Cataclysm

The First World War as Political Tragedy

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We now come to one of the most significant decisions of the war. Hindenburg and Ludendorff’s all-out offensive in the west in spring 1918 opened the endgame. Its failure wrecked the German army and made possible an Allied victory that would otherwise have been delayed for at least another year and possibly might not have come at all. Yet from Berlin’s perspective the alternative of a compromise settlement remained closed. The failure of Kühimann’s September 1917 feelers suggested that neither Britain nor France was willing to negotiate separately or give way over Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine; nor was Wilson prepared to talk until Germany had been democratized or at least had suffered a decisive defeat. Germany could have tried to unblock the diplomatic path by offering unilateral concessions. In particular, relinquishing Belgium would have given the British much of what they wanted and forced them to choose whether to fight on for Russia and for Alsace-Lorraine. Yet probably in such circumstances they would still have stood by their partners, and such a policy of renunciations (similar to that of Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War) might have set off an uncontrollable process by demoralizing Germany’s army, its home front, and its partners — as was indeed to happen in autumn 1918. But in any case Hindenburg and Ludendorff believed that a peace without tangible gains would undermine the Hohenzollern monarchy domestically and leave it vulnerable externally. Thus during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations Ludendorff exclaimed to Czernin, ‘If Germany makes peace without profit, then Germany has lost the war!’, while Hindenburg warned Wilhelm that any peace must give Germany such powerful frontiers that its enemies would not start another conflict for years. Similarly, in the west Belgium remained indispensable to OHL’s security concept. Georg Wetzell (OHL chief of operations) wanted it as a permanent deployment base from which the German army could close off Calais as a British disembarkation point and could threaten to advance on Paris. Only thus could the Western Allies be deterred from attacking Germany, and defeated if deterrence
failed. On 11 December 1917 Hindenburg wrote to Hertling that as Kühlmann’s feeler to Britain had failed and Germany’s military situation had improved it should renew its claim to a 99-year lease on the Belgian coast and take the Liège area, keeping Belgium under military control until it was ready for an alliance with Germany. Negotiation was now off the agenda.

So was the option of remaining on the defensive. The U-boat gamble had brought America in while failing to knock Britain out. OHL paid close attention to U-boat building, but during 1917 and 1918 construction ran into difficulties despite receiving priority in labour and raw materials, and the submarine fleet failed to expand. Ludendorff and Colonel Bauer, head of the OHL economic section, doubted that the submarines would deliver decisive results in 1918 or stop US troops from being shipped *en masse* in the summer; indeed they may have overestimated the rate at which the Americans would arrive. Once the US forces were in line, the outlook would at best be for a prolonged defensive, leading, as Hindenburg put it, to ‘a gradual state of exhaustion’. Probably rightly, he and Ludendorff believed their soldiers dreaded more long defensive battles like Third Ypres. Reserves of men were running low, industrial productivity was waning, and even after the victories in Russia and Italy Germany’s allies had less staying power than its enemies. If all hope of victory were lost, there would be no point in continuing the conflict. On the other hand they reasoned that even a failed offensive would encourage the army to try again in the next war, and Ludendorff later told the Reichstag he was willing to lose a million men in the effort.

Although OHL would probably have sought a western breakthrough even if Russia had stayed in the war, the Bolshevik Revolution made the chances seem unexpectedly bright. Germany could now look to a temporary superiority in manpower, in addition to its superior tactics and satisfactory equipment stocks. It had strengthened its eastern forces to deal with the Kerensky offensive, raising them to the highest level of the war. But from 1 November 1917 to 21 March 1918, according to the German official history, the Eastern Front divisions fell from eighty-five to forty-seven and those in the west rose from 147 to 191. Eight German divisions in Italy were also moved to the west, and smaller contingents from Macedonia, while a small Austro-Hungarian force arrived in France for the first time. The highest-quality eastern units were transported, including guards divisions, and those left behind lost their men aged under thirty-five and fell well below strength, as well as sacrificing many of their horses. Also available to reinforce the western army was the 1899 conscript class, which came into the line early in 1918. As of 21 March the western army had 136,618 officers, 3,438,288 men, and 710,827 horses; the eastern army had respectively 40,695, 1,004,955, and 281,770. Though mediocre, the latter remained numerically large, but fell further to 0.59 million personnel by July. Despite Hindenburg and Ludendorff’s pressure to resolve the Russian situation, in fact, most of the movement westwards preceded the Brest-Litovsk treaty, and afterwards it slowed down. On the other hand, Germany’s political commitments in the east expanded. OHL stripped down its troop presence there, but not by enough.

