

## 4. LESSONS LEARNED AND HISTORY OF CONFLICTS

# THE GERMAN OFFENSIVES, 1918. AN ANALYSIS OF OPERATIONS AND LEADERSHIP (PART II)

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### ABSTRACT

The second part of this article analyzes more in detail the conduct of the five German offensives on the Western Front in 1918. The first offensive (codenamed "Michael") initially achieved astounding success mainly due to the application of infiltration tactics. However the broken terrain and the lack of an operation goal after the initial breakthrough resulted in its failure. The second offensive ("Georgette") had limited aims, and after an initial advance was stopped by the British, who were becoming accustomed to the new German tactics. The third offensive ("Blücher"), against the French sector, was originally intended as a diversion to attract enemy reserves. However the unexpected initial tactical success induced Gen. Ludendorff to continue the offensive, funneling reinforcements into it – again without a clear operational goal. The result was the occupation of a deep and vulnerable salient with no strategic purpose. The last two offensives were even less successful and evidenced lack of coordination and the progress of the Allies in devising countermeasures to the infiltration tactics. The conclusions are that, while the German Army excelled in the tactical field, its leaders failed to develop clear strategic plans and downplayed the importance of operational art. These flaws are a major cause of the offensives' failure, and the lessons drawn from the analysis of the German military leadership in 1918 may still have significance for early 21st century warfare.

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### KEYWORDS

Infiltration tactics; supply; "Schwerpunkt".

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## Analysis of the offensives - Infiltration tactics and "Michael" offensive

Tactical flexibility was one of the strong point of the German doctrine. Too often

however, as already mentioned in the first part of the article, operational and strategic goals were subordinated to tactics, with the result of achieving only temporary territorial gains. The adaptation of operations to tactical necessities should not come to

the point where the overall plan and the ultimate objectives are forgotten. On the other side, minor changes must be made and opportunities seized in order to achieve the general objectives. The application of the new infiltration tactics was central to the German 1918 offensives. Infiltration or "storm troop" tactics were the German answer to the deadlock of trench warfare<sup>1</sup>. Instead of employing mass-wave attacks, infantry had to advance in small mutually supporting groups, avoiding as far as possible centers of resistance and plunging as much as possible into the enemy's rear, while by-passed enemy strongpoints were dealt by follow-on forces<sup>2</sup>.

Ludendorff's orders of March 23<sup>rd</sup>, two days after the beginning of "Michael", seem to lack an understanding of this second aspect. Below had met a bloody check while Hutier and Marwitz had realized a significant break-through. But, since the initial plan gave Below a paramount role, Ludendorff continued to send reserves to his front rather than concentrating on the exploitation of the success of the other two armies. As already mentioned, according to Liddell Hart here lies the explanation of the failure of Michael. It must be noticed however that here Liddell Hart focuses on tactics, in the specific case the failure of Ludendorff to apply correctly the new infiltration tactics, which required advancing along the lines of minor resistance. Ludendorff, argues Liddell Hart, chose to "feed" defeat (Below's failed breakthrough) instead of success, and for this reason he ultimately failed. In truth Liddell Hart's statement is not entirely accurate: most of the divisional reinforcements during "Michael" were actually sent to the Eighteenth army, seventeen out of

twenty-five divisions. In any case, Liddell Hart does not mention the fundamental uncertainty of the objectives of "Michael", which is the crucial question, as Zabecki and other critics point out. The plan required that the Second and Seventeenth Armies would swing north and eventually "roll" the British, while the Eighteenth Army would protect their southern flank. But this in itself would not have assured a decisive, total defeat of the British. This could have only been obtained by cutting them from the French Army with a thrust to the Channel or at least to Abbeville, the site of a crucial railway knot. This is what the Panzer divisions accomplished in 1940. Once the British were cut off in the Flanders, they in theory could still have been supplied from the sea. But the threat against the few ports on the Channel still in their hands would probably have resulted in their evacuation. At this point a little more than 100 French divisions would have confronted some 200 German, before the arrival of significant numbers of American troops. Would have the Germans succeeded had more reinforcement been fed to Eighteenth Army in the south? It seems unlikely that the few additional divisions that the OHL had at hand would have made a big difference. However, if von Hutier had been able to take Amiens or at least interdict it with artillery, the British would have indeed been placed in a perilous position. It is also noteworthy that, following von Hutier's initial spectacular gains Crown Prince Wilhelm's Army Group (to which Eighteenth Army belonged) argued on March 22<sup>nd</sup> for continuing the advance on its current southwesterly axis, instead of switching its efforts to the right to support nearby Second Army. OHL approved<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the offensive continued on divergent

