The First World War
Second edition

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

History is a narrative constructed by historians from traces left by the past. Historical enquiry is often driven by contemporary issues and, in consequence, historical narratives are constantly revisited and reshaped. Seminar Studies in History was designed to bridge the gap between current research and the broad, popular general surveys that often date rapidly.

The volumes in the series are written by historians who are not only familiar with the latest research in, and current debates about, their topic, but also have contributed to that research and the debates. The books are intended to provide the reader with a clear introduction to a major topic in history. They give a narrative and analysis of events and highlight contemporary controversies. They include the kinds of tools generally omitted from specialist monographs – chronologies and a glossary – as well as that essential tool, an up-to-date bibliography. They conclude with a selection of documents – some traces of the past illustrative of events described, which also serve as the historian’s raw materials.
CHAPTER ONE

WAR KNOWN AND WAR IMAGINED

THE CIVILIAN VIEW OF WAR

The First World War began on 3 August 1914 when Germany declared war on France and invaded Belgium. Germany and Austria-Hungary* (the Central Powers) fought against Russia, France and the British Empire (the Triple Entente*). After the Pact of London of September 1914 which bound the latter three not to make a separate peace, they became known as the Allies. They were joined by Italy in 1915 and then by America in 1917, as an associated but not allied power. The war grew out of the diplomatic crisis that began when Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb, assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife. The archduke was the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary sought to punish Serbia for sponsoring such terrorism. Russia defended Serbia, a fellow Slavic state. Germany insisted that the rest of Europe keep out of the business that her ally Austria-Hungary had with Serbia. France was bound by treaty to assist Russia. Britain did not have formal treaty commitments to France or Russia, but informal military and naval arrangements seemed to the government to amount to a moral commitment to help France. People in the towns and cities of the belligerent nations welcomed the outbreak of war almost universally and assumed the conflict would be over by Christmas. It did not end until 11 November 1918. Historians estimate that the war led to approximately 9.5 million military deaths.

After the First World War, survivors across all of Europe looked back to the world before 1914 with profound nostalgia. They contrasted the bleakness of the war and its aftermath to the radiant light of a golden age the war seemed to have destroyed, an age of peace, prosperity and tranquility [Doc. 10]. This homesickness for a time rather than a place showed up more in personal memoirs or fiction than in academic history, which was instead obsessed with finding the diplomatic causes of the war.

Of all the myths about the age before 1914, that of the Long Peace is the most enduring, echoed as it has been in both high and popular culture. It is also the least realistic. After all, British people in their sixties in 1914 would
individualism, materialism, cynicism, uncertainty, aimlessness or boredom. Eric Leed argues that people welcomed the war as an escape from the dispiriting realities of the new industrial world (Leed, 1979). They did not realize that war itself would be industrialized. It would not provide an escape from mechanized routine but only an intensification of it.

THE PROFESSIONAL VIEW OF WAR

Were the professional soldiers wiser than civilians about what would be the realities of war? Yes and no. By 1914 many of them factored new technologies and social realities into their guesses about the next war. Civilians might imagine that war was a gallant and uplifting adventure, and soldiers often shared the assumption that character mattered most in life, but soldiers also knew that the staggering increase in firepower brought about by a century of industrialization ensured a corresponding rise in violence and casualties. They expected the next war to be terrible. Like the public, however, they thought that it would be brief and mobile. In particular, they assumed that improvements in manpower, firepower and command would strengthen the attack. They did not realize that in the first instance the defence would benefit more, simply because it could be dug in while the attack had to move above ground [Doc. 8].

The experts and the public were in various stages of denial about the nature of warfare because the profound changes that had occurred over the previous century were not so much hidden from sight as they were unpalatable to those who believed that war ought to embody a purpose other than brute killing. Both the natural and the customary limits to violence had weakened. Total, unlimited warfare had at least become possible. The French Revolution led to the 'nation in arms', with an economy devoted solely to the demands of war production supporting the armed forces. The Industrial Revolution increased firepower exponentially, above all with artillery. Formally cast in bronze or iron and loaded from the muzzle, the new guns were bored out of high quality steel and loaded from the breech. Mechanisms to absorb the recoil meant that guns stayed in place and retained their aim after they were fired. The simple division between light field artillery and heavier garrison or siege artillery became more elaborate as specialized guns and projectiles appeared: howitzers with a plunging or steep arc of fire; quick-firing field guns using shrapnel against human targets; immense long-range guns on fixed mountings or railway carriages to destroy heavy defensive positions; early versions of trench mortars that gave the infantry portable artillery of their own; heavy machine guns that filled a niche between small arms and artillery.

Armies in the past had been limited in size by the inherent difficulties of co-ordinating a large group, by problems of supply and by the shortage of
men willing to become trained, reliable soldiers. Hierarchic organization and training overcame the problem of control, although linking the sharp end of combat with the centres of command remained a problem throughout the First World War. Problems of supply and logistics were less severe. The ancient custom of overestimating one's needs and producing more than enough to win was finally practical when mass production arrived. Getting the mountain of stuff to where it was needed was also easier because of the modern railway system and the existence of all-weather paved roads in Western Europe.

As for the traditional limitation on the size of armies, all the major powers except Britain and her Dominions solved the problem by adopting conscription, thereby making all men of military age liable, at least in theory, to serve. In Germany men were liable to serve at age 20 for two years in the infantry and three in the cavalry or field artillery. After that they might serve in the reserve for four to five years, which meant a fortnight of training each year. There could also be terms in the Landsturm, an emergency national guard, between age 17 and 20, and the Landwehr or militia for 11 years after that, taking a man to age 45. The Landsturm and Landwehr, however, were only mobilized in wartime emergencies.

With the Germans providing the model, the other continental powers followed with varying degrees of thoroughness. By 1914 the major powers had million-man armies made up of young first-line soldiers and huge reserves of older trained men.

Why was the impact of this seismic change not understood more clearly, especially by military professionals? The answer, perhaps, is that if war had indeed tilted to the defensive side, it had lost much of its apparent purpose. To be sure, states could be more confident about defending themselves against attack, even surprise attack, which is how most wars had started. But that seemed to point to mass armies digging in and going nowhere. What, then, was the point? Good question, and rather than answering it in a clear-headed way, people built optimistic assumptions into their plans and projections.

WAR PLANS

What did the military leaders plan to do when war came? Only the leaders of Germany planned to initiate a general European war, and then it would seem that they did so because they were convinced war was coming, probably by 1916, whether or not they wanted one. Better that it come when they could still expect to win or even survive against the perceived 'encirclement' posed by France and Russia. The great general Helmuth von Moltke, Bismarck's military partner in creating the German Empire between 1864 and 1871, had planned for a limited war that involved defending in the west against France and seeking limited gains in the east. His eventual successor, Count Alfred von Schlieffen (Chief of the General Staff 1891-1906), took a strong and united Germany for granted. He saw no reason to play it safe the way Moltke had; the safety that such caution would provide seemed temporary, given the danger Germany would still face on two fronts. If a two-front war were coming, he looked for a way to win it decisively. Whether or not he came up with a formal plan (the Schlieffen Plan^1 is now a matter of historical debate, but it seems safe to say that he devised a formula or set of working assumptions which committed most of the German army to a sweep through the Lowlands into Northern France, then hooking south to the west of Paris. Assuming that the French advanced east into Alsace and Lorraine, the provinces they had lost to Germany in 1871, the Germans could hook around them going the other way. Germany would beat France within six weeks and then use her railway system to shift east to defeat France's ally, Russia. Schlieffen's approach was a bold gamble which had the considerable virtue of addressing the gravest problem the German leaders thought they faced: what to do in the event of a two-front war. By doing so, however, Schlieffen reduced the incentive to ask just how likely such a war was. Was there any evidence available to the Germans that the French and Russians were indeed going to attack? Were there no non-violent ways, such as negotiation, to deal with the neighbours? Was Germany in fact consciously inventing reasons to precipitate a war? Schlieffen might not have bequeathed his state with a plan but, after he left office, his state acted as if he bad and, moreover, as if it were the only plan they could now follow. Every international situation Germany faced after 1906 increasingly led back to the assumed solution, the magic bullet, war against France — even if France were only marginally involved. When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Moltke's nephew, also named Helmuth von Moltke, succeeded Schlieffen in 1906. When Russia not only rebuilt much of her military power after her defeat by the Japanese in 1905 but also started to build railways in what had been the underdeveloped glacies of Russian Poland, Moltke began to worry about the prospects of attacking in the west and defending in the east. Russia might show up on Germany's eastern frontier in strength before France was defeated. What then? Increasing the size of the army^2 seemed one logical step to take. The problem here was that the German Navy was also eating up the scarce tax resources available to the central government (the Reich), and money bills to pay for arms increases had to obtain the approval of the Reichstag, the national parliament. Moreover, conservative elements in the Prussian Ministry of War were reluctant to dilute the traditional composition of the army, which constituted an aristocratic officer corps and a peasant rank and file. Expansion of the army would mean drawing upon the middle and working classes of the cities. In the end, the stark necessities of security overrode conservatism and political complications, and the Reichstag passed army bills in 1912 and 1913 that increased the size of the army by around 20 per cent.
Joffre's pragmatism showed up in his new plan, Plan XVII. Instead of waiting to see where the Germans attacked and letting them come, Joffre wanted to counter-attack as soon as possible, preferably in Belgium where the ground was most suitable. When concern for Belgian neutrality ruled that out, Joffre's alternative was to plan for early counter-attacks either in Lorraine or in the Ardennes along the eastern frontier. These attacks, however, were not planned in detail, so that Plan XVII was, in Strachan's judgement, a plan more of mobilization than of attack comparable to the German plan. It specified where the army would gather, not how it would then proceed. This in fact was one of the strengths of France in 1914. Joffre's experience with railways paid off in improvements for the system of quick mobilization, so that the German advantage was gone and Joffre had reason to believe that his army would begin a war in the right place, able to react to whatever the enemy did. What neither he nor his intelligence staff fully understood was the size of the move the Germans would be making. By 1914, they conceded that Germany would be using reserves in the first wave, but they also believed that up to 22 German divisions would be sent to the eastern front to hold off the Russians. The sheer length of the German front and its immense weight on the right wing did not seem possible given the numbers the French were crunching. When your hammer is not as large as you would like, you assume fewer nails.

The Russian armed forces had staged a remarkable recovery from the shambles of 1905, helped in part by Russia's spectacular economic growth and heavy investment from abroad, especially France. What had yet to be added to the military mix was an officers' corps competent at field command or staff work. So a Russian plan to strike first was ruled out by the inability to plan anything. As with Austria-Hungary, Russia was not contemplating taking part in, let alone starting, a general European war. Her interests were confined to the Balkans.

The British defied the trend to taking thought for the morrow by having no strategic plans of their own. Instead they intended to attack the small British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the left wing of the French army and conform to the French plan. Britain was not carrying out a formal treaty obligation to France when she declared war on Germany. The treaty obligation at work was the Treaty of London of 1839, guaranteeing Belgian neutrality. What shaped the British response was the moral obligation they felt to support France once the goal of the German threat through the heart of Belgium became clear. In acting, the British were not just defending Belgium. Above all they were defending the target of the German invasion of Belgium, France.

THE NAVAL RACE

Britain had long depended more on the Royal Navy than on its small army of long-serving professionals to defend its vital interests. Once the challenge
posed by the new Imperial German High Seas Fleet became clear after 1900, Britain committed her resources to staying ahead at sea, especially in numbers of up-to-date capital ships. The moving force other than the Kaiser behind the German programme of naval build-up, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, wanted a world-class battle fleet to rally the middle classes to the monarchy and intimidate Britain into making geopolitical concessions. However, once the First Sea Lord, Admiral John 'Jackie' Fisher, reorganized the Royal Navy to concentrate it in home waters, reformed the training of officers and manning of ships and launched a programme of super-battleships with HMS Dreadnought in 1906, the British were satisfied just to stay ahead. This they did, with 24 Dreadnought-class battleships by 1914, compared with 13 for Germany, plus 13 under construction against 10 for Germany.
CHAPTER TWO

1914: OOPS! THE PLANS FAIL

We still tend to think that the war was all of one piece and that those who experienced it had a single, common experience. The war, however, developed in ways the historian Trevor Wilson, quoting the novelist Frederick Manning, calls its ‘myriad faces’ (Wilson, 1986). The soldier of 1914 encountered something different from the soldier of 1917; the French soldier something different from the German; the front soldier something different from the people at home, who often seemed to share nothing with them any more (Docs. 6, 12 and 16); the mother worrying at home something different from the nurse at a base hospital (Doc. 17); the war profiteer something different from the conscientious objector in jail. As the fighting tended to subside over winter, giving those in charge a chance to reconsider their approach, the war also changed over time. Each year it lasted formed a distinct period:

1. 1914. Manoeuvre on the battlefields, bogging down in the west into unexpected positional war while the war in the east remained more open and mobile; at home, ‘business as usual’.
2. 1915. Improvised trench war and badly planned offensive disasters on the Western Front; German success against Russia; the state-controlled war economy emerged at home.
3. 1916. The year of the most-remembered phase: well-planned disasters of attrition on land and sea; total war at home.
4. 1917. No end in sight in the field, until Russia collapsed; revolution, despair or grim determination at home.
5. 1918. Movement returned to the battlefield; the home fronts approached or moved past the tipping point. And then it was over.

THE BATTLES OF THE FRONTIERS

In compliance with the Schlieffen-Mollee plan, the Germans sent 1.5 million men across their western frontier in the first days of the war. First came cavalry patrols and an advance guard into Luxembourg on 3 August. Then
the northernmost armies set off into Belgium on 4 August, the First Army under General Alexander von Kluck and the Second under General Karl von Bülow. With 320,000 men, Kluck’s First Army was the largest of the seven German armies attacking in the west. With the advantage of surprise, the Germans were slowed only by problems with traffic and supply. The first real resistance the First Army met came at the fortress of Liège, the hub of the Belgian defensive system. When the Belgian defenders stopped the initial German attacks, the Germans brought up immense siege mortars. The main fortress at Liège fell quickly, and then the satellite fortresses. By 16 August, the Germans had opened the path through the central plain of Belgium towards France. Although Liège was still the only significant obstacle that the Germans had faced, the vanguard of their attack slowed down simply because men could not keep marching between 20 and 25 miles a day, especially in the unusually hot weather. Moreover, by blowing railway tunnels, the Belgians constricted the flow of supplies and reinforcements. When Belgian civilians resisted, the Germans treated them as franc-tireurs or terrorists and killed them en masse to cow the rest into submission. In Dinant, 612 men, women and children were shot in the main square. Two days later, the great library at Louvain was set on fire when the occupying troops panicked for five days. The British later exaggerated the ‘Belgian atrocities’ of August and September 1914 for propaganda purposes, so that posterity came to think they were a hoax. They were not. They happened, and they set a terrible precedent for the century to follow.

Moltke thought briefly about shifting the main attack to Lorraine. He moved some reserve divisions there and gave the Sixth Army, under Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, orders to defend vigorously. Rupprecht was more than just a figurehead and had real abilities as a commander. He decided that the order to defend did not rule out attacking. By 20 August, his Bavarians had thrown the French out of Lorraine. So by accident, the bulk of the French army was retreating to positions between Paris and the greatest of the French frontier fortresses, Verdun.