As of 21 March, thirty of the eighty-one German divisions on the Western Front south of the river Oise had been moved from other theatres, as had eight of
the thirty-three in Flanders. By raising the German Western Front divisions to 191 against 178 Allied ones, they gave the Germans numerical superiority for the first time since 1914. It is true that only one in six of the divisions that took part in the 21 March attack had been moved from other fronts, but by holding quieter sectors the eastern forces freed up Ludendorff's best troops for the spring battles, much as the Americans later released British and French divisions. The figures illustrate, however, how OHL's hopes of breakthrough depended on the qualitative superiority of its existing Western Front armies rather than on quantitative reinforcement. Most of the best German divisions had always remained in the west, and by spring 1918 many had rested in quiet sectors for more than a year. Thus sixty-eight German Western Front divisions had missed the rigours of Third Ypres, against only nine British ones. OHL counted on fresh but seasoned troops being schooled in the new tactics and achieving the breakthrough that had eluded their enemies.
OHL believed in its men – Hindenburg gave Vertrauen or trust, as his chief reason for confidence in victory\textsuperscript{114} – but unlike at Riga or Caporetto they would face a first-class enemy and would enjoy no overwhelming advantage either in numbers or in materiel. Ludendorff considered he could mount only one attack at a time,\textsuperscript{115} and he did not expect to finish the job at the first attempt, envisaging instead a succession of hammer blows. He told Wilhelm this would be the most colossal problem ever faced by any army: the offensive would begin at one point, continue at others, and last a long time.\textsuperscript{116} None the less, since at least April 1917 he and Hindenburg had envisaged a great western offensive: the first (with the arguable exception of Verdun) since the Marne.\textsuperscript{117} They and their advisers repeatedly described this operation as a ‘last card’: if it failed, said Ludendorff, ‘Germany must go under’.\textsuperscript{118} In October Wetzel had urged on Ludendorff an early spring attack in order to seek a decision in the west before the Americans arrived, even though at that stage he still expected Russia to remain a belligerent.\textsuperscript{119} Ludendorff was already committed to the idea before the Mons conference of 11 November 1917, ironically held one year exactly before the end of the war. At Mons he and Wetzel conferred with the commanders of the two northern army groups on the Western Front, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria and Crown Prince Wilhelm of Prussia, and their chiefs of staff, Kuhl and Schulenburg. Ludendorff told the commanders (who were sceptical) that only the offensive could be decisive, that the troops wanted to go back onto the attack, and that Austria-Hungary and Turkey were nearing their limit. The meeting failed to agree on where the blow should fall, Kuhl wanting to strike the British in Flanders while Schulenburg preferred a new blow at Verdun.
Wetzell shared the latter view, considering the French army the larger and more dangerous antagonist yet also the one that held its front more thinly. Ludendorff summed up by endorsing the principle of an offensive as early as possible, to give the maximum time before the Americans arrived. His preference was to attack the British, though not in Flanders but near St-Quentin, which was indeed what materialized. He believed he was not strong enough to defeat the French, especially as they had space to retreat, whereas the BEF was smaller and less skilful (which is not to say he treated it lightly). He ordered studies for a series of attacks, on Hazebrouck, Ypres, Arras, St-Quentin, Verdun, and the Vosges, but in January OHL settled on the St-Quentin operation (code-named ‘Michael’), which on 10 March Hindenburg ordered for the 21st.

Although Hertling and Wilhelm II approved the attack, they were consulted at a very late stage and appear not to have influenced the strategy, of which the political purpose was notably vague, Ludendorff saying the aim was to force Lloyd George and Clemenceau to negotiate before the Americans arrived in strength. Nor were the operational objectives at St-Quentin particularly transparent. Ludendorff was preoccupied with the difficulty of the initial breakthrough and therefore selected the location largely on tactical grounds. Flanders was closer to the sea and to the Channel ports, but the terrain there was unlikely to dry out adequately until April, and he wanted to start sooner. Round Arras the British defences were formidable. Hence he opted for the less densely garrisoned southern section of the British line between Cambrai and St-Quentin and La Fère, where the land was relatively dry and flat. A breakthrough here would take no immediately important objectives, but it would enable him to pinch out at Flesquières the salient remaining from the Cambrai battle prior to a drive north-westwards that could separate the French and British armies and push the latter towards the sea. To some extent this conception mirrored that behind the battle of the Somme. Its danger, given Ludendorff’s limited numerical superiority and his forces’ lack of mobility, was that like Haig in 1916 he would deliver a blow into a void and then be halted in possession of ground that lacked strategic significance.

None the less, Ludendorff was favoured – probably more than he realized – by the inadequacies of his opponents. The Americans were fewer than expected, the French and British were poorly co-ordinated, and (probably most important) the BEF’s own defence measures were flawed. Between November 1917 and March 1918 the numbers of American troops in France rose from 78,000 to 220,000, though only 139,000 were combatants and of this potential of approximately six divisions, one at most was ready for action. The reasons for this included the interval required to conscript and train the new divisions, as well as shipping shortages – although the Allies could have devoted more tonnage to troop transports, and after May they did. Moreover, the American commander, Pershing, backed by Wilson, still insisted on his forces developing into an independent army, and opposed even temporary amalgamation with the French or British because it might become permanent. When in December 1917 Clemenceau complained that the AEF was unfit for battle and Pétain proposed that American regiments should be incorporated into French divisions for two months’ training before they entered the line, Pershing still resisted, not only because yielding to the
French would set a precedent for the British, but also because he feared they would train his men only in ‘trench warfare’ techniques whereas he wanted them to learn ‘open warfare’ too. Eventually it was agreed the AEF’s regiments would spend one month with French divisions until it had enough instructors of its own, but it would keep its operational independence. Until May, Ludendorff’s hammer blows would fall almost wholly upon the British and French.