<sup>1</sup> Gudmunsson, B.L. *Stormtroop Tactics*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> House G.M. *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Zabecki, D.T. *The German 1918 Offensives*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 142. *Idem*, *The Generals' War*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018, p. 112.

axes, further indicating the lack of a clear operational objective.

### Enemy strengths and weaknesses

Even the best conceived plan, when it is translated from the maps to the actual battlefield, may meet problems or failure if the enemy does not conform to the expectations of the planners, which seldom he does. We have seen how the failure of "Michael" largely depended on the failure of Below to obtain a breakthrough. This failure is largely due to the nature of the adversary opposing the German Seventeenth Army.

Of the two British Armies, which had to bear the brunt of the German offensive, Byng's Third and Gough's Fifth, it was the latter that was the weaker. As we have already seen the force of the Allies had decreased, and in particular the British order of battle had been reduced by five divisions from October 1917 (see Part I, p. 7). This was due to the costly offensives launched in 1917, especially "Third Ypres", better known as "Passchendaele". The losses suffered by the British in this long offensive had not been fully made up. Lloyd George, the British premier, was not in good relations with the British "generalissimo", Douglas Haig. Worried by the sterility and the cost of Haig's strategy, but unable to find a suitable replacement for the general, he limited the flow of replacements to the army in France in order to restrain Haig from carrying out expensive attacks<sup>4</sup>. Thus, not only the British at the eve of "Michael" had five divisions less than the previous autumn: they had to reduce the number of battalions in a brigade from four to three (except in the Empire divisions). As a consequence now the United Kingdom divisions had only nine infantry battalions instead of twelve. The French and Germans had since long time

reduced their divisional strength, adopting the "triangular" division, with three infantry regiments instead of four.

The weakness of the English front was especially felt at the southern extremity, where the British had to extend their lines in order to take over a section of the French front. At the eve of "Michael" Gough's Fifth Army defended 42 km of front with 12 infantry and three cavalry divisions, while Byng's Third Army occupied 28 km with 14 infantry divisions<sup>5</sup>.

Tactical weakness added to the numerical inferiority of Gough's Army. The Fifth Army tried to adopt the principle of the defense in depth, copied by the Germans, without the proper understanding and training. The line was divided in three sectors: a forward zone, a battle zone, and a rear zone, the first two zones some two km deep and separated by roughly the same distance, while the rear zone was shallower. A typical disposition for a Fifth Army's division was with three battalions forward, three in the battle zone, two in the rear zone and one behind in reserve. In theory this disposition should have been very effective, as the Germans who had used similar tactics against the British had proved it. But the positions of the Fifth Army had been occupied too late and by too few troops. There had been no time to complete the works. The forward zone was well protected by barbed wire but lacked a continuous trench line. The battle zone was incomplete and the rear zone almost non-existent<sup>6</sup>. By comparison, the positions of the Third Army were much stronger. Not only the portion of front to be defended was shorter, the terrain was also more favorable to the defensive. This helps to explain the failure of Below in achieving a breakthrough. The criticism of Liddell Hart is thereafter justifiable: Ludendorff should

<sup>4</sup> After the Passchendaele offensive serious thought was given to replace Haig, but no candidate was deemed suitable.

