Hundred Days
The Campaign That Ended World War I

NICK LLOYD

BASIC BOOKS
A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York
1. Decision on the Marne

It remains for the living to finish the glorious work of the dead.
Georges Clemenceau

18–25 July 1918

The retreat from the Marne began on 20 July. In the coming days three German armies trudged northwards in long grey columns; giving up the ground they had gained during the spring and occasionally looting French villages. One observer, Rudolf Binding, remembered being 'sick at heart' after seeing soldiers running around taking everything they could get their hands on; a dangerous illustration of the disorder and ill-discipline that was beginning to grip the German Army after four long years of war. 'In the twinkling of an eye everything was turned upside-down, as if the looters were professionals,' he wrote. 'The soldiers hacked whole beds to pieces for the sake of a length of sheeting the size of a towel and worth about one-fiftieth of their value; thousands of sheets of paper were thrown into the mud for the sake of a single picture postcard, and whole cupboards burst open for the sake of a reel of cotton.' And it was not just the property of the enemy that was being grabbed; German supply trains and depots were increasingly being targeted by groups of deserters and looters desperately searching for food. 'This conduct on the part of German soldiers,' so one report read, 'constitutes a defiance of discipline, and must be repressed with the utmost vigour.' Even worse, it was anything but an isolated incident and was happening right across the front. The German war effort, it seemed, was rapidly coming apart.

The morale of the Army remained steady, but it was increasingly fragile. Hope in victory was now being replaced by disillusion and weariness. Georg Bücher, a soldier who fought throughout 1918,
remembered that life was viewed with ‘a crazy indifference’. 'We had become hard – a frozen, inarticulate hardness which was yet an agony when, thinking ourselves unobserved, we allowed our faces to betray our thoughts.' Many had long since ceased to hate the enemy and looked upon the 'terrified agitation' of recruits – who seemed to become younger and younger with every passing week – with distrust and unease. 'We had nothing left to hope for,' he wrote, 'even our last desperate hope, the hope of victory, had deserted us.' There was nothing left to do but keep going. Even the Army Group commander, Crown Prince Wilhelm, began to notice that things were not as they should have been. 'I entered every morning the office of the Army Group,' he wrote. 'I was always prepared for bad news and received it only too often. The drives to the front, which had previously been a pleasure and recreation for me, were now filled with bitterness. The staff officers' brows were furrowed with care. The troops, though still almost everywhere perfect in discipline and demeanour, willing, friendly and cheerful in their salutes, were worn to death. My heart turned within me when I beheld their hollow cheeks, their lean and weary figures, their tattered and dirty uniforms...'"

The growing problem of looting, poor discipline and desertion could be traced back, in some respects, to a simple lack of food. By 1918 the German nation and its army were starving. During the great offensives earlier in the year, in March and April, German troops had been amazed by the amount and variety of food and drink they found in British and French supply dumps; things like tinned stew and jam that had disappeared from the German diet years ago. Officers would stumble across groups of men gorging on captured rations or drunk on whisky, and unconcerned about the urgent need to press on. This lack of appropriate nutrition also meant that German soldiers were unable to resist the influenza pandemic that swept across the front during the summer. A number of divisions could only muster company strengths of around sixty men, about 30 per cent of their manpower being sick with flu, and this seems to have been entirely typical of what the German Army suffered in this period. In the Army as a whole a staggering 135,000 men were taken ill with influenza in
June; the following month another 375,000 men had to be excused duty for this reason.⁴

Given the extent of the problems facing the German Army – which had sustained nearly 800,000 casualties in the last six months – it was little wonder that a growing number of senior officers were advocating a withdrawal from exposed and over-extended lines to a shorter, more easily defensible position. Many argued that they should retreat to the Siegfried Stellung (or Hindenburg Line as the Allies called it), the formidable series of defences that had been prepared in 1916 as a kind of German insurance policy in the west. Here, they argued, their armies should rest and reform, and then let the Allies break themselves upon it. Major-General Friedrich Karl 'Fritz' von Lossberg, Chief of Staff at Fourth Army and one of the best defensive tacticians, admitted in the days after 18 July that the position on the Marne should be given up immediately.⁵ Others advocated even more radical action. Crown Prince Wilhelm reported to OHL that the front should be immediately withdrawn to the so-called Antwerp-Meuse position, which lay far behind the Hindenburg Line. This would give their troops a breathing space, shorten the front considerably, and free precious reserves.⁶ These concerns were eminently sensible and a valuable recognition of Germany's dangerously exposed position in the west, having gained large amounts of territory that was difficult to defend and strategically useless, but they would not be received well by the men who ran the German war effort: the Kaiser, Wilhelm II; the Chief of the General Staff, Paul von Hindenburg; and his right-hand man, General Erich von Ludendorff.