By now Joffre knew that the Germans were advancing in strength in Belgium and that the centre of the German line was also surprisingly strong. Because of the prior underestimation of German strength, he naturally concluded that this strength in the north and middle meant that the Germans were weak somewhere else. At first, he thought this meant in Lorraine. When his attack into Lorraine failed, he decided that the centre of the German line must be weaker than it first seemed. That was where he sent the Third and Fourth Armies. With the French infantry lined up in bright red trousers and blue jackets and the officers in full dress uniform, like targets on a shooting range, the result was a massacre. The French fell back to the river Meuse. Their initial attacks had failed badly at the cost of 300,000 casualties and had scarcely bothered the Germans. They were just beginning to roll.

THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE (BEF) UP TO MONS

On 5 August, three days after France began mobilization and a day after the British Empire declared war on Germany, Prime Minister Asquith convened a Council of War. The Council realized immediately that the BEF must go to north-west Europe. As for what it would do when it arrived, the soldiers admitted that the only plan they had was to stick to the left flank of the French army. Britain thus backed into the Western Front as a very junior partner of France, adding the four (later six) divisions of the BEF to the 70 of the French army.

The BEF duly embarked, crossing the Channel and setting out for Maubeuge without a hitch. By the time it approached Mons across the border in Belgium on 21 August, the French were beginning to realize that they faced disaster. Almost all of Joffre’s armies had been decimated and thrown back. Only the Fifth Army under General Charles Lanrezac, on the left of the French line, remained intact, simply because the German First Army had yet to reach
Belgian army still intact, but Moltke was strengthening the left wing in Lorraine. On 25 August, he detached two corps from the right wing to relieve the crisis that seemed to be impending in the east. If he is to be faulted, it would be for taking these men from the all-important right wing, which had already started to bog down in Belgium. The fewer men the First and Second Armies had, the more they tended to pull apart as they fanned out when they moved into France. On 27 August, Moltke allowed Kluck to freewheel, moving independently of the Second Army next to him. Convinced that the British were retreating west to the Channel, Kluck wanted to sweep wide to the north to cut them off. The BEF, however, was retreating to the south, west not to the coast, and was closer to Kluck than he realized. The British 2nd Corps, under General Horace Smith-Dorrien, was too exhausted to march any further and dug in at Le Cateau. Once again, Kluck had the BEF in his sights, once again British rifle fire and artillery were deadly, and once again the Germans made the mistake of attacking frontally. The 2nd Corps stood its ground and finally retired in good order.

Thinking only of the hunt for the BEF, Kluck lost touch with Bülow’s Second Army. The British marched into the gap between the two armies. They might have made something of their luck under a decent commander. By 29 August, however, Sir John French had lapsed into a total funk. His subordinate corps commanders, Generals Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, were still full of fight, but only depressed Sir John the more and he actually issued orders to prepare the BEF to retire to England to refit. Sensing that Sir John was losing his grip, the British Cabinet sent the new Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, over to instruct him to conform to the movements of the French army and not even to think of bugging out. Joffre also hovered over Lanrezac’s shoulder, and when Bülow’s Second Army again ran into the French Fifth Army, Lanrezac finally hit back. So came about the muddled battles of St. Quentin and Guise, the high point of which came when Lanrezac’s 1st Corps, under General Franchet d’Esperey, threw the Germans back over the river Oise in the last old-style Napoleonic infantry charge in history. Kluck now had to double back to help Bülow, which meant turning south short of Paris instead of hooking around it to the west. Moltke eventually approved, because his hope now was to push the French to the south-east. To make sure the large garrison in Paris or the BEF did not attack Bülow’s rear, Moltke ordered Kluck to stay between Bülow and Paris. Kluck thought this was too cautious, and on 2 September he ordered his First Army to cross the river Marne the following day.

THE MARNE
With Kluck only thirty miles from Paris, the French government prudently shifted to Bordeaux. On 3 September, the Military Governor of Paris, General
Joseph Galliéni, summoned from retirement to be Joffre’s deputy, realized from air reconnaissance that the Germans were turning south short of Paris and heading for the Marne. He ordered the new Sixth Army under General Michel-Joseph Maunoury to prepare to attack the ripe German flank that had appeared when Kluck moved to the Marne. Joffre confirmed the attack the following day, and then went to work on Sir John French. After some spirited oratory from Joffre, Sir John promised that the BEF would do what it could.

On the German side, poor communications were wrecking the tidy world of peacetime plans, war games and staff rides. It was also messing up Moltke’s well-power. Only a week before, the mood in his headquarters in Luxembourg had been euphoric, but by 5 September, victory was slipping away. The enemy was getting beaten like a drum, but it was still free to manoeuvre, a bad omen which Moltke deduced from the absence of captured men and guns. Worse still, Kluck’s energetic tourism had exposed the entire German right wing to a Schlieffen plan in reverse. On 4 September, Moltke restrained the First and Second Armies and warned them to guard against a flank attack from Paris. By the time the order reached Kluck, he had already moved most of his army across the Marne.

On 4 September, Maunoury’s Sixth Army ran into the reserve corps Kluck had left north of the Marne. Maunoury’s sharp attack on the vulnerable German right flank had a ripple effect, leading to adjustments out of all proportion to the initial French blow. Moltke ordered Kluck to pull back. By 6 September, the entire French army and the BEF were attacking. Nowhere did they break the German line, and the net effect was little more than equal and opposite pressure. When Kluck pulled his two corps back across the Marne and sent them to counter-attack. Maunoury, this opened another gap of almost twenty miles between the two German armies. By now, the rule was that when there was a gap, the BEF would pop up in the middle of it. The rest of the rule was that the British were unable to exploit their good fortune. Aside from the gap between their leading armies, the Germans were doing well. They repulsed the French Fifth Army, now under Franchet d’Esperey instead of Lanrezac. They drove back the French Ninth Army under General Ferdinand Foch, of whom more will be heard later. In spite of the German steadiness in the field, they bled first. On 9 September, Billy ordered his army to pull back. Kluck had no choice but to conform and ordered a retreat in the direction of Soissons to the north-east. By 11 September, all the German armies were heading north, either under local orders or on direct orders from Moltke. The only reason the German retreat did not turn into a rout was that the French and British were too exhausted to pursue.

Thus dwindled out the Battle of the Marne, the ‘miracle’ as the French immediately called it. It did not mark the collapse of the Schlieffen-Moltke plan, because Moltke’s indecision and Kluck’s improvising had already forfeited a quick German victory before Maunoury jarred the German right flank. It was not a showcase for clever generalship. Joffre’s main virtue was his equanimity, a quality not to be dismissed lightly in a supreme commander. What the British would call ‘twitch’ in the Second World War can spread like an air-borne disease, especially from high office. Joffre’s supporters tried to credit him with the attack on the German flank, but the initiative for that came from Galliéni. As it happens, the Germans stopped it cold, despite the presence of 3,000 soldiers rushed into the French line by 600 taxi cabs. What was significant during the battle was not what happened but what the Germans, and above all Moltke, thought might happen. Nor were their fears groundless, because if the BEF had been able to exploit the gap between the two main German armies, if Joffre had ordered a massive attack by his left wing in the east instead of a general attack along the line, the German army might indeed have been broken and a long way from home.

**First Ypres**

Although the Battle of the Marne was a draw, it was also a strategic victory for the Allies. The German expectation of a short war was finished. As both sides regrouped and recovered, the leaders looked ahead to the next round. They realized that frontal attacks were best avoided. Outflanking the enemy to the north would be wiser. In pulling back to the Aisne, where the German First Army dug the first trenches of the war and held off a French attack, Kluck began what was to be called ‘The Race to the Sea’. The description is misleading, because each side was trying to turn the other’s flank before reaching the sea.

After the Marne, Joffre bowed to Sir John French’s plea that the BEF be allowed to fight nearer to its Channel base. It was extracted from the Aisne and sent up to Flanders. By early October, the Germans had finally taken Antwerp. With this threat in the rear removed, they decided to use five of the reserve corps that had besieged and taken Antwerp to break around the north of the enemy line at Ypres. Then, the chief of staff and head of the OHL (High Command) was no longer Moltke, who had suffered one nervous collapse too many, but Erich von Falkenhayn, the Minister of War. Falkenhayn seemed more politician than soldier to some of his fellow generals, and to posterity his short-haired crop, silver moustache and cold-blooded command decisions made him seem like an earlier version of Darth Vader. Looking past appearances and the jealousy of rivals, Falkenhayn analyzed situations with a clear intelligence (Doc. 2). To help the flanking attack he used replacement divisions made up of untrained student volunteers. By the end of the battle, between a third and a half of them, around 40,000, were killed or wounded. Among the minority to emerge unscathed was an older member of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Regiment, Adolf Hitler. The BEF by then included
units of the Indian army. By the end of the battle, a third of the original BEF was dead.

Both the Germans and the British actually broke through, but in each case the defending side brought up reserves to seal the breach quicker than the attacking side exploited its gains. The climax of the battle, actually witnessed by the Kaiser, came when the Germans broke through at Gheluvelt, and the British, led by a few hundred survivors of the 2nd Worcestershires who formed the only reserve left, counter-attacked and threw the Germans back. After a final attack by the elite Prussian Guards failed, the battle petered out. By holding Ypres itself but giving ground slightly to the north, the British gained a bulge or salient in the Front, which now ran from the Channel to the Alps. They lost 50,000 dead and wounded at Ypres, the Germans around 100,000.

EASTERN FRONT: TANNENBERG TO LEMBERG

On the Eastern Front, plans and expectations also fell by the wayside. The Russians had not obliged the Germans by waiting six weeks to attack. Instead, they threw two huge armies into East Prussia as soon as the war started in August. The First Army, led by General Pavel Rennenkampf, advanced from the east towards Königsberg. General Alexander Samsonov’s Second Army came up from the south. These armies were little better than feudal levies, badly equipped and worse led, but they rolled over the German screen by sheer weight of numbers. When the German commander in the east, General Max von Prittwitz, appealed for reinforcements, Moltke, as mentioned, detached two corps from the west and sent them to hold back the Russians. By the time they arrived, the new commanders in the east, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, had turned the tide with the forces on hand, following a plan that Col. Max Hoffmann, operations officer with the German Eighth Army, had prepared earlier.

Hoffmann realized that Samsonov’s Second Army, moving slowly towards the town of Tannenberg, was out of touch with Rennenkampf’s First Army. Legend has it that the two Russian generals hated each other, but their failure to co-operate was common enough among Russian officers. Even worse than any personal feudling, the Russians did not encode their radio communications, which allowed the Germans full access to their plans. Hindenburg had been plucked from retirement to steady the new command team. Ludendorff provided the brains. As a talented staff officer of bourgeois origins, he had worked tirelessly before the war on the expansion of the German Army. Despite his high rank as Quarter-Master General of the Second Army, he personally led the capture of Liège, and then moved to the east. He was known to be erratic and tempestuous, which is why he was paired with Hindenburg. They became a remarkable team.

On 26 August, the outnumbered Germans attacked Samsonov’s Second Army near Tannenberg. Three days later the Second Army had ceased to exist, with 120,000 Russians taken prisoner and most of the rest of the original 200,000 dead. Samsonov shot himself. Ludendorff quickly moved the Eighth Army to face Rennenkampf’s First Army in the wastelands formed by the Masurian Lakes. The Germans mounted a holding attack, pinning the Russians while a flanking force worked north through a gap in the Russian lines. By 11 September, the First Army had lost 125,000 men; Rennenkampf abandoned the field and headed back to Russia.

On the same day, 11 September, the Austro-Hungarian offensive in Galicia, which had begun successfully in August with the capture of Krasnik and Komarow in Russian Poland, fell apart when the Russian Eighth Army, led by the ablest Russian commander in the war, General Aleksandr Brusilov,
smashed into the right flank of the Austro-Hungarian advance. The Austrian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, originally intended to operate only against Serbia. When Moltke virtually ordered him at the last minute to move against Russia, he tried to mount two attacks in opposite directions. When the Russians took Lemberg, the Austro-Hungarian withdrawal became a rout. With 350,000 men lost, the Austro-Hungarian Army never recovered from its opening fiasco. The Serbs then completed Conrad's misery by holding off his invasion of Serbia in September.

THE SOLDIERS

The military leaders might not have expected the defensive stalemate that emerged, but when it did, they, or more often the new men who replaced them, analyzed the unexpected dilemma with a good deal more acuity than the post-war legend about bone-headed generals would suggest. As Trevor Wilson points out (Wilson, 1986), they realized that there were essentially only two ways to bring back open and mobile warfare. One was to attack faster than the defence could entrench itself. Speed to achieve this came through the railway systems. For example, in the race to the sea in 1914, the battles between the Marne and Ypres took place where east–west spur lines delivered men who had been moved north on the main lines. Speed was constant for both sides because both were using the same railway network. Space was the other variable. The 475 miles of front might seem to present opportunities for open attack somewhere, but much of the territory was unsuitable for attacking, especially between Verdun and the Swiss frontier. In the flatter areas where manoeuvre was possible, the increase in firepower and manoeuvre power of the previous half-century ensured that both sides could pack in more than enough to stand their ground. Even before 1914, modern trenches had evolved far beyond being holes in the ground. Reinforced with barbed wire (one of the underrated basics of trench war), sandbags, deep dugouts, modern rifles, quick-firing field artillery and machine guns (one of the overrated basics of trench war), entrenched defences would yield only to infantry well supported by artillery. So artful manoeuvre and power drives were both impractical, at least for the moment. Moreover, by the end of 1914, everyone had run out of shells. Starting virtually from scratch, both sides converted to war economies to feed the guns. Yet the same artillery backstopped the defences. The more things changed, the more they were likely to stay the same, if only because the two sides had the same technological capacities, and whatever device one side lacked, it soon was able to copy.
THE POLITICIANS

The warring powers objectively still had a range of choices; all chose at this early point to limit the war. The shortage of shells gave them no other choice. Subsequently, however, each power faced a different situation. The French had the least freedom of choice. As Foch is alleged to have said after the war, 'when I last looked, France had not invaded Germany.' Other than surrender, the only option open to the French was to expel the invader. The Germans had a choice of fronts and therefore some strategic leeway. Looking ahead to the coming campaign season, they chose to defend in the west and attack Russia in the east. Hindenburg and Ludendorff wanted to commit everything to an eastern victory, but Falkenhayn doubted that he had the resources to force a Russian capitulation. Russia could always trade space for time, withdrawing into her vast interior to fight another day, the way she had when faced with Napoleon. Falkenhayn preferred to combine military pressure with diplomatic moves to detach Russia from her Western allies. As it happened, the German victories in the east in 1915 were too humiliating in their scope and their diplomatic concessions too minor to alter the will of the Tsar to fight on. Austria-Hungary still faced the threat the South Slavs seemed to pose to the survival of the multinational Empire, but it was now magnified by the struggle against the Slavs of Russia and the Habsburg Empire fought on despite its sorry start in 1914 is still hard to understand. Patriotism of the sort that France or Germany could muster was insignificant in a state whose ruler at most wanted, in his words, 'a patriot for me'. Yet there was perhaps an underlying affection for Franz Josef, who had been on the throne since 1848. Even for disgruntled nationalists he had become rather like unsightly wallpaper that is too familiar and inconvenient to replace. The Dual Monarchy kept going by sheer inertia.

