German artillery and trench defences, they were in a position to get their troops forward at least as far as the distance a high explosive shell could travel.

Moreover, it was not important in these circumstances whether enemy morale was secure or waning. At Amiens, German troops of high morale were overrun just as thoroughly as those whose devotion to combat was less than robust.

But a major test of the new methods of conducting an offensive remained. After all, the German defences at Amiens—an area but recently overrun and to which their High Command had since paid little attention—were rudimentary. But well behind the front stood the altogether more formidable Hindenburg Line, which in the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme in 1916 the German command had developed into a sophisticated defensive system. Would the British Army's method of attack also prove capable of overcoming this kind of defence in depth?

The Hindenburg defences were certainly formidable. In places they were 6000 yards deep, with protecting wire and concrete machine gun posts. In some sections they were aligned to incorporate steep-banked canals. The key sector lay to the north of St Quentin in the area of the British Fourth Army.<sup>10</sup> If this position could be broken, the entire line to the north would be turned. But it was here that the defences were at their strongest. The main element was the St Quentin Canal, which had 50 feet of steeply sloping banks, and water or mud to a depth of six feet. It was an insuperable barrier to tanks and a considerable obstacle for infantry. Just to the north, the canal ran through a tunnel which would make the going easier but which encompassed the greatest depth of defence.

Against these obstacles there was no question of employing surprise, as had been possible at Amiens. A long bombardment on Somme lines was essential to destroy a sufficiency of wire and of machine gun posts to allow the passage of the infantry. Also, in the contrast to Amiens, tanks could play only a minor role. They were useless against the canal and of dubious utility against the tangle of defences in the tunnel area.

Despite these problems, several factors were to the advantage of the British. First, the Australians had captured plans of a section of these defences revealing every machine gun post, artillery position, trench, and wire entanglement.<sup>11</sup> Second, the British were able to employ to even greater effect the method of maximising artillery fire, which had been so successfully employed at Amiens. Third, British industry had supplied the artillery with high explosive shells in unprecedented numbers.

The actions of 29 September revealed the potency of these factors. The counter-batteries proved just as effective as on 8 August. As a result most German guns had been neutralised by zero and played little role in the ensuing battle.

Certainly not all aspects of the attack went well. In the northern sector where theoretically the tanks could be employed against the tunnel, the powerful defences held up the American and Australian attackers and thus deprived them of the supporting barrage. Thus the attack ground to a halt.<sup>12</sup>

But events further south, where the canal defences happened to be at their strongest, redeemed this setback. In the aftermath of a devastating artillery bombardment, an obscure British division (46th North Midland) crossed the canal and pushed on to breach the Hindenburg defences on a front of 6000 yards. Thereby they outflanked the Germans holding up the Australians and Americans and enabled the attack to proceed along the whole front. The key to this success should be carefully noted. Because of the evident difficulties which would be met in attempting the crossing of a canal, the Fourth Army had concentrated most of its artillery in the Midlander's area. As noted, the counter-batteries early on eliminated the distant German guns. The remainder of Fourth Army's artillery, employing a huge volume of shells, overwhelmed the more immediate defences. Some statistics illustrate this proceeding. For each minute of the attack 126 shells from the field guns alone fell on every 500 yards of German trench. And this intensity was maintained for the entire eight hours of the attack. That is, in the advance from the near bank of the canal to their final objective, these infantrymen on any 500 yards of front were supported by 50,000 shells. No defences could withstand this onslaught. The defenders, irrespective of their morale, were killed, stunned, or too cowed to offer protracted resistance.<sup>13</sup>

These events, with local variations, were repeated in the areas of the Third and First British Armies. By 5 October the Allies were through the entire Hindenburg system and into open country.

It was clear what these operations signified. The British had now developed methods of overwhelming the most powerful defensive system at relatively modest cost. There was of course a severe limitation: no advance could be pushed beyond the protection of the covering artillery. By the end of September even Haig, though at times reluctantly, had come to see the wisdom of this 'bite and hold' approach, at least as a prelude to the still-anticipated climactic battle for which the cavalry continued to be held in readiness.

So in essence from early October until 11 November, the Allies continued to make a series of steady, if unspectacular advances along their entire front, pausing to consolidate at times, and then advancing once more. By 17 October the Germans had lost the line of the River Selle, and in early November the Schelt and then the Sambre. Their increasingly disorganised armies could do little but accelerate their retreat.

Ludendorff, in a lucid moment on 28 September, had realised he had no answer to this onslaught. He recommended making peace. Then he changed his mind, but it was too late. The newly appointed civilian government in Germany disregarded his latest about-turn and sought to initiate armistice negotiations, thereby precipitating his resignation. In late October a German delegation crossed the French line to commence discussions. By early November, with widespread strikes at home, mutiny in the fleet, and revolution threatening in a number of regions, the delegation had little choice but to sign. So at 11 am on 11 November the war on the Western Front came to an end.

What can we conclude from the contrasting operations of the Germans and the British in 1918? The German Command seems to demonstrate a similar brand of hubris to that which led them to implement the Schlieffen Plan in 1914. It was a combination of overweening arrogance coupled with ruthless expansionism and the desire to dominate. That all of this had very little to do with developing a method which actually might win the war should be obvious from what has been said above. Indeed the vaulting ambition of the German command led them to will a victory rather than work out the means by which it might be obtained.

On the British side it was the very modesty of their ambitions which led them to success. At last the grandiose plans which brought them undone in 1916 at the Somme and in 1917 at Third Ypres had been replaced—rather against Haig's wishes—with a series of operations with limited goals. These limited attacks did not attempt to push the infantry beyond the limits of the technology which provided their protection. Thus it was the machines above all, in the form of guns, but also tanks, trench mortars, machine guns and so on, which directed the extent of each advance. By narrowing their horizons—which after all they could afford to do because they had no desire to sweep across great tracts of Europe for their own aggrandisement—the British hit on a formula for victory. That the Germans did not because they could never envisage narrow horizons is one of the nicer ironies of the war.

## Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of these issues see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, 'What Manner of Victory? Reflections on the Termination of the First World War', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire* 72 (1990): 80-96.
2. For a lively account of the attack on the British on 21 March 1918 see Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle* (London: Allen Lane, 1974).
3. For a favourable view of these tactics see Bruce I Gudmussen, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).
4. Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918*, vol 1 Maps (London: Macmillan, 1935).
5. Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), 475.
6. Norman Stone, 'The Fruits of Brest-Litovsk', *The Purnell History of the First World War*, 2794-804.
7. Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, 561.
8. For a full discussion of the Battle of Amiens see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military-Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-18* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), chaps 26-8.
9. *Ibid*, chap 27.
10. 'Notes on the Siegfried [Hindenburg] Line—German Defensive Scheme', AWM 26/12/490/6, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
11. See *ibid* for details.
12. CEW Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive, 1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942), 986-94.
13. Major RE Priestley, *Breaking the Hindenburg Line: The Story of the 46th Division* (London: Unwin, 1919).