

## THE BITTER END: 1918

As the world staggered into 1918, war seemed to have become a permanent condition. War weariness manifested itself not just in revolution or pacifism but also in an obsessive commitment to a total war effort. As Lloyd George told the leaders of British trade unions in January, 'My own conviction is this, the people must go on or go under'. At the same time, however, he issued a statement of war aims more liberal than the better-known Fourteen Points President Wilson announced a few days later. He genuinely hoped for a positive German response, which might open the way to an alternative to going on or going under, a compromise peace. Ludendorff treated Lloyd George's gesture with contempt. He had his own ideas about an appropriate peace, and was demonstrating these to the shocked Bolsheviks at Brest-Litovsk. The ensuing treaty between Germany and Russia tore huge areas of Ukraine, the Baltic states and Poland from Russia. It is misleading to say that the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk showed what the war was all about. The Germany against which the Allies declared war in 1914 was not the same Germany Ludendorff now controlled. It would be more accurate to say that Brest-Litovsk showed what the war had created – in the case of Germany, a military dictatorship bent on creating an empire in the east on a scale that served Hitler as a precedent.

## LUDENDORFF ROLLS THE IRON DICE IN THE WEST

With Russia out of the war, Italy reeling and peace feelers going nowhere, the Western Front was clearly where the final decision would take place. As the fighting closed down for the winter after the hellish ordeal of Passchendaele and Cambrai, 168 Allied divisions, including 98 French and 57 British divisions, faced 171 German divisions. The Allied totals did not change for the next three months.

On the German side, Ludendorff faced four choices as he contemplated the future. He could accept the stalemate on the Western Front and start to sound out the possibilities of a compromise peace, for example by giving Lloyd George a favourable response. The second choice, unconditional surrender,

was even more out of the question. The third possibility was the most interesting. After shifting the forces freed by victory in the east to the west, Ludendorff could have deployed them defensively and then sent out a peace offer that only one of the enemy powers would find attractive. To attract Britain, Germany could make concessions over Belgium, or over Alsace-Lorraine to attract France. Faced with the impossibility of cracking the German defence and a public interest in the German concessions, the enemy coalition would either fall apart or let the fighting subside into a cold war. This option would require a mixture of military threat and political dexterity. What eliminated it from Ludendorff's mind was the American factor and the British blockade. In the long run, any attempt to go over to a defensive policy of Fortress Germany would run up against the Allied optimism that time was on their side, a view that Ludendorff shared with Falkenhayn [Doc. 2]. German superiority on the defence would not impress the enemy as long as the enemy believed that this superiority would eventually be overcome by American manpower and the starvation blockade. The threat alone of an attack in the west would not bring the enemy to the bargaining table. The attack could not be bluffed; it had to be made and it had to succeed, despite all the inherent obstacles to successful attack. So Ludendorff settled on the fourth option, using the forces freed by the collapse of the Russians to force a decision in the west.

What clinched Ludendorff's decision was his shrewd hunch that he now had the means of victory in hand. As a former commander in the east, he kept his eye on the innovations that had worked with such brilliant effect against Russia and Romania. Once he had decided to attack in the west, he brought in the innovators from the east to work their magic. General Hutier took over the 18th Army, while Geyer was put to work training carefully selected teams of infantry in methods of deep infiltration. Culled from the most aggressive troops in each regiment, these battle-teams, nick-named 'Storm Troops', were trained in special camps and equipped to move independently, without regard to flank support or artillery cover. Whenever they met resistance, they were to flow past it and carry on; mopping up would be the task of the regular line troops. The other edge Ludendorff thought he had was his artillery. Bruchmüller had worked out the use of phosgene and mustard gas shells and accurate, heavy and brief bombardments to paralyse and confuse the enemy at the very moment of attack. His techniques were not novel or unique; gunners in the French and British armies were working along similar lines. But they were novel for the German army on the Western Front, and would thus be a new experience for the victims on the other side. Rather than chewing up the ground, revealing the time and place of attack and getting in the way of the attacking infantry, Bruchmüller's barrage suppressed enemy fire; his sophisticated orchestration of the guns meshed smoothly with the new tactics of infiltration. With both Geyer and Bruchmüller, as with the innovations on the Allied side, one can see that the secret of successful attack was really not

exotic but rather an intelligent application of the existing means of war. To be successful, an attack needed to co-ordinate infantry and artillery seamlessly. It needed the selective application of controllable force at just the right place.