Britain seemed to have the most freedom of choice by the end of 1914. Her new army was still embryonic, so that the Royal Navy remained her main strength. As early as the winter of 1914-15, members of the War Cabinet understood that the impasse on the Western Front might not be temporary. Winston Churchill wrote to Prime Minister Asquith to insist that the new army not be forced to 'chew barred wire in France' (Wilson, 1986: 104). David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had gone from being a critic of militarism to a staunch believer in the war. Not, however, any kind of war nor war at any price. He too did not want the main British effort on land to be on the Western Front. There Britain would always be a junior partner to France and might well be drawn into the French manner of war which seemed to him to involve enormous and wasteful attacks to wear down the Germans. Lloyd George looked instead to the Balkans. The growing conviction of the politicians that Britain should fight anywhere but the Western Front testifies to their compulsion, but also to their evasion of the central reality Britain faced in the war. Between 1914 and 1918, most of the German army was on the Western Front, making it the main front. To fight elsewhere ignored the reason Britain was at war in the first place, the need to defeat Germany. Whatever freedom of choice Britain had in theory, or in the imaginations of Churchill and Lloyd George, in fact she had as little as the others. She could see it through on the Western Front, tiptoe off to an unimportant sideshow, or drop out altogether. The generals accepted this point and its implications. The politicians had to deal with the political and social implications and understandably turned wafting into high policy.

CIVILIANS AND THE SUSPENSION OF PARTISAN POLITICS

Side-stepping the point was not an art form exclusive to the British. Politicians in all the warring countries had to tread carefully. As war approached, civilian leaders worried that an outraged public would regard war as a calamity and hold them responsible. When instead crowds everywhere welcomed the war rapturously, and even militant socialists supported the war on behalf of the working classes, the leaders issued a collective sigh of relief. Had the war not been so popular, at least in the larger cities, it might indeed have been over by Christmas. What turned another war into the Great War was its extraordinary popularity [Doc. 10].

In Germany, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg had been Chancellor (head of the central government) since 1909. A civil servant by training who in office was responsible only to the Kaiser and not to the elected parliament of the Empire, the Reichstag, Bethmann had hoped to concentrate on domestic matters. Foreign policy, in which he was relatively untrained, came instead to dominate his attention. After his wife died in 1912 he seems to have become fatalistic, and by 1914 to have convinced himself that war was inevitable. All he could do was to ensure that Germany was prepared for it when it came. That meant hoping for British neutrality and keeping a watchful eye on the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which in 1912 had won a third of the seats in the Reichstag. In its official programme, the SPD was committed to oppose any war the capital classes foisted on the workers. In practice, the SPD gradually became less radical and more patriotic. Bread and butter issues and parlia-

mentary politics displaced revolutionary ideology. When Bethmann delayed acting until Russia mobilized first, the SPD joined the rest of the nation in believing that Germany was the victim of Tsarist aggression. It was thus not just war with all its romantic associations that Germans embraced in August. They were also celebrating their new-found unity. When the Kaiser declared on 4 August that he no longer recognized parties but only Germans, he gave voice to a deeply felt yearning and for once spoke to and for his people. The government declared a Burghfrieden* or 'truce of the castle', to signal the suspension of normal partisan politics.
Like the influenza pandemic that struck the world at the end of the war, the 'spirit of August' was not confined to one country or class, although contrary to legend it did not carry away everyone. People less engaged in the modern world were less susceptible, so that the 'spirit' was less evident in the countryside in Europe or in the longer-settled areas of the Imperial Dominions such as Nova Scotia or Quebec in Canada. France matched the German _Begfrieden_ with a _Union sacrée_. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was too fractious even to pretend to be united. Russia had little in the way of civic politics to suspend, but she too had a sudden abundance of patriotism. The Liberal government in Britain did not bother to proclaim a truce, yet the end result was much the same. The women suffragettes, Irish nationalists and trade unionists who had been so militant in the years before 1914 either suspended their agitation or backed the government enthusiastically. The legal side of conscription was secured by the Defence Of The Realm Act (Doc. 9).

Under Andrew Bonar Law, the Unionists (Conservatives) moderated their bad temper and kept a close watch over the Liberals.

Although an interest in war had been growing before 1914, so had pacifism. Its most popular expression was The Great Illusion by Norman Angell. He argued that modern states were too integrated economically to make war a rational option. Following this vintage liberal argument, businessmen assured themselves that a long war was out of the question because it would ruin trade. When war came, the main economic worries concerned trade and finance. Only when the war did not end after a few months did government and business think about problems that would occur in the longer run: shortages of raw materials, the disruption of the workforce with so many men in uniform, and paying for the war, which was proving to be expensive beyond all expectations. When Winston Churchill used the phrase 'business as usual', he hoped to dispel the fear that the situation was heading into unknown dangers. The trouble with this breezy complacency was that the need for victory was making old ways of managing obsolete. War tests everything. Whatever obstructs victory is dumped overboard; whatever works passes the test; and measures,manners or mores that once were unthinkable are adopted 'for the duration' if they bear the promise of victory.

**WAR AIMS**

Victory was pretty much the only war aim the powers formally declared. Of course they also tried to explain why they were fighting. Germany was fighting to avoid encirclement and to secure a free hand to grow to be a world power. France was fighting to expel the invader. Britain was fighting to rid the world of bullies, or at least bullies who wore pointed helmets. Canada, Australia, South Africa and India were fighting because the Empire (read Britain) was fighting. Austria-Hungary was fighting against the threat of disintegration.
Russia was fighting for the rights of the Slavic peoples. All the states claimed to be defending themselves against the aggression of others. All left the public expression of what they were fighting for, of the details of war aims and peace settlements until the fortunes of war decided the outcome.

This omission of clear and explicit war aims was more than an oversight. What a state wants to achieve through war affects the sort of war it gets. When the aims are unlimited, the war tends to be as well, as with the Second World War. The curious thing about the First World War is that, even though the avowed aims of all of the powers were either unexpressed or, when finally articulated, limited and defensive, the means by which the war was fought became increasingly open-ended and unlimited. The belligerents defined victory simply as the collapse of the enemy and dedicated all their resources to that end. So it was that after the first deaths, war was the cause of more war and seemed to take on a life of its own. In effect, the civilian leaders asked the soldiers to fight until the other side gave up. The civilians would then revise the maps and sort out the details. The soldiers in turn asked the civilians not to be back-seat drivers and to keep quiet until victory came.

In private, people high and low had war aims that were anything but defensive and limited. The best example of such a private agenda is the September Memorandum of Bethmann [Doc. 1]. When Professor Fritz Fischer discovered the document in the archives, he thought it proved that the government of Germany, and not just Pan German extremists, was committed to annexations and European supremacy (Fischer, 1967). Bethmann's private aims were indeed indistinguishable from Pan German aims. They were, however, private. He drafted the memorandum before the Battle of the Marne negated the hope of a quick victory. When the god of battle left the enemy able to fight on, Bethmann refused to endorse or deny annexations. Not only would any declaration of aims play into the hands of the enemy, but it would offend either the Social Democrats, who wanted the peace to reflect the situation before the war, or the growing movement for annexations. To uphold the Burgfrieden, he asked the parties and interest groups to say nothing about war aims. They would trust him, he would trust the army, and the result of this stoic solidarity would be a peace that would reward Germans for their sacrifices. The British were similarly vague about their avowed aims, but they had the advantage of publicists like H.G. Wells, who provided phrases that were a substitute for policy. 'War to end war' and 'war to make the world safe for democracy' went over well at home and in America.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAR IN 1915: BADLY PLANNED DISASTERS

RUSSIAN POLAND, SECOND YPRES

The muddled state of war aims in 1915 corresponded to the muddled state of the war itself. Germany had failed to carry its plan to the intended conclusions but still held the strategic initiative in the east and west. In particular, Falkenhayn had the advantage of a reserve of manpower which, thanks to the central position of Germany and to the railway system, he could deploy where he wanted. Brusilov's success in September led Falkenhayn to fear that Austria-Hungary was too weak to resist Russia by herself. So he moved his reserve from west to east, using a chlorine gas attack at Ypres on 22 April to cover the withdrawal of eleven divisions and to test the effectiveness of poison gas as a weapon. Gas had not been used on the Western Front before, and the Algerians and French reservists who were its first victims broke and ran. The BEF, including the 1st Canadian Division, stood its ground on the second day and, at the cost of 2,000 lives, plugged the gap [Doc. 7]. Because the gas attack was experimental and the Germans intended to stay on the defensive in the west, they were not ready to exploit their initial success. The Allies quickly improvised gas masks, and poison gas became a feature of the new warfare, limited because of its dependence on the wind and terrain but increasingly part of the dehumanized environment of the Front and always deadly to the unwary [Docs. 13 and 17].

To attack in the east, Falkenhayn set up a two-pronged offensive in Russian Poland, with General August von Mackensen commanding the Austro-German thrust north-east in Galicia and Hindenburg attacking in the north towards Kovno [Map 2]. Hans von Seeckt was Mackensen's chief of staff, Ludendorff continued to serve with Hindenburg. Both Seeckt and Ludendorff were innovative. Seeckt put his assault divisions in the line without tipping off the Russians to the impending attack; the brief but intense preliminary bombardment also confused them, and when the German first wave attacked on 2 May, it was ordered to flow around resistance, leaving these positions to be taken by later waves. The attack went as planned and the Russians
collapsed. The Austrians regained their fortress city of Przemysl on 3 June and Lemberg on 22 June. Falkenhan then directed Mackensen to move north. Warsaw fell on 4 August, and then the fortress city of Brest-Litovsk. To the north, Hindenburg took Kovno. By the time Falkenhan closed down the eastern campaign, his forces had advanced 300 miles, occupied most of Russian Poland, taken a million Russian prisoners and inflicted a further million casualties. It was the most successful German campaign in the war. The loss of prestige was devastating for the Tsar, especially after he sacked the Grand Duke Nicholas as commander-in-chief and took his place. Tsar Nicholas could not have organized a rummage sale let alone an army. From now on, defeat would be a personal matter, bringing the very survival of the autocracy into question.

Falkenhan was not thinking of driving into Russia proper but rather of inflicting such a defeat that the Tsar would abandon France and ask for a separate peace. Humiliation, however, made the Tsar stubborn. Nor was he alone. The loss of Russian Poland finally gave the patriotic classes of Russia something tangible for which they could fight. Seeing the helplessness of the autocracy, the middle classes started to take over the organization of the war economy. As production rose, so did inflation, making the cause of "bread," or affordable food, into a revolutionary issue.

The trench system and the code of the front

Fewer men spread over greater distances kept the war in the east mobile. The war in the west was different. To understand why trench warfare prevailed there, one must first realize that it was nothing new. Since the first appearance of rifled arms with a greater zone of accurate fire, infantry had dug in for protection. In the First World War, trenches* appeared as early as the Battle of the Aisne. When the opposing armies connected the strongest defensive positions they held with trenches and barbed wire over the winter of 1914–15, the trench system emerged as a temporary improvisation. The trenches in turn were reinforced, in the German and British positions with sandbags piled to form parapets in front and parapodes to the rear (both terms derived from medieval siege warfare), in the French lines with bunches of branches to "cover" or strengthen the constantly collapsing walls. In front of the trenches, in No Man's Land, each side stacked rolls of heavy barbed wire. The teeth were razor-sharp; men could tear themselves to pieces if they were caught [Doc. 3]. Wiring parties worked through the nights while raiders tried to cut gaps. These gaps then showed the enemy where an attack would likely come.

Trench systems evolved gradually. They were different for each army. The British had to build on the ground in Flanders rather than dig in because of the high water table. In theory their system used three lines. The front line contained the fire and command trenches. The fire trench was zig-zagged with traverses,* with thick buttresses blocking off each section, and an infantry section of 14 men in each separate bay. The command trench, about twenty yards back, contained the dug-outs and, where possible, the latrines. The second line was the support trench, from seventy to a hundred yards behind the front line. The third line was the reserve trench, four to six hundred yards behind the support line. The French, who were still committed to attacking, used only front and support trenches and, like the British, manned the front line heavily. The Germans, who had shrewdly taken the high ground when the front stabilized, built a trench system up to 5,000 yards deep, with the forward lines lightly held and the reserves safe in massive bunkers, some dug up to a hundred feet underground.

By and large, the Germans learned about trench warfare faster than the Allies not because they had expected it, which they had not, or because they were wiser in the arts of war, which they were, but because they had an incentive to learn. They chose to stand on the defensive on the Western Front, which concentrated their mind on using their firepower and higher ground to maximum advantage. In this learning period, the Allied commanders were still thinking of attacking, leaving the unexciting details of figuring out appropriate tactics to field officers, who improvised stop-gap solutions. Few realized that in war, and perhaps in modern life, nothing is as permanent as the temporary (Daylight Savings Time, income tax, trenches). Then again, nothing is as temporary as the permanent, for the layout of the trench system was constantly modified by bombing, the weather and reconstruction. In effect, the infantry rebuilt the trenches each night. Because the trenches were always changing and the men in them usually on the move, unless they were in a front-line trench in daylight, it was almost impossible for soldiers to comprehend the labyrinth they were inside.

As trench fighting developed, a myth about the war took hold, especially among British junior officers. Myth in this case does not mean a falsification of the war experience but rather a heightened explanation of it that confirmed certain beliefs and made sense of the situation. According to the myth, young men went to war full of innocence and idealism, hoping to make the world a better place and to purge themselves of such peacetime vices as selfishness and materialism. They were murdered en masse by the old men, the generals, politicians, and profiteers, the noncombatants. This bitter disenchantment was muted at first, appearing occasionally in outbursts such as the declaration of the poet Siegfried Sassoon in 1916 [Doc. 12]. But eventually it became the dominant way of imagining and understanding the war. This myth of the Massacre of the Innocents made sense of the disjointed experience by refusing to look for any overall meaning, or indeed denying the possibility of such meaning in the world the war created. Paul Fussell (1975) has argued that instead of offering a meaningful narrative, the myth of the war imposed a binary structure:
then (naive and innocent) and now (grizzled and world-weary), here (the trenches) and there (home), them (the noncombatants) and us, before and after [Doc. 16].

After the war, this myth became virtually the only way of remembering the war especially in Britain and France, expressing as it did a disillusionment not just with the war but with the peace that followed it [Doc. 18].

What should be noted is that the dominant myth of the war grew out of the experience of a small minority of the front soldiers, junior officers from relatively privileged backgrounds. Indeed, it could be argued that these young men were not actually front soldiers in the strict sense, because as officers, even junior officers, they visited the front lines and led raids and attacks but did not live continuously in the front-line trenches. That honour was reserved for the other ranks. For the educated officers, it was a ‘literary war’, to quote Paul Fussell. The overwhelming majority of front soldiers, however, came from the urban and rural working and lower-middle classes. These less educated and literate men did not preserve their experience in letters or works of the imagination, although many of the survivors later provided invaluable interviews and memoirs. Their attitude to the war can be gauged from the language they used [Doc. 15], the songs they sang [Docs. 4 and 5], the trench newspapers they wrote and read and the way they behaved. On the whole, whereas the officers saw the war through the prism of duty and service, the other ranks saw the war as unavoidable work to be carried out as part of a team, and treated it much as they had treated their civilian work.

According to the myth that arose after the war and coloured the way the war was remembered, the ordinary soldiers were doomed to their fate, which they had to endure passively. In fact, the soldiers had choices – not many to be sure, but enough to affect the conduct of the war. Seeking to show ‘not... how the decisions of a few generals affected thousands of soldiers, but, rather how the decisions of thousands of soldiers affected a few generals’, Tony Ashworth shows that front soldiers on both sides worked out a system of ‘live and let live’ that prevailed in about one-third of the trench tours made by all the divisions of the BEF [7: Chapter 7]. Both the astronomical casualty rates for certain days and the attitude of utter disenchantment were exceptional rather than typical [Doc. 16].