<sup>5</sup> Middlebrook, M. *The Kaiser's Battle*, London: Allen Lane, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-105.

have sent the reinforcements to the two Armies in the south, instead of obstinately trying to achieve a decisive breakthrough in Below's sector.

### Supply problems

It is not at all given that, even if Ludendorff had reinforced the success of the Second and Eighteenth Army, the Germans would have reached decisive results. On the path of the attacking armies laid the old battlefield of the Somme, an area completely devastated. When the German reached it, their supply system broke down, since it was extremely difficult to bring forward the supplies on the broken terrain. This is also pointed out by Nordensvan to explain why the German offensive ran out of steam<sup>7</sup>.

One more factor hindered the prosecution of the German offensive. A German Staff officer, Rudolf Binding, in his diary for March 28th describes it: "Today the advance of our infantry suddenly stopped near Albert. Nobody could understand why. Our airmen had reported no enemy between Albert and Amiens. ... Our way seemed entirely clear. I jumped into a car with orders to find out what was causing the stoppage in front. As soon as I got near the town I began to see curious sights. Strange figures, which looked very little like soldiers, and certainly showed no sign of advancing, were making their way back out of the town. There were men driving cows before them on a line; others who carried a hen under one arm and a box of notepaper under the other. Men carrying a bottle of wine under their arm and another open in their hand. Men who had torn a silk drawing-room curtain from off its rod and were dragging it to the rear as a useful bit of loot. More men with writing paper and coloured notebooks. Evidently they had found it desirable to sack a stationer's shop. Men

dressed up in comic disguise. Men with top hats on their heads. Men staggering. Men who could hardly walk"<sup>8</sup>.

Three and half year of austerity, made much worse by the enemy blockade, had led to this. And, even worse, drunkenness now combined to check the progress of the German armies, as even Crown Prince Rupprecht later admitted<sup>9</sup>. Certainly this was partly due to the break of the supply system on the old Somme battlefield. Men with empty stomach can hardly be expected to fight effectively. So it is doubtful that in such conditions, even if Ludendorff had sent his reserves to the Eighteenth and Second armies, "Michael" would have succeeded. The logical conclusion is that the centre of gravity of the offensive should have been elsewhere. Not to the north, evidently, since the strength of the British Third army there prevented any decisive breakthrough. Probably the only chance would have been to the south, with the axis of the advance passing south of Amiens. In this way the old Somme battlefield would have been skirted to the south. The operational goal for the German armies should have been to reach the Channel, and so cutting in two the Allied armies. This could probably have been accomplished also by reaching the Channel south of the Somme, or swinging northward after achieving a breakthrough in the south. Of course we are in the realm of speculation here, anyway the OHL seemed to ignore the importance of this operational objective.

If the choice of Ludendorff to advance on a terrain unsuitable to supply cost him "Michael", the ultimate defeat of the successive offensives cannot be attributed to this reason. Instead, a series of spectacular tactical successes distracted him from pur-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>9</sup> Herwig, H.H. *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, London: Arnold, 1997, p. 410.

<sup>7</sup> Nordensvan C.O. *Världskriget 1914-1918*, Stockholm: Lklén & Lkerlunds Förlags, 1922, p. 352.

suing coherent operational and strategic objectives. It would be correct to state that in the offensives following "Michael" Ludendorff reinforced the tactical success at the expense of the overall operational and strategic plan. He cannot be blamed to fail of applying correctly infiltration tactics. John Laffin points out that the Germans were used to "feed" success when they took the offensive. The problem is that these local successes distracted the German generalissimo from the overall aim. But what was exactly this overall plan? As we mentioned, Ludendorff intended to defeat the British Army with a series of blows aimed to either smash or exhaust it and at the same time to prevent the French sending reinforcement to their ally. It was a strategy of frontal attacks that resembled much more Falkenhayn's attritional strategy at Verdun than the flanking, encircling operations planned by Moltke the Elder and Schlieffen. It is not thereafter incorrect to say that in the last three years of WWI German strategic and operational planning had actually declined, and had almost been replaced by a fixation for tactics.