The place Ludendorff chose was St. Quentin, where the tired British Fifth Army was scratching out a defensive line. From the Army Group under Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, the 17th Army was to head for Bapaume and Marwitz's Second Army for Peronne, after which both armies would wheel north to roll up the British lines. Hutier's 18th Army was to break through at St. Quentin and guard the flanks of the other two armies. By massing troops and guns along a fifty-mile front of attack, Ludendorff hoped to free the main thrust up the middle. When the Allied line was ruptured at the point where the British and French met, the British would have to pivot on their northern flank in Flanders and fold back to the coast, while the French would pull back in the other direction, on Paris. Ludendorff would be forcing open two swinging doors. There was no need to plan what would happen after the breakthrough in any detail; it would simply be a matter of exploiting success. 'In Russia,' Ludendorff told Rupprecht, 'we always merely set a near goal and then discovered where to go next' (Wilson, 1986: 556). Ludendorff had restored flexibility to grand strategy. It remained to be seen if he had brought too much flexibility and not enough strategy. In retrospect, his great offensive smacks of wishful thinking on a grand scale. If the British responded as he hoped, he might indeed win. But what if they hung on? Even if they broke, how did Ludendorff expect to move quickly to exploit his success? His cavalry remained in the east, garrisoning the conquered territories. He thought tanks were overrated, as perhaps they were at the time. So his flowing attack would depend upon foot-soldiers and artillery, and the need to keep the guns up would deprive the attack even of the mobility it had in 1914.

#### THE SPRING OFFENSIVE: WINNING THE WAY TO DEFEAT

The results of the first day of the great Kaiser's battle on 21 March seemed to confirm Ludendorff's genius. He restored movement to war, so that the fighting of 1918 is in many ways closer to the warfare of 1940 than of 1916. By 11 a.m., the British had lost 47 battalions, a fifth of their strength in the sector under attack. By midday, the second or Battle Zone was crumbling, especially in the southern sector of the attack where the Fifth Army was at its weakest. By the end of the day, the Germans had captured 98 square miles of British front and 19,500 prisoners. The British lost 7,500 dead and 10,000 wounded. The predictable cost of attacking had to be paid and the Germans lost 40,000 casualties, but they had hammered the Fifth Army almost out of existence. The British troops in the Forward Zone do not seem to have understood that they were supposed to pull back to the Battle Zone after an initial resistance, so that their function would be like a shock absorber rather

than a speed bump. Instead, most thought they were supposed to fight to the death, and either did so or surrendered when honour was satisfied. Moreover, morning fog favoured the German attackers and would continue to do so until the end of July. At the Somme in 1916, 200 German machine guns had stopped the British attack. By 1918, the British defenders in the Forward Zone had 2,000 machine guns and 4,000 in the Battle Zone, but they could not repeat the German effort at the Somme because of the gas bombardment and the fog, which let the German Storm Troopers slip past the machine-gun nests.

Despite the apparent total success on 21 March, in retrospect we can see a few ominous flaws. Although the Germans captured the entire Forward Zone they were attacking, they broke into the British Battle Zone only in the south, where Hutier's Eighteenth Army performed superbly. Tactically Ludendorff was committed to flowing around resistance, but strategically he could not afford to be as opportunistic. His strategic goal was to break through, drive west and pinch the British between his army and the Channel. When the bulk of the British Third Army stood its ground, this created a strong shoulder to the north of the rupture, which slowed down the advance of the German Seventeenth and Second Armies. When Ludendorff decided to exploit Hutier's success, the net effect was to bring the French fully into the battle and relieve the pressure on the British. The Eighteenth Army indeed pushed a huge bulge to the south and west, eventually crossing the Marne, but the French and British lines held. When Ludendorff then restored the main thrust to Rupprecht's Army Group, and then later switched his attacks up to Flanders, he simply divided his strength and wasted it in improvised attacks. Even while the German army advanced, its spring offensive was fading, so that it was winning its way to defeat. Like the nation as a whole, it was starving; the advance was at times brought to a halt when even the elite Storm Troopers stopped to loot British supplies of food and liquor. As the Germans went forward, they were moving into the battlefields of 1916, devastated ground that favoured the defence and prevented supplies from keeping up with the advance. Moreover, the regular line troops were now moving in the open. After adapting to trench war, they felt vulnerable and often dug in out of habit. Just as often they had good reason to take cover, because moving out of the trenches exposed them to a danger they had hitherto been able to handle: attacks from the air. The Allied air forces flew strafing runs around the clock and, along with isolated gun batteries, slowed down the exposed Germans.