According to Ashworth, as the trench system emerged, the front soldiers exercised the first of four choices open to them. They exchanged peace openly, with the most famous but by no means the first or last truce coming on Christmas Day 1914 on the British front. High Command was not amused and, as its grip over the war tightened, it forced the front soldiers to try a second option, inertia. They refused to take aggressive action because it made no sense against someone who could hit back. Equal vulnerability and a latent sense of fair play thus reduced the violence. Once again, High Command imposed rules to ensure that the men had the proper ‘offensive spirit’ [Doc. 15, Offensive]. Specialist units, recruited from men who wanted to be aggressive,
were sent to the Front to use mortars, grenades, sniping rifles and gas to irritate the enemy. Once again, the men refused to submit passively. They worked out a third response, ritualization. Because they were under orders, they could not openly engage in truces or refuse to be aggressive. They had to act, but they could try to ensure that what they did was not lethal, hoping that the other side would return the favour. PatROLS avoided each other, gunners fired predictably at the same time and place, and each side was careful not to harass the other’s ration parties. As the violence became ritualized, ‘the other side’ came to refer more to the other team, as in a sport, than to the enemy. The real enemy were all those outside the Front, the staff officers and civilians who were keeping the war going while imagining it to be different than it was [Docs. 4 and 16].

According to Ashworth, traces, inertia and ritualization made up the live and let live system, a way of improving the chances of survival that was carefully handed on to the new units that came into and took over the line. Soldiers were really civilians in uniform, and usually could not and would not abandon their civilian view of life, including the commandments of the Gospel nor to kill. They fought not for King, Emperor or Country but for each other. When and if they abandoned live and let live, it was often to avenge the loss of comrades. They soon became disenchanted with the home front and its perception of the war as glorious. This created a rift between combatants and noncombatants [Doc. 16]. How then did nine and a half million men die if hatred was either episodic or absent at the front? By and large it happened because most of the killing was distant, mechanized and impersonal rather than face to face. Front soldiers were no killers. They were the killed.

NEUVE CHAPELLE, CHAMPAGNE, ARTOIS AND LOOS

The British discovered the strength of the German defences when they attacked at Neuve Chapelle on 10 March. The staff planners tried to approach the problem of attacking with fresh ideas. They saw that it was a gunners’ war, and brought in 340 guns to fire off more rounds than in the entire Boer War. The artillery was asked to co-ordinate a fire plan instead of freelancing at targets of opportunity. The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) provided aerial reconnaissance and photography. Finally, the infantry was made familiar with the ground over which it was to attack. Haig insisted on the need for surprise and the British concealed their intentions completely.

If wise precautions and thorough preparation were enough, Neuve Chapelle would have been a success. Indeed, the first British rush advanced 1,200 yards and took the village of Neuve Chapelle. Haig got ready to pass the entire First Army through the village, including the cavalry, but nothing came of it. The second wave of infantry got entangled with the first, and then General Henry Rawlinson, commanding 4th Corps, was slow bringing up the reserves. The

be observed to be accurate; the shells and guns had to be free of defects and of the proper weight for the job at hand. Rawlinson soon concluded that ‘bite and hold’ attacks were the only way to attack successfully. The guns did the biting; their range dictated what the infantry could take and hold. He was right. Bite and hold was one of the secrets to success hidden in plain sight. Why then did he and the other responsible commanders forget or ignore the lesson they learned so early? The answer seems to be that their initial successes encouraged them to go too far, to bite off more than they could hold. In the case of Neuve Chapelle this very human flaw showed up in the hope that a whole army could funnel through the village and break out. It was not stupidity that bedevilled high command but impatience, not too little imagination, as critics often complained after the war, but too much.

Joffre remained supremely confident that he could pinch off the huge German salient formed where the front turned to the south-east. The two avenues of ground suitable for attack were at Arras and in the Champagne district. The first French offensive came in May, when 18 divisions attacked near Arras, aiming to take the high ground of Vimy Ridge that dominated the Dosai plain. The main attack foundered on the elaborate German trench system, as did the British attack on Aubers Ridge. Nothing daunted, Joffre claimed that his real objective was to wear down the Germans, not to break through their lines. Wearing down, *usure* in French, was then elevated into higher diction as *attrition*. For the set piece in the autumn, he devised the greatest offensive of the war to date, the main blow coming in the Champagne region where the front turned and ran due east, with a supporting attack in the Arras area, including Vimy Ridge.

The French three-day bombardment in the Champagne offensive, heavy though it was, failed to breach the defences or cut the wire. The French repeated the pattern they and the British had set at Neuve Chapelle and Arras: success on the first day (25 September), soon giving way to uncoordinated local actions, and finally, after ten days of thrashing around, a futility attack against the German second lines. For a two-mile dent in the German lines, the French lost 145,000 men. To the north in Artois, the Allies fared even worse. Joffre had pressured Sir John French to attack the industrial sector north of Lens. Haig, who was to command the attack, argued that the target area was heavily fortified and of little military value. After a bombardment that was light because of the shortage of shells and thus brief enough to surprise the Germans, the British took the village of Loos and pushed on to break through the second German line near the suburbs of Lens. They released 130 tons of chlorine gas, killing 600 Germans but also, when it blew back, killing or disabling many of their own men. Sir John French unwisely kept his main reserves 16 miles to the rear, and by the time they reached the battle, the Germans had sealed the breach. With confusion reigning, the British second wave advanced in column into German machine-gun fire. When Sir John finally shut down the attack, the British had lost around 8,000 officers and men, killed and wounded. All they gained was another useless salient. It was at Loos that medical officers first observed ‘hysterical manifestations’ in some of the younger soldiers, the first trickle of what was to be called ‘shell shock’. In an official dispatch, Sir John tried to blame Haig for the delay with the reserves. Haig, however, was better connected than Sir John and, on 17 December, became Commander-in-Chief of the BEF. From the Scottish family that produced the famous whisky, Haig started his career in the cavalry and rose quickly, helped by his wife’s friendship with the Court and his own real abilities as a staff officer. Taciturn of speech, he was a clear-headed writer, in some ways like a top commander in the next war, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Haig was much better than the pig-headed Presbyterian of later legend. He had long been convinced that modern wars would be protracted, with the decisive battle coming only after a long wearing-down struggle.

**GALLIPOLI**

Lord Kitchener complained that what was going on was not war and he did not know what to do. In fairness to him, this should be coupled with his hunch at the start of the war that it would be long, and his certainty at the start of 1915 that the German lines in France could not be carried by assault. By that time the War Council agreed with his view, but it could not offer an alternative to the Western Front. It could not because there was no alternative except a negotiated peace, and with Kitchener’s New Army’s still training and the prospects of the Allies likely to improve in the long run, the War Council saw no reason to quit. However, responding to a request from the War Council for options, the Admiralty in early 1915 proposed ‘a naval expedition in February to bombard and take the Gallipoli peninsula, with Constantinople as its objective’ (Wilson, 1986: 107).

At the eastern end of the Mediterranean, the Dardanelles Straits ran into the Sea of Marmara, on the coast of which lay the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople. The Straits were 41 miles long, four miles wide at most and as narrow as three-quarters of a mile. The Gallipoli peninsula formed the north coast of the Straits, Asiatic Turkey the south coast. To pass through the Straits, the Royal Navy would have to destroy the forts along the shore and neutralize the minefields, which meant destroying the shore batteries protecting them.

The Royal Navy began to bombard Gallipoli on 19 February. The fortresses were scarcely touched, but the assault committed Britain to carry on. So Kitchener quickly authorized the dispatch of a regular division, the 29th, to Gallipoli. Even with the Australians and New Zealanders (the Anzacs) and some French added to the 29th, the military force would amount to only 75,000 men, half the total he had earlier promised.
to land his men. He chose Cape Helles at the tip and Savla Bay and Gaba Tepe halfway down the north coast. The invasion kicked off on 25 April, which later became Anzac Day, commemorating the coming of age of the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. The Anzacs missed Gaba Tepe and landed on a smaller beach, but they managed to advance inland despite the rough ground and fierce resistance from the Turks. The main force of the Anzacs landed at Anzac Cove and dug in. The landing at Cape Helles had a mixed result. The British and Anzacs scratched out outer perimeter defences on the beaches and hung on.

By now, the navy had stopped promising any result even if it did force the Straits, while Kitchener had decided not to divert any more men from the Western Front. By July, several attacks from the Cape Helles beach heads had failed dismally, and the only point from which an attack seemed promising was Anzac Cove, originally a secondary position. To achieve surprise, Hamilton tried night attacks. Once again, despite the courage of the Anzacs, the inherent difficulties of the situation prevailed and the attack stalled. On 6 August, Hamilton landed his New Army divisions at Savla Bay, north of Anzac Cove and behind the Turkish front. The Turks were surprised and by the end of the first day, the British were close to a victory. But the local commander, Sir Frederick Stopford, dithered and let the beach head degenerate into a shambles, giving the Turks time to organize their defences.

By September, the summer heat, the flies, dysentery and disappointment had worn out everyone on the British side. Hamilton was sacked in October. To cover up the fiasco as much as investigate it, a Dardanelles Committee of Inquiry was set up in London, and then promptly changed to a smaller War Committee from which advocates of Gallipoli were excluded. That meant Churchill, who had earlier been demoted to a junior Cabinet portfolio. When Kitchener went to Gallipoli, he agreed to evacuate. The Cabinet fell in line on 7 December. Because the Turks were glad to see the British leave, the evacuation was the one aspect of this badly planned disaster that went right. From its muddled origins through its tragic course to its pointless end, Gallipoli was a textbook example of the dangers of making things up as one went along. 'Plan' might seem like a four-letter word when its military results are contemplated, but Gallipoli serves as a reminder of the grim fate in store for those who proceed without planning. Of the 410,000 British and Commonwealth and 79,000 French soldiers who served at Gallipoli, 205,000 of the former and 47,000 of the latter were killed, wounded, sick or missing.

Meanwhile, the naval attack had bogged down. The navy could not suppress Turkish fire from the land and so could not sweep the minefields. When the naval commander fell ill, Admiral de Robeck took over command and carried out the original plan, a daylight attack on 18 March using 16 obsolete battleships to hit the forts. Unexpected mines sunk three of the battleships, although in shallow water, and put three more out of action, and the mine-sweepers never reached the minefields. De Robeck withdrew, promising to return to support an amphibious landing.

General Sir Ian Hamilton, in command of the landings, was given no staff for planning and logistics and had only six weeks to figure out where and how
CHAPTER FIVE

THE HOME FRONTS

On the home fronts, 'business as usual' was a hollow pretence by 1915. In Britain, the grim reality of war arrived with the shell crisis and the lists of dead. In Germany, it took the form of an increasingly bitter debate over war aims and submarine warfare. The occupation of a tenth of France concentrated the mind of the French wonderfully and ruled out any fond hopes of an easy war. Severe inflation saw to it that staying alive preoccupied the people of Russia. Ethnic nationalism had divided the subjects of the Habsburg Empire long before the war and now intensified, with the added complication that Slavs in the Empire were pitted against fellow Slavs in Russia. When Britain and France bribed Italy to enter the war in May 1915, the peoples of the Habsburg Empire finally had an enemy they could all dislike. Unfortunately for both them and the Italians, the only place they could meet to fight was in the valley of the Isonzo river and in the Dolomite Alps north and east of Venice. Between June 1915 and June 1917, there were ten distinct 'battles of the Isonzo', none conferring an advantage to either side for long and all adding up to abject misery comparable to the suffering the Germans and British endured in the flood plains of Flanders. German help gave the Austro-Hungarians a thin edge, culminating in the rout of the Italians at Caporetto in October 1917, sometimes called the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo. A year later, the Italians with British help broke through to Austro-Hungarian headquarters at Vittorio Veneto, in effect applying a finishing blow to the ancient Habsburg Empire.

BRITAIN: DORA AND CONScription

The British saw no option but to use illiberal means to defend their liberal way of life. At the outset of war, in response to the public frenzy about the danger posed by German spies, the Asquith government passed the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) which in a few sentences conferred sweeping powers on the Cabinet to maintain order and security [Doc. 9]. The spy craze soon abated, in part because there were so few German agents in Britain, and public support for the war remained solid, if not at the near-hysterical intensity of 1914, but the restrictions on civil liberties increased. The Irish Nationalists under John Redmond, disappointed when Home Rule for Ireland was postponed for the duration, nevertheless supported the war. Strikes suddenly gave way to labour peace, and the unionized working class proved just as willing to volunteer for service as the rest of the nation. The suffragettes in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) abruptly broke off their militant campaign to get the vote for women and supported the war. The united front of the British people ran deep.

The flood of volunteers shows the unity. Over a million men enlisted by the end of 1914, and 2.2 million by September 1915. They swamped the makeshift organization Kitchener and the War Office set up for the New Army that was to replace the Regular Army that was being decimated in France. Thousands of the volunteers went not into the New Army, however, but into existing Territorial divisions. These were units of part-time reservists formed as part of the reforms of the British Army that the Minister of War, Lord Haldane, introduced after the Boer War. Professional soldiers like Kitchener doubted the effectiveness and reliability of the Territorials, but necessity overrode such prejudices and in the end the Territorials proved to be a vital part of the British military effort. On the other hand, the ramshackle arrangements for the New Army resulted in such tragedies as the Pals battalions, by which men joined up with their mates on the promise that they would serve together. The social catastrophe this unleashed when men from a city, town or common workplace all too often died together is still difficult to measure or grasp. Yet the example of the Pals (or 'Chums') points to the innocence of these early days, in which men joined because their family expected it, because the idea of a brief holiday with pay was attractive, because, as the song said, 'every girl loves a soldier', or because the men believed in the nation's cause.

The flood of volunteers left the authorities with two messy problems: how to train them and how to replace them in the workforce. Training remained haphazard. Retired officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were 'dug out' to provide experienced leadership, which all too often was experienced to the point of being antique. In the end, the New Army used its time in camp to become physically fit and to learn the rudiments of drill. Given the novelty of the trench experience lying in wait, its real training would have to come on the job when it reached the trenches. As for replacing the volunteers, the obvious solution was to use women but this required delicate negotiations with the trade unions, who feared that their hard-won rights and privileges would be diluted. Men who left their jobs to fight were guaranteed their positions when they returned. Because of the importance of industrial workers to the war economy, especially in metal-working and mining, they tended to be retained in their pre-war jobs more than white-collar workers were in theirs. J.M. Winter has
estimated that if the same proportion of blue-collar workers had served as did white-collar, an additional 600,000 men would have been freed up to serve over the duration of the war (Winter, 1986). Although the appearance of women in industrial jobs was much publicized, especially in munitions, most of the substitution for men took place in the commercial and non-industrial sectors. Replacement labour also came from the servant class and from the underclass that had been almost permanently unemployed before the war. Because families at the bottom of the social order received a steady income for the first time, the war improved their situation dramatically. This showed in the sudden decrease in infant mortality despite the absence of half the doctors, who were serving in the army. Mothers were able to feed their children and themselves properly.

As the rush to volunteer abated, the government had to reconsider its antipathy to conscription, which meant rethinking a basic tenet of liberalism, the aversion to state coercion. Asquith was not one to hurry a decision and handled the issue in stages. First came Lord Derby’s scheme by which the eligible male population was divided into annual classes. Only single men would join up when they came of age, and instead of conscription, which smacked of Prussian militarism, they would be persuaded to ‘attest’ or promise to serve. Tribunals were set up to consider exemptions. Canada and Australia tried similar compromises, but the casualty rate for the infantry rendered them futile. In January 1916, the Military Service Act conscripted all single men between 18 and 41. After a muddled effort to honour Liberal principles, the government introduced universal conscription in May 1916. Even though voluntarism increased the army by 2 million men, despite 400,000 casualties, it seemed by the spring of 1916 to be another part of the old world that was vanishing. Canada followed the British example in 1917, but Australians twice rejected conscription in plebiscites. In August 1917, then Prime Minister Lloyd George put Sir Auckland Geddes in charge of the Ministry of National Service and empowered him to allocate manpower between the army and industry. In setting his criteria, he retained the existing policy that protected manual over white-collar workers.

PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP

It is tempting but misleading to attribute the unity of the nations at war to propaganda. The British in particular seemed to have mastered the dark arts of persuasion. In fact, German behaviour, as with the execution of British nurse Edith Cavell and the sinking of the passenger liner Lusitania, both in the spring of 1915, sold the war to the British public. The government did not see the need for an official propaganda organization aimed at the home front until 1918. Up until that time the main concern of the government was neutral opinion. In 1914, C.E.G. Masterman, head of the National Insurance
Commission, was asked to recruit well-known writers to influence foreign opinion. Masterman's group took the name of the building in which he worked, Wellington House. It was a secret organization set up with separate bureaus to handle target countries, America being the most important. The propagandists studied the local media in their assigned countries and published pamphlets and books geared to local opinion. Even today, most of these publications appear to be impartial rather than hate-the-Hun ranting, and of course they bear no indication of their connection to the British government. For America, the Canadian-born novelist Sir Gilbert Parker analysed press opinion and set up a mailing list of 33,000 prominent Americans. He gave American publishers commissions to publish books that Wellington House approved, which were then sent to those on the mailing list. He also organized film and lecture tours. The rule of thumb at Wellington House was to keep the message balanced and seemingly academic. The lack of any obvious connection between the British government and the propaganda helped to maintain the impression of objective honesty. The Germans also concentrated on American opinion, but their efforts were more obvious and heavy-handed and were no match for the more adroit British.

In all the countries, those on top kept popular feelings on a short leash by censoring the news. The military clamped down immediately in Germany, but neutral press reports available through Holland and Switzerland helped to offset the official version of the war. Lord Kitchener allowed a journalist to be assigned to the staff of the Commander in Chief. After Kitchener approved the reports, they were published under the byline 'Eyewitness'. Then in May 1915, the press managed to have permanent correspondents assigned to the BEF to supply more useful news. If the war correspondents failed to report the truth about the war, this was just a part because, even if they were experienced and honest, grasping what exactly was happening and then expressing it clearly were almost impossible tasks. After all, not many front soldiers found the truth about the war easy to comprehend or express. Why should it have been easier for outsiders? Truth was not the first casualty of war. Truth lived, but it lived in isolation, unknowable and silent.

**War Economies**

The sword was, for the moment, as powerless as the pen. To explain the failures at Loos and Neuve Chapelle, Sir John French claimed there was a shortage of shells. The press took up his complaint. The government in turn blamed the munitions workers, and to ensure that they concentrated on their work, pubs were closed from mid-afternoon until evening. This did little to increase productivity but did play a role in improving the health of the lower classes. The BEF did indeed face a shell crisis. It lacked enough of them and those it had were often faulty and of the wrong type. Yet the same was true of every army in 1915. No one had fully anticipated how important heavy artillery would be. Because the habit of planning and government intervention were far more prevalent in France and Germany than in Britain, these states moved quickly to set up command economies for war production. Despite the British faith in laissez-faire principles, part of the liberal civilization for which they believed they were fighting, they moved over to what was becoming known as 'war socialism' almost as quickly as the others. This became clear when the middle surrounding the War Office forced the government to create the new Ministry of Munitions, under the dynamic leadership of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George.

**Germany, War Aims and War Means: Submarines**

In Germany, meanwhile, the euphoria of August evaporated after the deadlock on the Marne but the **Burgfrieden** persisted. Although the left wing of the Social Democrats became increasingly sceptical about the justice of the German cause, in particular the claim to be acting only in self-defence, the party remained loyal to Bismarck. So did the left-learning liberals, the Progressives. The more right-wing National Liberals had been deeply divided before the war between those dedicated to serving the interests of heavy industry and the states quo and those tied to commerce and light industry and interested in a modicum of political reform. Now war aims provided the line of fracture, with a majority of National Liberals favouring annexations in the east and west. The Conservatives, representing the interests of land-owners and old Prussia, and the Free Conservatives, who were close to heavy industry, were the most committed to a so-called 'peace of victory', and were angry at the refusal of Bismarck Hollweg to commit himself to such a peace openly. By the spring of 1915, the right-wing parties had formed a war aims majority in the Reichstag. It worked with a war aims movement outside the Reichstag, made up of pressure groups representing heavy industry, large agriculture and the free professions, especially academics.

The means of waging war rather than the ends for which it was waged came to threaten Bismarck's delicate balancing act and the **Burgfrieden**. In 1914-15, submarines were too new a weapon to be fully covered by international conventions and rules governing blockading at sea. With Britain's huge surface fleet and her great advantage in merchant shipping, she had only a secondary interest in an undersea weapon of stealth. By the logic of Germany's continental position and restricted access to the open sea, she should have concentrated on submarines, but Tirpitz's obsession with matching the Royal Navy in the North Sea and his exploitation of the prestige which only battleships offered led him to give the submarine a low priority.

Right from the start of the war the British turned the entire North Sea into a war zone in which they prescribed safe routes for neutral shipping, which
had to travel under British escort. They further declared that all goods heading for Germany, including food and raw materials, were contraband liable to seizure. This was economic war with a vengeance, and it could be argued that the British blockade and not the German use of Zeppelins to bomb East Anglia in April 1915 or the sinking of the passenger liner Lusitania was the first instance of intentionally total war, making no distinction between soldiers and civilians.

Diplomatically, the Germans had no effective answer. They already guessed that the submarine would be the only way to counter-blockade and were reluctant to denounce ruthless methods they might have to use themselves. Yet they were cornered strategically as well, because the only way that they could gain the advantage at sea would be if the Royal Navy was inept enough to be lured into a pitched battle on German terms. The Royal Navy, however, had seized the initiative at the start, much like the Germans did on land, and was determined not to lose it through careless adventures. Late in 1914, the German admirals threatened to use submarines to blockade the British coast, but the threats were hollow, if only because the Kaiser flatly opposed all-out submarine warfare and Germany had only a handful of submarines available. The Kaiser’s scruplesgot to the heart of the German dilemma. He thought that drowning innocent civilians was frightful. Yet why should the German counter-blockade with submarines be more frightful than the British blockade with surface ships? It was because of the nature of the particular weapon. Using surface ships, the British could board a neutral ship, inspect the cargo and confiscate any war goods, with a promise to compensate shippers after the war. The intercepted ship and crew could either be sent on their way or escorted to a British port. Submariners worked differently. They preferred to attack on the surface, using torpedoes and deck guns to sink ships. Travelling submerged was reserved for running to and from station by stealth. Such attacks meant destroying the cargo and drowning the crews because the small size of the submarines prevented them from picking up survivors.

The Germans wrestled with the problem of what to do for six months. Neutral nations, led by America, were unwilling to pay Germany the respect they showed Britain for the simple reason that Germany had only 22 submarines, of which only a third could be patrolling on station in the war zone at any given time. In February 1915, the Germans formally initiated submarine warfare. They declared that German submarines would sink every enemy vessel encountered in the waters around the British Isles. They would spare neutral ships, but given the British habit of sailing under neutral flags and given too the accidents normal to war, neutrals would be well-advised to stay away. The Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral von Pohl, actually wanted to sink neutral ships on sight, thus launching unrestricted submarine warfare right away, but Reffmann and the Kaiser, already nervous about the American reaction, overruled him.

The February declaration gave Britain the excuse to make her blockade of Germany total, so that all trade with Germany, even through neutral ports, would henceforth be stopped. The German decision brought an angry protest from President Wilson, who informed Germany that America would hold her fully accountable for any indiscriminate attack on American ships and would even go to war to defend the freedom of the seas. The worst thing about the German bluff was that it was quickly seen to be hollow, so that the neutrals kept on trading with Britain.

On 7 May 1915, a German submarine sank the British Conard liner Lusitania off the Irish coast. The attack conformed to the policy that Germany had announced in February, and technically the liner could be classed as an auxiliary cruiser and thus a legitimate target. Although only 128 of the 1,200 victims were American, the earlier German attempt to frighten neutrals now came back to haunt them, and in America, one would have thought the Mayflower had been sunk. In a series of notes, Wilson first insisted that all forms of submarine warfare were illegal, because even if a submarine attacked on the surface like a cruiser, it could not take care of survivors. His third note, in July, admitted the novelty of the submarine and thus the irrelevance of any appeal to traditional restraints. It went on to point out that, since the sinking of the Lusitania, the Germans had indeed found possible to limit the use of submarines to surface interception and thus to abide by ‘cruiser rules’. So the war at sea could be limited, and if the Germans nevertheless reverted to terrorism, America would be forced to consider war. Germany quietly backed down. The German navy fitted the submarines with deck guns, which allowed them to surface, inspect neutral ships to ensure they were not carrying contraband and, if they were, to evacuate the ships before sinking them. In the period between May and July 1915, submarines were able to deal with 86 per cent of the merchant ships they sank in this limited or cruiser method.

In August, a U-boat sank another British liner, the Arabic, despite explicit orders from the Kaiser that all large passenger liners were to be spared. Again, President Wilson protested angrily, and this time, thanks to the support of the Kaiser, the civilian leaders of Germany prevailed over the admirals. The U-boats were ordered not to sink enemy passenger liners without warning. When Tirpitz denounced such a weak response to American threats, his loyal supporter, the chief of naval staff, was replaced with one more in tune with the chancellor. By late 1915, nine months of crisis over the submarine had settled down into a German-American détente. The Germans had forced the world to concede that the submarine, when used like a surface cruiser, was a legitimate means of war, while the Americans had forced the Germans to forego the most ruthless and effective use of the weapon. For Americans, there was still the parallel outrage of the British blockade, but by helping to support the price of cotton, hard-hit by the loss of German markets, the British appeased American opinion more effectively than the Germans could or would.
Bismarck had dodged a political crisis and preserved the shell of the Burg-
freiden, but at a heavy cost. If and when the German admirals built a fleet
of U-Boats sufficient to counter-blockade effectively, his concern about the
American reaction would pale beside the imperative of using a war-winning
weapon [Doc. 2].
CHAPTER SIX

1916: ATTRITION AND THE WELL-PLANNED DISASTERS

The third year of the war featured human misery of a type and scale that defied understanding or conventional description, a sense among some of the front soldiers that they had been betrayed and abandoned, and at home a growing weariness with the war, which translated either into defeatism or a grim determination to stay the course. In other words, the war we now remember finally arrived. One might think that the alternative to badly planned disasters would be well-planned triumphs. Instead, the world got well-planned disasters that took on a horrific scale because of the thoroughness and ingenuity of the planning. They were disasters not because of incompetence, cold-bloodedness or bad luck but because of their context. They took place in a titanic struggle in which the two sides were more or less equal, especially in their capacity to mess up the hopes and plans of the other side. What the Prussian writer Clausewitz called the ‘friction’ of war, the inability of those in command to impose their will effectively, dominated the course of events. Accounts of the war that stress how badly it was managed usually imply that it could have been much tidier or better run. Such critiques are like moving flags around a map of a battlefield well after the battle. They use hindsight to predict the past and to say, in effect, that things would have gone much better if Napoleon, Caesar or maybe even if the author had been in charge. The starting point to understanding the war in its maturity, however, is to accept that its horrors and its waywardness were built-in. Of course the fighting could have been better managed. There is room for criticism or for speculation along the lines of ‘if only this or that had been done’. But not much. What happens at the sharp end of modern wars is remarkably resistant to close control from above. Just look at today’s headlines – whatever day it is.

JUTLAND

The first battle to typify the stalemate took place at sea. On 31 May 1916, the German High Seas fleet under Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer set out from Wilhelmshaven to lure the British Grand fleet to its destruction. Still facing a
disparity in ship totals, Scheer intended to use his battle cruisers, under the command of Vice-Admiral Franz von Hipper, as bait to lure the British battle cruisers under Sir David Beatty within range of the main High Seas fleet. The British sailed, hoping that Beatty’s ships would lure Hipper’s. The six-hour battle continued more to British than to German expectations, so that twice the Grand fleet crossed the German “T”—that is, formed the top of a T so that every one of its guns could bear on the enemy while only the forward German guns could fire back. Yet the Germans sank 111,980 tons of British warships and killed 6,945 sailors; the British sank half the tonnage, 62,233 tons, and killed 2,921 German sailors. The discrepancy was due in part to British complacency; the Admiralty had known for over a year about the problem of flash control in its battle cruisers, whereby flames from exploding shells could penetrate to the main ammunition magazines because safety systems were disconnected to speed the transfer of shells to the guns. This uncorrected problem led directly to the explosion of three battle cruisers at Jutland with the loss of virtually all hands. In addition, British signalling was deficient, British ammunition was inferior to the German, and the British commanders’ overall handling of the Grand fleet was cautious to the point of paralysis. Yet Churchill was right to comment later that Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the Commander of the Grand fleet, was the only man who could lose the war in an afternoon. By not losing at Jutland, Jellicoe won. Although the Germans won a rare propaganda victory when their dispatch came out before Jellicoe had returned to Scapa Flow and the British public believed the German version, the Kaiser and the German admirals did not. They knew the British remained in control of the seas. The German fleet returned to its harbour at 4.30 a.m. on 1 June and in effect stayed put thereafter.

VERDUN

By the end of 1915, France had lost half her regular officers and as many men as Britain was to lose in the entire war. Joffre was disturbed. The only original commander left, he was in effect the Generalissimo of the Entente. On 6 December, the Allied commanders met at his sumptuous headquarters in Chamilly. He proclaimed that the Artois and Champagne offensives had brought ‘brilliant tactical results’. Only bad weather and a shortage of munitions, he claimed, had prevented them from ending the war. Because war production was improving and the British New Army would soon take the field, Joffre intended to repeat these frontal attacks on a grander scale in the coming years. For the location of the final battle, Joffre chose the valley of the Somme river, hitherto a quiet sector. To support this offensive in the west, the Russians would hit the Austro-Hungarians in the east and the Italians would attack in the south.

Falkenhayn was making his own plans for 1916. His cool overview of Germany’s situation was clear in the analysis of the war he prepared for the Kaiser in December 1915 [Doc. 2]. With relentless logic, he argued that a limited attack on the hollowed fortress complex in and around Verdun would force the French to defend at all costs. This would lure the French within range of German guns, bleed France white and cost the real enemy, Britain, her main ally. On 20 December, the Kaiser approved Falkenhayn’s proposal, and on Christmas Eve, planning began for Operation Gericht, Execution Place, a limited attack that turned into the longest continuous battle in history.