Throughout the late spring and early summer, Ludendorff kept launching fresh attacks in his desperate effort to bring the enemy to terms, but even though the goal of each new attack was defined more realistically, Ludendorff could not regain the initiative. With the Allied general reserves now under the command of Foch and the Allied troops gaining experience in defending, the Allies held their ground. All the Germans won were exposed flanks, diabolical supply problems and longer lines to defend. Ludendorff attacked the French

at Reims to suck their reserves away from the British, so that the well-rested German Flanders Army Group would then be able to attack the British. Pétain, however, parried the Reims attack without calling for reserves. Confused about what to do next, Ludendorff decided to go ahead with the Flanders attack as a diversion.

#### THE ALLIES COUNTER-ATTACK

Before Ludendorff's latest improvisation could come off, the enemy clarified the situation. On 4 July, the Australians under General Sir John Monash achieved a brilliant success attacking with tanks at Hamel. Two weeks later, on 18 July, fifteen French and four American divisions, with 500 tanks, broke through the German line at Villers-Cotterets and pushed the Germans back ten kilometres.

The worst was yet to come. On 8 August, General Rawlinson, massing together ten Dominion divisions, four British and one American, three cavalry divisions and over 400 tanks, crashed through the depleted German Second Army near Amiens. The panic among German troops which had dismayed Ludendorff on 18 July was repeated on a more alarming scale, with retiring troops accusing reinforcements of strike-breaking and prolonging the war. In his memoirs, he called 8 August 'the black day of the German Army in the history of this war' (Ludendorff, 1919: 679).

#### THE COLLAPSE OF LUDENDORFF

When Ludendorff met the Kaiser on 13 August, he admitted that the war was lost and offered his resignation. The Kaiser coldly rejected the offer. Two days later, a colleague, Colonel Albrecht von Thaer, a staff officer recently posted to headquarters from the front, noted that Ludendorff was grave and depressed. 'He now sees clearly that our troops are more or less *kaput*. If one could gain some sort of rest for them, that would naturally be a great advantage' (Kaehler, 1961: 253).

Ludendorff was on a rack. Professionalism and success had brought him far beyond his modest bourgeois origins, but one slip, one sign of fallibility, would send him back to obscurity. He had staked everything on his spring offensive. When its tactical success did not translate into strategic advantage and the enemy was no closer to submission, he sensed that fortune had deserted him. Commanders are under intense stress at the best of times. Haig, for example, coped with the pressure by placing everything in the hands of God and keeping the obscenity of war well clear of his headquarters. What made Ludendorff's position intolerable to him was his personal and social vulnerability. Defeat does not come easily to anyone, but to an obsessive workaholic like Ludendorff it threatened personal humiliation. He had gambled everything to win the Great War and now he would be the greatest loser in history.

Rather than admit this, he kept up the habits that had brought him success: prodigious working hours, an obsession with detail and a rigid, impassive exterior. But with his energy focused on keeping up a bold front, he was unable to carry out his main duty. He could not face the situation he had created. The civilian government, and the new Foreign Secretary, Admiral Paul von Hintze in particular, waited for a straight report on the military situation. But how could Ludendorff tell mere civilians (or admirals) what he refused to admit to himself? At most, he would concede that the chance of military victory was now uncertain. That much was obvious to everyone. What the government needed to know was how well a defensive struggle might go, but that was the sort of loser's game Ludendorff would not play. So, as he stayed locked in the prison of his own head, Germany lost whatever slim chance there remained to organize a firm defence along the Hindenburg Line and put out careful feelers for a negotiated peace.

From the point when the twin disasters of 18 July and 8 August revealed both the chance of defeat and Ludendorff's nervous exhaustion, factions began to form among the staff officers at OHL. Ludendorff's protégé, Colonel Max Bauer, saw that his superior was cracking under the pressure and brought in a young officer to take over some of the paperwork. The new assistant, Colonel Wilhelm Heye, turned out to be more than a clerk. In fact, he soon became the key man in the effort to get rid of Ludendorff and put the Kaiser and the government fully in touch with the military situation.