In theory, Falkenhayn had chosen the ground well. Verdun had been a fortified city since Roman times, and by 1914, succeeding generations of French military engineers had turned it into the most formidable defensive position in the world. When the Western Front took shape, it drifted itself around Verdun, so that the fortress was at the tip of a huge salient. Successive rings of hills surrounded the city itself, which had been reduced from its peace-time population of 15,000 to around 3,000 garrison troops. On the ridge of each outlying hill there were fortresses; German maps showed no fewer than twenty major and forty intermediate satellite forts. The river Meuse ran through the town, cutting the whole sector into two parts, the Right Bank or eastern half and the Left Bank or western. There were two fortified lines on the Left Bank and three on the Right Bank, where Falkenhayn intended to attack, with the outer line anchored by the massive forts of Moulinsville, Vaux and Douaumont. The Germans did not know that the French General Staff had come to score fixed defences and fortifications, which they assumed from the experience of Liège in 1914 could not stand up to German heavy guns. So Verdun had been stripped of its guns and most of its garrison.

Some of the French soldiers on the spot began to suspect that an attack was coming, but Joffre and his staff treated their reports as alarmist and continued to weaken Verdun. The strict secrecy with which the Germans covered their massive preparations reinforced Joffre’s habitual deaf ear for bad news. For the first time in the war, the Germans used aircraft to achieve protective air cover over an entire sector. The French were unaware of the miles of new railway lines laid down to bring in munitions and supplies for the 140,000 men of the Fifth Army due to attack. In all, the Germans deployed 850 guns, including 53 of the howitzers that had smashed Liège, two 15-inch naval guns for long-range work; 17 Austrian 305 mm mortars, 306 field guns; 152 mine-throwers; and several new additions to the horror, flame-throwers. All this firepower faced only 270 French guns. The 72 German battalions in the first wave would face only 34 French battalions.

The preliminary German attack began on 19 February. The bombardment stunned the French front soldiers with its intensity, but enough of them survived to break up the attack. The Fifth Army launched its main push on
21 February, quickly taking the village of Haumont, which opened up a ravine leading south to the next strong point and exposed the flank of the Bois de Cuesnes, where Colonel Émile Drant was holding out valiantly. Drant was in his sixties. After a distinguished Army career, he had been elected to the National Assembly. Rejoining the Army when war broke out, he was assigned to the Verdun sector and soon predicted that Joffre’s policy of weakening the defences there would lead to disaster. Knobelsdorf finally had to send three entire Army Corps and around 10,000 tons of shells against Drant. Down to eighty men, he stood in the open directing counter-fire until he was killed.

The weak second line on the Right Bank collapsed on 24 February, and when the third line broke, a path opened to Fort Douaumont. By the end of the day, the entire Verdun position was tottering. With superior range and technique, German guns had silenced their French counterparts. The French wounded were in danger of freezing to death. Verdun was wide open, but the Germans did not know it. They were trying to figure out what had happened at Fort Douaumont.

Fort Douaumont was situated at 2 o’clock if one thinks of Verdun as the centre of a clock. Taking it was an honour that the tough Prussians in the 24th Brandenburg Regiment coveted, and they were considerably miffed when their neighbouring regiment, the Westphalians from West Germany, drew the assignment. Among the Brandenburgers was Sergeant Kunze. All afternoon, Kunze and his unit of ten men pushed south until they stood before Fort Douaumont. He had orders to remove any obstacle to the advance of the infantry, and he reckoned that Fort Douaumont was definitely an obstacle. It did seem odd that the French guns were aimed far off and there were no garrison troops visible. He pushed on through a gap in the wire, across the moat, and by forming his men into a gymnastic pyramid, into the fort. Still no sign of the enemy. He went on alone. After one small group of French gunners escaped capture, he surprised a larger group and barricaded them in their room. By now, three other German units, also acting independently, had crept into Douaumont. They joined Kunze around 4.30 p.m. They had captured Douaumont in forty-five minutes without firing a shot. No wonder. Joffre had reduced the garrison to fifty-six elderly gunners, and when it had occurred to the French to reinforce the place, everyone thought someone else was doing it.

To get Douaumont back, the French lost 100,000 men.

While Germany rang its church bells and celebrated, Falkenhayn worried that Verdun itself might fall as easily as Douaumont, undermining his whole scheme. French honour had not yet been engaged, mainly because the French army was issuing communiqués ranging from outright lying to solemn assurances that losing fortresses was a cunning way to win the war. When the commander of the 37th Division panicked and pulled back to the Meuse, the entire Right Bank seemed ready to fall, and no amount of spin control could cover the threat to the honour and security of France.
The situation was saved by de Castelnau, Joffre's Chief of Staff. As a devout Catholic aristocrat, he was a misfit in the army. Making him stick out even more, he was able and intelligent. He had been promoted to Chief of Staff by another clever misfit, Galliéni, by now the Minister of War and Joffre's bitter rival. By the evening of 23 February, he had decided that the situation was grave enough to warrant waking Joffre after he had gone to bed. Joffre agreed with de Castelnau's offer to visit the battlefield and take stock. He also agreed that the Second Army, under General Philippe Pétain, be sent in to reinforce Verdun, with Pétain assuming command. Once at Verdun, de Castelnau decided that Pétain should be ordered to defend not just the Left Bank west of the Meuse but also what remained on the Right Bank, including Verdun itself. Critics have suggested that de Castelnau should have stuck to his first notion, giving up Verdun and holding a shortened salient on the Left Bank. But would the French troops hold on the Left Bank, or would they keep retreating? De Castelnau feared the latter. So he preferred to take a stand. He was doing precisely what Falkenhayn hoped.

Until 1914, Pétain's icy personality, peasant pessimism and unfashionable contempt for offensives had blighted his career. His passion for the defense rested on his sensible appreciation of the increasing power of rifles, machine guns and artillery, summed up in his remark that 'one does not fight with men against material'. In the first phase of trench warfare, he and the times finally concurred. As one general after another was dismissed, Pétain kept making sure that more Germans were hurt by his decisions than Frenchmen and his star kept rising.

Pausing at Headquarters to consult Joffre, Pétain sensed a hint of panic, and more than a hint at Verdun, which he reached late on 25 February. De Castelnau still remained calm, and together the two men agreed to hold on. At Verdun, Pétain's first move was to institute proper barrages from carefully selected positions. Then he made sure that more and more supplies could reach Verdun, even though there was no railway and only a narrow fifty-mile road. He organized the maintenance of this road, the Voie Sacrée or Sacred Road, despite constant German fire and a thaw on 28 February that turned the road into a swamp. The lifeline held, and Verdun was able to get reinforcements and the 2,000 tons of supplies it needed each day. Finally, he ensured that the remaining strong-points on the Right Bank were properly defended. There would be no more cheap wins for the Germans, no more Dousansts.

The appointment of Pétain marked a turning-point, in part because it coincided with setbacks for the Germans. The same rains that turned the Voie Sacrée to mud made it almost impossible to bring up the heavy guns to support the infantry. As German losses became less effective, the French guns, reorganized by Pétain, became deadly, especially when they could fire across the Meuse into the exposed flanks of the German advance on the Right Bank.

By the end of February, German losses had caught up to the French. Falkenhayn could have diverted reserves from Flanders and Picardy, but he still wanted to keep the battle limited. Falkenhayn had nothing much to say when he conferred with the commanders of the Fifth Army at the end of the month. The Crown Prince and Knöbelendorf could only repeat their plea for more resources to allow them to spread the attack to the Left Bank and cut off the single road supplying Verdun. In the end, Falkenhayn agreed. In effect, once the German attack down the centre stalled, they decided to get it going again by attacking on both the wings, on the Left Bank and Fort Vaux. So much for the limited offensive Falkenhayn had planned. He had doubled both the frontage and manpower of the German commitment, and he no longer held the advantage of surprise. Pétain expected a heavy attack on the Left Bank, where the open and rolling ground was dominated by Mort Homme, a hill with a double summit. He positioned his guns to good effect and when the Germans attacked on 6 March, French artillery, together with infantry counter-attacks, stopped them short of Mort Homme. On the Right Bank, the attack on Fort Vaux stalled.

The Fifth Army attacked Mort Homme again a week later. Once again, the first wave overran the French but was caught in the open by the French guns firing from the next hill to the south, the Bois Bourrus. When the Germans struggled closer to the Bois Bourrus, they were caught by guns firing from Côte 304 to the west of Mort Homme. They were now discovering the grim logic of attacking a continuous front. All the planners could do was to widen the attack, hoping to neutralize the guns at the shoulders and so free the push up the centre. To take Verdun, they had to take Mort Homme on the Left Bank; to take that, they had to take the Bois Bourrus; to take that, they had to take Côte 304; and to take that, they had to take Avocourt, at the western end of the Verdun sector. In fact, they did take Avocourt when a French division ran away, demoralized by too much Verdun. Once in Avocourt, French guns pinned the Germans down, and for the first time in the war, the OHL heard reports of poor morale, and even of units refusing to go over the top. In part, this was because of the policy of keeping divisions in the line for long periods instead of rotating them through reserve and rest, as Pétain was now doing and the British had done all along. Mainly, however, the Germans were reacting to the tenacious French defence. Both sides had too much Verdun.

By early April, the Germans decided to attack along the entire Verdun sector. The assault on Mort Homme reached the lower of the two summits, at which point the exhausted Germans looked up to see the French on the higher crest. A few days later, the French recaptured the lower summit. Early in May, with oppressive heat replacing the snow and rain of the earlier battle, the Germans took Côte 304 by blowing it up with the most concentrated shell fire of the war so far. With this, the line of defence that Pétain had established when he arrived suffered its first breach. The second came in May when Mort Homme fell. Nevertheless, in clearing the obstacles on the Left Bank and
holding up their advance on the Right, the Germans had taken greater losses than the French, doubled the limited offensive Falkenhayn had intended, and joined the French as fellow victims on the Execution Ground.

At this point, the Germans should have been able to resume their original attack on the Right Bank. The weather was bad, however, and the commanders were once again at odds. Falkenhayn tried to return to his original idea of limiting the attack by constricting the flow of reserves. He worried that Haig might attack to relieve pressure on the French, and that the German losses were as heavy as the French. The Crown Prince could see the glorious triumph he had expected slipping away. He concluded that if Verdun could not be taken, it should not be attacked. However, Knoebelsdorf, his Chief of Staff, wanted to mount an all-out attack on the Right Bank, and persuaded Falkenhayn to let the Fifth Army have one more go.

It is ironic that, as the Battle of Verdun reached its climax, Pétain shared the Crown Prince’s doubts about the battle. Since arriving at Verdun, he had known that abandoning the Right Bank and Verdun to stand on the Left Bank would have been the most sensible course of action. But de Castelnau had decided otherwise, for reasons of morale which Pétain, as a realist, might not share but could not dismiss. At least he had been able to limit costly offensives and bring in a system of replacement which ensured that his infantry divisions stayed in the line for only a few days at a time. Although this meant that two-thirds of the entire French Army was cycled through the meat-grinder, it at least allowed the soldiers in the front lines to be as fresh as possible and prevented the destruction of entire divisions.

Joffre knew that while Pétain’s star was rising, his own was falling as word spread about how unprepared Verdun had been. Joffre wanted action and yet would not allocate the men and guns Pétain demanded before he would agree to attack. So Joffre had Pétain promoted to command the whole central sector of which Verdun was a part, replacing him with Robert Nivelle.

On 1 June, the Germans launched the general offensive Knoebelsdorf had been preparing for two months. The centre of the attack was the siege of Fort Vaux, to the south-east of Douaumont. The fort itself was the smallest in the Verdun system, with only machine guns for its defence. But it did have Major Sylvain Raynal in command, a veteran who had worked hard to put the fort in order. He was unable to fix the water supply or send away the horde of wounded stragglers who had taken shelter. Thus, when the Germans surrounded the fort and seized the roof, Raynal was trapped with around 600 men, most of whom died for fighting and desperate for water. For five days, the two sides fought in the tunnels under the fort. One man managed to lead some of the wounded out and even to return with news that Nivelle was sending relief. Raynal and his men had to watch the undermanned relief force get cut to pieces. The last link to the outside was a carrier pigeon, one of four Raynal had when the siege began. Although weak from gas and unsure of its direction

in the moonscape of Verdun, the bird made it to French lines, delivered Raynal's message and fell dead. In the end, Raynal lost a hundred men defending Fort Vaux, but the Germans lost 2,600, and only the lack of water broke the French defence.

With Fort Vaux taken, the Germans had only to capture Fort Souville to reach Verdun itself. Knoebelsdorf thought that victory was within his grasp. Pétain agreed. Even Nivelle began to consider evacuating the Right Bank. Everything hung on Fort Souville, the key to which was the crossroads at Thiaumont. For two weeks, the fighting centred there, with Thiaumont changing hands fourteen times. Nivelle foolishly ended Pétain's system of rotation. The divisions at Verdun were now condemned to stay, and by mid-June, morale was falling, if only because the divisions chained to Verdun were losing around 4,000 men each time they saw action and the men still alive were setting action at Verdun for the second or third time. Pétain had allowed for the loss of one division every two days, but German pressure and Nivelle's costly policy of counter-attacking raised this to two divisions wasted every three days. The Germans almost had Verdun and the French desire to keep it was waverer. Around 12 June, Germany was within an inch of winning the war on the Western Front, which meant winning the war. Two days later, the chance had gone and the tide had turned. Nothing in particular changed at Verdun, but something had changed in the German High Command. The man who saved France was Erich von Falkenhayn, with assistance from the Russian Alevi Brusilov.

The cause of Falkenhayn's crucial decision in June was what had shaped German military policy in 1914, the way Germany had yoked herself to an ally she despised and ignored. When Conrad asked Falkenhayn for help against Italy, he was brushed aside. Wounded by such Prussian arrogance, Conrad withdrew several divisions from the Galician front facing Russia to use against Italy. He did not inform Falkenhayn of this, but then Falkenhayn had not troubled to tell him about the Verdun offensive. The Austro-Hungarian attack against Italy fell apart. Then, on 4 June 1916, the Russians by purest chance chose the very point on the Galician front which Conrad had weakened as the place to attack with forty divisions. Because Brusilov lacked enough guns to mount a preparatory barrage, he attacked without one and caught the Austro-Hungarians by surprise, capturing the entire front. Conrad had to grovel for German reinforcements. Falkenhayn realized that Austria-Hungary was about to be knocked clean out of the war. To gain time to decide what to do, he ordered the Fifth Army to halt its advance towards Verdun. He then sent three divisions east to prop up the Austrians. By the time he allowed the Fifth Army to roll again, the French had gained a second wind. Knoebelsdorf achieved the usual early successes but he could not break through to Verdun. The new Green Cross or phosgene gas shells used to take out French batteries were lethally effective but not used enough. The French had
just enough reserves to hold the line, the Germans too few to break through. In both cases, the delay of a few days and the dispatch of the three German divisions east were crucial.

As at the Marne in 1914, a Russian attack saved France by distracting the Germans. In both cases, the Russian effort turned out to be suicidal. When the Germans counter-attacked against Braslows, the Russian Army collapsed, setting off a crisis that was one of the causes of the first Russian Revolution in February 1917. At Verdun, however, the initiative had slipped from German hands. The Germans knew this by the evening of 23 June. So did Nivelle, for it was on that evening that he issued the famous order 'They shall not pass'. A counter-attack the next day took back all the ground lost.

Alistair Horne regards 23 June as the turning-point of the Battle of Verdun and therefore of the Great War. Not only did the Germans fail to break through to Verdun, but a week later the New Army of Britain made its debut in force at the Somme. By the strict logic of Falkenhayn's thinking, time had run out on German hopes of a victory [Doc. 2].

The battle may have been decided but momentum kept it going. Although Falkenhayn suspended the offensive in July, Knobelsdorff went behind his back and got approval for one more push. This time, he planned to use phosgene gas shells intensively, and sure enough, when the German infantry went over the top, the French guns were silent. But when the Germans moved into the open, the French opened fire. Their crews were wearing improved gas masks and had held their fire to trap the Germans in the open. A handful of Germans reached Fort Souville, from which they caught sight of Verdun, but no one was following their advance, and they were killed or captured. Eventually, after a month of futile struggle, the Crown Prince was able to persuade his father the Kaiser to sack Knobelsdorff. At the same time, the sudden entry of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente gave Bethmann Hollweg a chance to persuade the Kaiser to relieve his arch-rival Falkenhayn. In came Hindenburg and Ludendorff from the east. Their first reaction on seeing the Verdun Front was disbelief that the German army should have been squandered in such a pointless way. When Falkenhayn departed, the 'limited' battle he started had consumed 315,000 French soldiers, but also 280,000 German.

There was one more act in the drama of Verdun. Despite Pétain's reputation for pessimism, he was not unwilling to attack. He objected to inadequate attacks, carried out with insufficient strength along too narrow a front. He wanted the grand, set-piece attack, prepared in meticulous detail and based on an overwhelming superiority in men and guns. The infantry and the gunners would have to work closely as a team. So, once the German pressure eased, Pétain prepared to re-attack Douaumont, and indeed all the ground lost since February. For a change, the partnership with Nivelle worked smoothly. Nivelle's expertise in artillery was channelled into preparing a creeping barrage behind which shock troops would advance. He took the time to train both the gunners and the infantry in the complexities of the barrage. When the French attacked in October, almost everything went right for a change. When Fort Douaumont fell to the French, it was almost as empty as it had been in March when the Germans had walked in. What was left of Fort Vaux also returned to France after an attack costing 47,000 casualties.

Together, both sides lost around 700,000 men in the battle of Verdun itself, and for the war as a whole, the Verdun sector claimed over one and a half million lives. For what? Falkenhayn did not want to take Verdun; he wanted the French to defend it. Pétain did not want to defend it, but did so when de Castelnau picked up Falkenhayn's challenge. Thousands died to take or defend Côte 304 or Mort Homme, not because either was the key to Verdun, but because each was thought to be the key to some other position, which was the key to a further position, and so on, ad absurdum.

Yet to say that Verdun was utterly pointless is not to say it was insignificant. On the contrary, it changed the world history that followed. One way to see this is to try what is called 'counter-factual history', in other words, to ask 'what if?' Answers are of course arbitrary and unproveable, but they focus our attention on the importance of what actually happened. What if the Germans had taken Verdun in June? War weariness was already growing in France. Such a setback, coupled with a minimally intelligent German policy of concessions, might well have detached France from the Entente. Germany would not have had to fall back on her doomsday strategy, unlimited submarine warfare. America would not have been provoked into entering the war. If the Germans chose to bargain with Russia rather than crushing her, the Russian military disaster of 1916 would not have pulled the last supports from the Tsarist autocracy. Above all, had the Germans won in June, the last attempt to win the war with limited methods would have worked. The world would have been spared the full dose of total war it got. Much of the poison that the war injected into history came only after mid-1916: hateful propaganda; double-dealing diplomacy; much of it dedicated to fomenting revolution in enemy nations and dependencies; weapons and tactics always more brutal; million-men armies wearing each other down, going nowhere, younger and less trained with each passing month. Such measures were of course present before 1916 and had been employed ferociously or reluctantly. They were not summoned out of a vacuum. But summoned they were, by the stalemate at Verdun.

**The Somme**

When the Allied commanders had met at Chantilly in December 1915, the joint attack Joffre proposed for the Somme valley would see 40 French divisions supported by 29 British divisions. Haig preferred a Halders attack, where the German defences were known to be less formidable. The Somme offered no strategic prize for the Allies to take or the Germans to defend. It
was chosen because that was where the French and British lines met. Haig also hoped for more time to train and equip his forces, especially the divisions of the New Army. When Falkenhayn attacked first at Verdun, the French part in what had originally been a French plan dwindled, until finally the French were committing only five divisions to the first wave compared with 14 British.

By 1 March the French Tenth Army had moved from Vimy to Verdun while the British First and Third Armies marched to the Somme. A new army, the Fourth, was created under General Rawlinson, who took over the planning. By 1916, preparations for battle were so elaborate that one might compare them to building a city (or, more accurately, a slum) for a million people. New roads and railways were built to carry the guns, ammunition and men; telephone cable from the front to battalion and divisional headquarters was dug in to a depth of six feet; reserve dumps were created, clear of enemy fire.

By the end of March, Rawlinson had this massive logistical work well in hand, but he still lacked any clear strategic objective. Because this strategic vacuum originated with the now-preoccupied Joffre, Rawlinson and his staff had no choice but to stick to tactics.  

The tactical objective was clear enough. The pastoral Somme valley was dominated by the Pozieres Ridge running obliquely across the Front. To the north, the ridge was in British hands, but where the Ancre river, a tributary of the Somme, cut across the Front, the ridge passed into German hands. From this point near the village of Thiepval, the ridge twisted along the low valley of the Ancre for fifteen miles, down to where the Ancre joined the Somme. The objective of the attack would be the ridge south of Thiepval. Upon reflection, the staff of the Fourth Army decided to be more modest, and limited the attack to the eleven miles of ridge that ran from the Somme to a small hill called the Serre. This reflected Rawlinson’s preference for ‘bite and hold’ tactics, as he put it in a letter the previous year. ‘Bite off a piece of the enemy’s line . . . and hold it against counter-attack. The bite can be made without much loss; and, if we chose the right place and make every preparation to put it in a state of defence, there ought to be no difficulty in holding it against the enemy’s counter-attacks, and inflicting on him at least twice the loss that we have suffered in making the bite’ (Sheffield, 2003: 22).

Rawlinson sent his plan to Haig, with a covering letter arguing that the real purpose of the attack was to take the high ground of the ridges and thus to kill as many Germans as possible with the fewest losses. This would seem like simple attrition were it not for Rawlinson’s hope of luring the enemy into making costly counter-attacks. In reply, Haig complained that the plan had no strategic purpose and ignored the need for surprise. The trouble was that any attack along the Somme, however cleverly managed, would lack strategic purpose, because the only target worth attacking there was the German army. If the purpose Haig had in mind was a breakthrough, Rawlinson’s proposal was indeed too limited. Yet Haig was concerned about raising false hopes. In the end, he asked the Fourth Army to increase the front to 15 miles and draw up more ambitious objectives. His complaint about the absence of surprise was more pertinent, but apart from suggesting mildly that the preliminary bombardment be short, he had no suggestions. No wonder. With the Germans looking down from the high ground, how could the British have surprised them? As for Haig’s preference for more time, when the Germans finally took Fort Vaux, Pétain and Joffre appealed for help so emphatically that they could no longer be put off. On 13 June, Haig finally decided that the great attack would come within a month, in the manner and place given in the Fourth Army’s revised plan.

For the British, everything depended on the guns. The Fourth Army got over 1,300 guns for the 15 mile front. The gunners were to lay down a bombardment beforehand to cut wire, destroy trenches and take out the enemy artillery. Then they would maintain a barrage during the battle to pin down the enemy. The planning was keyed to the range of the guns, which was assumed to be a maximum of 4,000 yards for observed, accurate fire. The staff assumed that every element of the German defence within this range would be destroyed. The assumption about the power of the guns was fatally wrong. British artillery might have coped with Rawlinson’s original and limited plan, but not with the expanded and ambitious version. With only around 400 heavy guns, the British lacked the weight of guns the Germans and French were using at Verdun. Although the shell shortage of 1915 had been overcome, around a million of the shells fired in the ten-day bombardment were shrapnel, useless against massed wire and hardened defences. They were used because British industry was not yet producing enough high explosive shells for the heavy guns. In addition, a high proportion of the shells were duds, the gunners were as inexperienced as the infantry, and the heavy guns had a built-in aiming error of at least 25 yards.

Because the work of the guns was so elaborate, infantry tactics were left simple. Each attacking company in the front line would go over the top at 7.30 a.m. and form a line, each man two or three yards from the next. There would be four lines in all, fifty to a hundred yards apart. The men would walk slowly in straight lines, through prepared trenches in the British wire, across No Man’s Land, through the obliterated German wire and into the German front line. The reserves would pass through and take the second line in the same fashion. Each man would be carrying at least sixty-five pounds on his back.

[Doc. 15, Marching Order, Fully. The average weight of the British soldier in 1916 was 125 pounds.]

The German defenders were not all dead or buried. Of the sixty British battalions in the first wave, German machine and field guns destroyed twenty completely before they even reached their own front line. On 1 July, 993 officers and 18,247 other ranks of the British army died; 1,337 officers and
34,156 other ranks were wounded; and 96 officers and 2,056 other ranks were missing and presumed dead or captured. Of the 120,000 men who attacked, around 60,000, or half, were killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner. It was the worst day in the history of the British army; indeed, the worst day for any army in the Great War.

The attacks in the northern part of the Somme front were to be diversions. In the attack of VII Corps around Gommecourt, the 56th (London) Territorial division found the wire cut and reached the German third line, but its advance was cut off by a German barrage. The 46th Midland division could not budge from the start line and took 4,300 casualties, grim yet, as Garry Sheffield observes, the lowest for the 13 divisions that attacked. To the south, VII Corps was to attack Serre and then turn to support the flank of the Fourth Army. The 31st Division (Pals from the North) ran into a barrage and got nowhere; the 4th Division took its objective but had to withdraw without the support of the 31st.

The worst shambles took place at Beaumont Hamel. The 29th Division was Regular Army, and for its service in Gallipoli had earned the sobriquet ‘Incomparable’. Although the first attack failed when the mine blowing up Hawthorn Redoubt went off early and gave the Germans a head-start, General de Lisle thought the attack had succeeded and sent in his reserve. The brigade included the 1st Newfoundland Regiment. Finding the communications trenches blocked, they attacked over open ground and were caught by German machine-gun fire before they reached No Man’s Land. The battalion took 684 casualties, 91 per cent of its strength. The 10th West Yorkshires of the 17th (Northern) Division suffered even more, with 710 casualties. In all, the incomparable 20th lost 5,240 men. Next to the 29th, 36th Division (Uxter) of X Corps started well thanks to effective artillery support, but when it ran out they were left isolated and exposed, and took 5,104 casualties. The only success for the 32nd Division, a New Army division drawn from Glasgow and the North, came when the 17th Highland Light Infantry, also known as the Glasgow Commercial, took Leipzig Redoubt through an adroit attack. Finally, on the left wing of the attack, III Corps attacked on both sides of the road from Albert to Bapaume. The hardest task fell to 8th Division (Regular) which had to move almost half a mile over No Man’s Land with German resistance on both flanks. The 8th reached German lines but could not hold its position. Next to it, the attack of the 34th Division (New Army) on La Boisselle failed completely. Once again, kicking off an attack by exploding mines served only to alert the enemy, and the 34th incurred the highest casualties on the day, 6,380.

South of Albert-Bapaume road, results were less bleak. General Henry Horne commanded XV Corps well. The 7th and 21st Divisions mixed New Army in with Regulars. They shifted the Germans out of Fricourt and Mametz. Even better was the work of XIII Corps. Under the inspired command of one of the best teachers in the British Army, General Sir Ivor Maxse, 18th Division, one of the original K or Kincher divisions, was defining what an elite division could do. Together with 30th Division, the Corps took its objectives by early afternoon, including Montauban village. The attack of the French Sixth Army on the left of the front went best of all. The three corps involved were well supported by French gunners, who also helped the British to their left.

The first day at the Somme went so badly for the British because their reach exceeded their grasp. They had to learn, and learning would only come through trial and error. Above all, the common understanding that it had become a gunners’ war had to be modified. Guns alone could not conquer. They had to work closely with the infantry; the two had to be integrated into a proper team or system. Firing plans had to be made more flexible, and of course the power of the guns had to be increased exponentially – the number of guns, the weight of explosive, which only complicated the firing plans as the guns grew more specialized. Infantry also had to evolve. The centre of gravity of the battalion had to move lower, to the platoon, and the sections making up platoons had to become specialists with bombs (grenades) and Lewis guns (light machine guns) and not just riflemen. Advancing in line was obviously suicidal, and the supposedly green soldiers of the New Army and the Dominions proved to be quick learners when it came to more sophisticated tactics such as fire and movement, using the lay of the ground to advantage.

Learning and flexibility were the order of the day, and yet sheer mass still mattered. Only after Verdun and the Somme started did those in charge realize the colossal volume of heavy guns and shells and the staggering toll of human life that would be needed to force a decision. With each battle after 1916, the weight of fire increased exponentially. There was one gun for every sixteen yards of front at the Somme, for the attack on Messines Ridge in the spring of 1917, there was a gun for every seven yards, usually a heavy. The Great War was an industrial war because of the guns. Anything thwarting the appetite of the guns had to be swept aside. Take the big guns away and the Great War would have been a war of infantry and field artillery; key everything to the guns and it became a war of entire organized economies, fought by attrition. This, however, would only become clear in retrospect. The staff officers were thus living life forwards but understanding it backwards, and made a natural mistake when they concluded that the ten-day bombardment they had planned would demolish the German defences.

Yet the Battle of the Somme still had 139 days to run: 600,000 British would be casualties in it, and, thanks to the strict policy of counter-attacking to retake ground lost, almost an equal number of Germans. Haig’s early hopes of a breakthrough gave way to Rawlinson’s style of bite and hold, preferably south of the Bapaume Road; ironically Rawlinson leaned to Haig’s earlier idea of chewing up German reserves. Both Haig and his subordinate commanders tended to keep things on a rolling boil, which seemed to Joffre and Foch to amount to a string of uncoordinated and ineffective pin-pricks. The
high hopes before 1 July seemed to have given way to dithering. Yet under the surface men were learning to manage their novel tasks, new men were emerging with new ideas, and new devices were taking shape. That the pay-off for innovation would not have to wait until a distant future was clear as early as 14 July, when the Fourth Army took part of Delville Wood, Trônes Wood and Bazentin Ridge, in effect capturing the German Second Position north of the Bapaume Road. Haig had assigned the youngest Army commander, Gough, to take over X and VIII Corps from Rawlinson, who was freed to focus on the tasks of XV and XIII Corps, under Generals Horne and Congreve, who had proved their worth on 1 July. What they came up with would seem to belong to 1918: a surprise attack that went off at 3.30 in the morning after a five-minute bombardment. The gunners managed their counter-battery work and wire-cutting well, and the weight of shells the German positions received was much greater than it had been on 1 July, although Rawlinson had a third fewer guns. Although the British broke into the German Second Position, breaking through or breaking out was still a fudged dream, and would remain so at least on the Western Front for the rest of the war. High and Delville Woods eventually fell, but only to a grinding set-piece attack.