On 25 September, Ludendorff ordered all Army Groups not to retreat an inch. Heye simply ignored the order. The next day, he and his colleagues decided to act. The representative of the Foreign Ministry at headquarters, Kurt von Lersner, telephoned the Foreign Secretary, Hintze, to tell him that the military situation was critical. Hintze did not fully accept the optimistic face Ludendorff was turning to him, but even so did not think the overall situation was critical. He was relying on his own sources and preparing the machinery for cautious peace feelers. Action waited upon the frank admission by the OHL that the military situation was grave. To act in advance of such an admission might shatter the morale of the army; to act too late, to wait until the chance of collapse became a reality, would open the way to anarchy and revolution. Hintze in fact believed that revolution was inevitable; the only question was whether it would come from below, as it had in Russia, or from above, as it had throughout Prussian and German history. He thus took from Lersner's message something other than what was intended. The staff officers thought he should know that a military collapse was possible. He knew what 8 August meant and assumed that the staff officers were hinting that a specific military reverse had just occurred or was about to. Hintze hurried along to see the chancellor and begged him to go to Spa to find out what was happening. When Hertling refused early on 28 September, Hintze decided to go himself to bring the situation to a head. Then Hertling told him that they would both go.

Hertling had changed his mind because the vice-chancellor, Friedrich von Payer, had told him that the co-ordinating committee of the left-wing majority in the *Reichstag* had decided that Hertling must be replaced by a chancellor enjoying the confidence of the *Reichstag* and pledged to peace and reform. Just when Hertling decided to bow to the *Reichstag* majority and resign, word arrived from Spa that the OHL wanted to talk to him about forming a new government. No one in Berlin realized that Ludendorff had decided that the game was over, and that the parliamentary politicians would be just the people to take the blame for losing.

What had happened on or about 28 September to force Ludendorff to admit openly what he had privately conceded for six weeks? A Franco-American attack had gone well in the Argonne on 26 September; on the 27th the Canadians forced the Canal du Nord which had blocked the path to Cambrai; and on the 28th, Bulgaria sued for peace, opening the way for the Allied forces in Salonika to move up the Danubian basin. The main attack came from the British, who were breaching the Hindenburg Line, and Ludendorff could stop them only by weakening his forces elsewhere, against the French in the centre or the increasingly effective Americans in the south. He faced a classic and total defeat. Even so, Germany still occupied more territory than she had the year before, and still had a solid and seasoned army of two and a half million men in powerful defensive positions. There was as yet no general Allied advance. Victory might have been out of the question, but the alternative to victory, even at this late hour, need not have been total defeat. A negotiated peace reflecting the stalemate in the west that had only just been broken was still possible. It required a defensive military strategy and very careful diplomacy. Both these requirements, however, depended on the mind and nerve of the Commander. On 28 September, Ludendorff collapsed. Realizing he was without supporters, feeling the panic of July and August return, he lashed out at his subordinates. He screamed that the Kaiser was a weakling, that the navy was to blame, that he was beset by treachery and deception. His voice shrill and hoarse, his fists clenched, he became hysterical; around 4.00 p.m., literally foaming at the mouth, he collapsed. Reports of his paralysis and collapse were later denied, but all the reports came from eye witnesses, the denials from his partisans who were not present.

By 6 o'clock, Ludendorff had recovered sufficiently to visit Hindenburg. He said that the collapse of the Balkan Front had convinced him that the defence of Germany was about to unravel. The government must therefore offer peace and request an armistice. Hindenburg agreed. The next day, 29 September, Hindenburg and Ludendorff met with Heye and Hintze. Hintze led off with a gloomy résumé and reviewed the preliminary steps he had taken to set up mediation through the Netherlands. Pessimistic though he was, he was not ready for what followed. Ludendorff described the military situation in bleak terms and insisted that an immediate armistice was necessary. To

Hintze, it seemed that Ludendorff was confirming what Lersner seemed to hint at earlier over the telephone, that there had been a catastrophe on the Western Front. Ludendorff later denied using the word 'catastrophe', and there does seem to have been a profound misunderstanding between the two men. Ludendorff thought that only an immediate armistice could prevent catastrophe; Hintze thought that an immediate armistice was the consequence of a catastrophe that had already occurred. He did not ask for details. Instead, Hintze, who had come to Spa to plead for an immediate change of government and then a peace offer as soon as possible, found that he would have to improvise an immediate peace offer *and* a change of government.