What attracts attention at the Somme are the tribulations of the British Army. The Germans suffered too, in no small part from their own handling of the battle. The seven-day British bombardment before 1 July might have failed to meet its goals, but it was nonetheless an ordeal for the Germans huddled in their deep bunkers, and cost the Germans over a hundred guns. Falkenhayn then played into British hands, or would have had they respected ‘bite and hold’, by insisting on immediate counter-attacks to retake lost positions. To underscore the point, Col. Lossberg became the Chief of Staff of von Below’s Second Army when Below wanted to pull back to shorten the line. Ironically, Lossberg subsequently became an undisputed genius at setting elastic defences in depth, the very opposite of what Falkenhayn was doing. To help the Second Army, Falkenhayn added seven divisions to reinforce as early as 2 July, seven more to the next week, and 42 over July and August, 35 of which opposed the Fourth and Reserve Armies. The units north of the Somme were reorganized into the First Army under Below; those to the south became the Second Army under General Max von Gallwitz, who also commanded the new Army Group the two armies formed. Pushing so many reserves to the Somme had the impact the Allies hoped. On 12 July Falkenhayn suspended major operations at Verdun. His cunning plan to achieve an unlimited victory through limited means had failed utterly. Gary Sheffield argues that from this time on, the Allies held the strategic initiative. The Germans were back on their heels because of the French resistance at Verdun and the British attack on the Somme.

Fighting continued in the Somme sector until mid-November. The British finally took Delville Wood and High Wood towards the end of July. Gough and his staff miscalculated the attacks of the Reserve Army, but the excellence of the Australian divisions bailed them out. The 5th Australian Division and the British 61st took Fromelles on 19–20 July, after which the 1st Australian Division took Pozières Village. The attack of the 2nd Australian Division was hustled along too quickly under pressure from on high, and after a better effort in August, the Australians had Pozières.

In subsequent attacks on Delville Wood, Thiepval, Guillemont, Couceleutre, Morval and the Ancre river, a pattern can be seen in hindsight, the only slight historians have. When the attack was concentrated on a narrow and manageable front, supported by a proper artillery fire plan and carried out by well-trained divisions, it tended to meet its limited goals. The attack of Maxse’s 18th Eastern Division that took Thiepval showed that he had indeed trained an elite division. The Australians and Canadians were close behind. On the other hand, when objectives were too ambitious or too vague, when co-ordination between units and between infantry and artillery was tenuous, then the attacks soon bogged down into atrocinous brawls. In addition, the resistance the British faced changed because of the pressure they exerted. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria was a very able field commander. After Falkenhayn was sacked, Hindenburg and Ludendorff gave him command of a new Group of Armies that included the First, Second, Sixth and Seventh. Its primary task was to wage a defensive battle using elastic defences in depth of the sort that Lossberg had been busy devising. Linear trenches were replaced with heavy machine guns sited in shell holes to provide interlocking fire. As with Péita at Verdun, Hindenburg and Ludendorff intended to pit machines against men, bleeding the attacking side white. It was not just that attacks were more costly than defence. If defence involved counter-attacking, then the costs were equal. But if the defence involved sapping, then the costs were far greater, and the other side would attack itself to defeat. Or so the Germans hoped. There was a measure of second-best about the shift in German policy, a confirmation of Sheffield’s view that the strategic initiative had passed from German hands. Rope-a-dope tactics worked for Muhammad Ali. They were not likely to save the weaker side in a Materialkrieg, a total war of industrial resources.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ORGANIZING FOR VICTORY

LUDENDORFF TAKES CHARGE IN GERMANY

Although Hindenburg and Ludendorff were given supreme command with a mandate to win the war, Ludendorff saw they would have to change the very nature of the war in order to win it. With German troops under heavy pressure both at Verdun and the Somme, attacking in the west was out of the question. Gradually, Ludendorff reverted to a defensive footing. He organized defences in depth, leaving the main line up to a mile or two behind battalion outposts. At its zenith a year later, the elastic defence featured three to four zones. The first zone was held lightly by interlocking outposts that acted as shock absorbers. The main battle zone was the trench system proper, while the rearward zone or zones served as a launching area for counter-attacks or a fallback if the enemy penetrated the main battle zone. The strategic equivalent of this came when Germany began the construction of an immense defensive line stretching south from the Somme area south-west to Soissons, where the front turned east toward Verdun. This Siegfried Stellung, known in English as the Hindenburg Line, was more than a line or wall. Up to ten miles deep in places, it featured immense belts of heavy wire, machine-gun posts and concrete pillboxes. It was a main battle zone with an attitude. Behind it, the entire German nation was mobilized under the Hindenburg Programme, a war economy under military direction.

Ludendorff realized that going over to the defensive in the west might buy time but it would not bring victory. Unlimited submarine warfare was the only answer. When Ludendorff first took over, he supported the cautious approach, and for the next few months, sorting out the mess left by Verdun kept him from meddling in political matters. Then in September 1916, he forced the government to declare the creation of an independent Kingdom of Poland. Because the new state was carved out of Russian Poland, this declaration effectively destroyed any chances for a negotiated peace with Russia, which Ludendorff thought impossible in any case. Defeat in the west meant attack in the east, his personal field of glory since 1914, and he wanted Polish aid.

UNLIMITED SUBMARINE WARFARE

The issue that brought the dispute over war aims into the open was the submarine. Those who favoured a moderate negotiated peace sided with Bethmann Hollweg, while the majority, who demanded sweeping annexations that would require a total victory, sided with the navy. When Tirpitz resigned in March 1916 after the submarines were restricted again, he led the creation of the Fatherland Party. It spread the message that only the ruthless use of the submarine would bring total victory and only total victory was worth considering. This upsurge in annexationism and war-fever mobilized radical pressure groups such as the Pan Germans outside the Reichstag and brought together a militant annexationist majority inside.

In October 1916, the Reichstag adopted a resolution presented by the Catholic Centre Party stating that the chancellor must bow to the expert military judgement of the High Command in deciding how to use submarines. The Centre Party moved towards support for total war because it had become convinced that a two-front war could not be won on land. Bethmann Hollweg also began to wonder whether his opposition to unlimited submarine warfare was wise. If unrestricted submarine warfare really would bring Britain to her knees in six months, how could he refuse to exploit the one weapon that could save Germany? America might come into the war as he had always argued, but how would she reach Europe if the submarine stood in the way? Faced outside with a growing alliance of politicians and generals, he bent in his own mind by doubts about the virtues of caution, Bethmann Hollweg began to hedge. However, he resolved not to give way to his enemies until he had had one last try at ending the war diplomatically.

OFFERING PEACE

Bethmann Hollweg was not the only leader who tried to negotiate in 1916-17. In Britain, a former Foreign Secretary and die-hard conservative, Lord Lansdowne, circulated a letter to the Cabinet in November 1916 calling for a negotiated peace. He made his appeal public a year later in a letter to the Daily Telegraph, The Times would not publish it. These peace feelers were not simply a product of war weariness. In late 1916, most people were still optimistic about the war, even those in uniform. War weariness did not come until 1917. Instead, the peace feelers served the double purpose of stopping the war before it became total if they succeeded, and of justifying total war if they failed. What doomed this last chance of negotiating peace before war became total were not the motives involved but the necessary ambivalence of even suggesting negotiations in the midst of war.

One rule of thumb in understanding coalitions in wartime is that allies usually end up distrusting each other. That being so, the first side to call for negotiations might be trying to weaken the other coalition by offering terms
that favour one of the enemies, thus encouraging the contempt that familiarity breeds. If the favoured enemy expresses interest, the others will feel ill-used. The peacemaker might be appealing to enemy public opinion over the head of enemy governments. Or the peacemaker might be genuinely sick of war and interested in peace. The other side has to evaluate the motives behind the peace offer before responding. Peace was one more illusion that had to be exposed before the disenchanting reality of total war could be seen in all its horror.

As Bethmann Hollweg contemplated what to do about the submarine, he had one eye on the Social Democrats. A radical and pacifist section had split away from the SPD the previous March, and its contention that the government was waging an imperialist war of aggression was gaining credence among the working class. Bethmann Hollweg’s other concern was Washington, where, in November 1916, Woodrow Wilson had been re-elected as the man who had kept America out of the war. Bethmann Hollweg knew that Wilson’s commitment to neutrality was more than a trick to win votes. By November, British arrogance annoyed Washington more than German behaviour, because the British had started to seize American mail on neutral ships and to blacklist companies doing business with Germany. Moreover, the British treatment of Ireland since the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916 had incensed Irish-Americans. Bethmann Hollweg knew that Wilson was preparing to offer himself as a mediator. If Germany could beat Wilson to the punch and announce the terms on which she would consider negotiations, then both the Social Democrats and the Americans would be appeased. If the Allies accepted these terms, then the gains Germany had made so far in the war would be consolidated in a peace treaty. If the enemy refused to concede a peace favouring Germany, the onus for prolonging the war would rest with them and the German conscience would be clear. On 12 December, Bethmann Hollweg declared that Germany and Austria-Hungary were ready to begin immediate peace negotiations for terms that would ensure their existence, honour and freedom.

Bethmann Hollweg’s ‘peace offer’ coincided with Wilson’s appeal to all the warring nations to state their war aims clearly. In the end, Britain and France rejected the German peace offer out of hand and managed to deflect Wilson’s attempt to insert himself as a mediator. How this was done shows the ambiguities of the situation and the virtual impossibility of stopping the war diplomatically. All these threads crossed in London, where Lloyd George had just replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916.

LLOYD GEORGE KNOCKS OUT PEACE

David Lloyd George rose to power as the champion of a total war effort to deliver the ‘knock-out blow’. When the German peace offer arrived just after he had replaced Asquith as Prime Minister, his concern over the weakness of Russia and the carnage on the Western Front inclined him to take the offer seriously. This was reinforced when Wilson’s appeal to state terms arrived, because Britain could not afford to alienate Wilson by appearing to be inflexible. Lloyd George wanted to avoid creating the impression that he had slammed the door to a negotiated peace.

When Lloyd George addressed parliament, he began by saying that France and Russia, the main victims of German aggression, had already replied to Bethmann Hollweg. He was simply going to support what they had said. He weighed war and peace, arguing that it would be a crime to prolong the war for no good reason but just as wrong to give up a righteous struggle simply out of weariness or despair. He had to respect the American wish that Germany be invited to state her terms and the French reluctance to state any terms at all. He solved the puzzle by arguing that, while he would listen to any useful terms Germany might offer, he was convinced that the fact of Prussian aggression ensured that worthwhile terms would not arise in the first place. Any German concessions would be worthless because they would be German, coming from the nation that had already violated pledges and treaties in 1914. In the end, he squared the circle, finding a way to pledge Britain to a fight to final victory without offending America.

Once the option of negotiation was discarded, Germany and Britain were locked into a fight to the finish. There was no longer room between them for American neutrality. On the final day of 1916, Ludendorff decided to cash the blank cheque the Reichstag had given him and demand unlimited submarine warfare. At a Crown Council on 9 January, Bethmann Hollweg accepted defeat and agreed to unleash the submarines. The last straw for him had been the cold reception his peace offer had received in London.

Not knowing of the German decision, Wilson still believed there was a chance to be the honest broker for peace. On 26 January, the British accepted his mediation. Wilson then learned that Germany was adopting unlimited submarine warfare. He immediately broke off diplomatic relations. In March, the British intercepted and carefully circulated a bizarre telegram from the German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, to the German ambassador in Mexico. Zimmermann offered an alliance to Mexico and the return of parts of Texas and New Mexico if she declared war on America. When the telegram was published, Zimmermann blithely admitted sending it. German submarines compounded the offense by sinking seven American merchant ships. Wilson felt he had no choice but to summon Congress and, on 6 April, to declare war on the Central Powers. The war was not only total now; it was finally a world war.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS

Just when there seemed no way out but straight ahead, the Russian people opened a door. In March 1917 women queuing for flour rioted in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). When the authorities used the army to put down the
demonstrations, the soldiers joined the angry crowds. With no support left, the Tsar abdicated. The Duma or parliament chose a provisional government under Prince Lvov. The new government tried to interest France and Britain in peace, but when they replied that the arrival of democracy in Russia improved the chances of victory, Russia stuck to its promises and stayed in the war. As first patriotism balanced war weariness evenly, but when the Russian offensive in June turned into a shambles, the loyalty of the provisional government to its allies was its undoing. The Socialist lawyer Alexander Kerensky took over the government, but the Bolshevik Vladimir Lenin, spirited from Switzerland into Russia via a sealed train thanks to the Germans, out-manoeuvred him easily. In November 1917, Lenin’s unqualified hostility to the provisional government and exploitation of the issues of ‘land, bread and peace’ enabled him to seize power from Kerensky.

THE FALL OF BETHMANN HOLLWEG: JULY 1917

Lenin’s sealed train would prove to be an unsafe container for ‘the bacillus of revolution’. When word of the Tsar’s abdication reached Germany, Bethmann Hollweg persuaded the Kaiser to mention political reform in passing in his Easter message. The dormant Reichstag stirred into life, and the parties in the centre-left majority formed an inter-party committee to consider reform. The dynamic Centre (Catholic) Party leader, Matthias Erzberger, had private information showing the failure of the submarine campaign. When he spoke in the Reichstag in favour of a negotiated peace, the left-wing parties included peace along with reform in their agenda and passed a Peace Resolution, the only such resolution put forward by any legislature during the war [Doc. 3]. Ludendorff argued that Bethmann Hollweg had lost control of the situation and forced the Kaiser to replace him with a nonentity, Georg Michaelis, who promptly gutted the Peace Resolution. Count Herlitzius later replaced Michaelis; he was almost as spineless, as was his vice-chancellor, the veteran Progressive Friedrich von Payer. With Russia about to drop out of the war and victory again in sight, the mood of the patriotic classes swung back to a peace of victory, just as the working classes moved towards peace and revolution.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TECHNOLOGY AND TACTICS

A TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTION? THE AIR WAR AND TANKS

The phrase ‘total war’ evokes not just the open-ended sacrifices the nations were making by 1917 but also the way the sense of urgent necessity fostered inventions of all kinds. Two of the new technologies the war hastened deserve special mention, aviation and tanks.

The Air War

The public fascination with fighter pilots and dog-fights still obscures the more prosaic but important work of the airmen. That was to serve as an eye in the sky for the ground forces through reconnaissance and artillery spotting. Fighter aircraft evolved as a way to deny the other side this aerial view. Initially pilots carried side-arms to shoot at each other. Machine guns would obviously be better, but apart from finding a gun light enough for aircraft with such a limited lifting capacity, the aircraft themselves posed a problem. There was no place to mount a machine gun that gave a clear field of fire.

The airmen themselves addressed the problem of aerial gurney by thinking things through. On 1 April 1915, Roland Garros, a French pilot, used a forward-firing machine gun to shoot down a German observation plane. The gun was crudely synchronized with the propeller, and to deflect bullets that were unsynchronized, Garros fitted metal collars to the blades. He ruled the skies for two weeks until the underlying logic of industrial warfare took effect. Both sides were technologically equal. What one could achieve, so could the other. When Garros crashed behind German lines, Anthony Fokker discovered the secret of his success. Fokker was a Dutchman whose aircraft designs interested the German authorities before the war. They now gave him Garros’s aircraft and asked him to go one better. He was not impressed with the deflector plates that Garros had improvised; bullets could weaken the propeller or deflect back at the plane or the pilot. For some time he had been thinking about an interrupter gear to ensure that bullets would pass through the arc of the propeller