Hintze accompanied Hindenburg and Ludendorff to see the Kaiser, who had journeyed to Spa unaware of what was coming. Showing a composure rare in his tempestuous career but born of his intense dislike of Ludendorff, the Kaiser impassively absorbed the news that the High Command wanted peace. He approved Hintze's proposal that Hertling be replaced by a government including the Social Democrats, but felt that both the request for an armistice and the formation of the new government could wait a few days, lest haste create the wrong impression. When he started to leave with matters still up in the air, Hintze intercepted him and pointed out that the army was in a hurry. The Kaiser reluctantly signed an Imperial Decree announcing a new parliamentary government. When the decree was published the next day in Berlin, it was the first indication the *Reichstag* majority had that their demand for a share of power had been accepted.

Much of the confusion after the conference of 29 September and the Imperial Decree of 30 September arose from unclear language. Hindenburg and Ludendorff thought they had asked for an *immediate* appeal for an *eventual* armistice; almost everyone else, including the Kaiser, Hintze and the staff officers, thought they had asked for an *eventual* appeal for an *immediate* armistice. The more the two generals applied pressure on Berlin to send out the appeal as soon as possible, the more the people in Berlin were convinced that the appeal must be for an end to the fighting right away, at any price. To compound the confusion, the appeal had to come from the new, reformed government. To Ludendorff's primitive political mind, that posed no problem: hire some politicians. To Hintze and Payer, who were trying to put the new government together, the problem was monumental, because the *Reichstag* majority, not realizing it was about to take centre-stage, had no candidate lined up to become chancellor. Payer and his friend Conrad Haussmann inserted the moderately liberal Prince Max of Baden, a cousin of the Kaiser's, without informing their parliamentary colleagues. Prince Max then learned that his first task as chancellor would be to sue for a ceasefire on enemy terms. When he objected that this would bring on a collapse of the army, the Kaiser told him that he had not been made chancellor to make difficulties for the High Command.

With the exception of Hindenburg, those who learned of Ludendorff's decision of 28 September to call for an armistice reacted with shock and disbelief. This was true even of his closest associates at OHL. During the evening of 30 September, Thaer learned what had transpired at the meeting with the Kaiser. When he heard that Ludendorff had said that Germany was finished and needed an immediate armistice, he could not believe it. But later that evening, he learned of a staff meeting planned for the next morning, and wondered 'Will the terrible news be given out there?' It was. Ludendorff described the precarious situation. 'After he had come to the realization that continuing the war would be futile,' Thaer wrote, 'he took the view that an end to it must be made as quickly as possible, so as not to sacrifice brave men . . . uselessly.' He told the staff that Hertling had retired, and continued, 'I have however asked His Majesty to bring those circles into the government which we in the first place must thank for getting us into this position. We will thus put these gentlemen in the government. They should now make the peace which must now be made. Those who prepared the soup should eat it.' Thaer saw Ludendorff through a romantic mist as a Siegfried, nobly bearing all sorrow and calamities. 'While Ludendorff spoke, you could hear soft moans and sobs; many, indeed most, were in tears' (Kaehler, 1961: 237). When Payer learned of the decision, he too was shocked and wondered aloud to Hintze whether Ludendorff had taken leave of his senses – not a bad guess, as it happens.

By the time President Wilson replied to the German request with exactly the sort of onerous terms for an armistice that Prince Max and the new government had predicted, Ludendorff had recovered his nerve. He insisted that the terms must be rejected. The government asked him angrily what had changed in the previous week to make a continuation of the war feasible again. Ludendorff replied that the minister of war had found more men for his army. The truth was that Ludendorff had found scapegoats who would drink the soup that he had cooked. To see such off-loading of responsibility as Ludendorff's main goal might seem far-fetched until one reflects that his manoeuvre worked to perfection. Even though the *Reichstag* leaders knew that they were being set up, their sense of patriotism left them no choice but to play the role given them and hope for the best. In short, the Stab In the Back legend, the vicious lie that the Socialists, Catholics, Liberals and Jews had seized power at home and opened the gates to the enemy, did not begin after the war but was itself a vital part of the way the war ended. If the legend later exercised so much power over German minds and contributed significantly to Hitler's rise to power, that was in part because it was not entirely invented but rested on a grain of truth. The German Army *was* stabbed in the back in September 1918, not by the *Reichstag* or by the civilian government, but by its vengeful and unbalanced leader, Erich Ludendorff. That is how the Great War ended.