### "Georgette"

The objective of the second German offensive, renamed "Georgette" (Klein Georg), was very limited: the conquest of the Ypres salient. South and west of Ypres there is a series of small hills, the most prominent of them being Mt Kemmel and Mt des Cats. The control of these hills would have forced the British to evacuate the Ypres salient, because the Flanders terrain is so flat that even the possession of these modest mounds gives a tactical advantage. The first part of the offensive was very successful, because it fell on two undermanned Portuguese divisions, which were completely routed.

The second part of the offensive fell on troops part of which had been transferred from the St Quentin sector, and were by now used to the German methods. To the south of the vital hills there was a shallow dish where the river Lys flows, and here was the area where the German attached on April 10th. Thick fog filled the entire dish on the morning of the attack, thus giving the British troops who had already experienced "Michael" an illusion of familiarity. They had learned some countermeasures from their previous experience: forward posts were left unmanned and booby trapped, reserve battalions were stationed whenever possible behind the junctions of brigades, and reserve brigades behind the junctions of divisions. Moreover, now the British troops had learned to retreat when threatened of encirclement, instead of remaining in place and being cut off. The German advance became slow and costly, reminding the past Allied offensives. The British made a methodical fighting withdrawal and Ludendorff was unable to feed reinforcements fast enough. A decisive victory was probably unattainable. Even the capture of Ypres probably would not have much changed the situation.

Only the encirclement and capture of large numbers of prisoners would have resulted in a decisive victory and this could have been achieved only if the attacking German forces had advanced all the way to the sea, cutting off the Second Army and the Belgians. It is doubtful that the Germans could have achieved such a result even if Ludendorff had poured more troops into the offensive. The enemy this time was more prepared. A minor gain for the Germans could have been the weakening of other Allied sectors in order to reinforce Ypres. But what actually happened was that the Germans lost at least as many soldiers as their enemy. The only consola-

tion for the OHL was that in three weeks the British lost all the territory they had gained during several months of struggle the previous year at great expense..

### First German use of armor

The end of "Georgette" was anticipated by the last spasm of the previous offensive, "Michael": on April 24th there was a final attempt to redeem the hollow triumphs in the south. This episode, in itself rather little in the context of the conflict, is remarkable because it saw the first use of the tanks by the German, and even the first clash between armored vehicles. Actually, it was because of the use of tanks that the Germans hoped to achieve a tactical surprise. Undoubtedly they caused a certain consternation among the British troops, now for the first time on the receiving end of an armored thrust. But the number employed by the German was too little to cause more than a local effect.

A lot has been written about the inability of the Germans to field more tanks at an earlier date, and about the shortsightedness of Ludendorff who, despite his tactical ability, failed to recognize the value of armored vehicles. Undoubtedly the history of German armor in WWI is a typical example of "too little too late". There are two factors however that help explaining why the German lagged behind their enemies in armored warfare. First, one has to remember that the German industry was hard pressed with the necessity to provide large amount of essential and proven equipment. The blockade forced the Germans to channel their dwindling resources on weapons whose utility was unquestionable. Still, it is true that the Germans had enough resources to produce the almost useless "Paris guns", and that the means employed for building those white elephants would have been better spent on tanks. Strangely, in a sort of historical reiteration, the Germans made a similar

mistake with their "V" missiles during WWII. The second factor was due to the early failures of the Allied armored offensives. The Allies made the mistake to employ the tanks too early, before correcting some mechanical problems, and in too little numbers. This condemned the tanks' baptism of fire to disaster, but had the unexpected and, for the Allied, positive effect to cause German skepticism regarding the efficacy of tanks. Instead, the Germans developed dedicated antitank weapons, the first of which was the T-Gewehr of 1918, an enlarged bolt-action rifle firing a 13-mm steel-cored projectile at over 900 m/s to penetrate 22 mm of hardened plate at 100 m<sup>10</sup>.

The Germans succeeded in building only one operative tank, the A7V, of which 100 exemplars were ordered in December 1917 but only about 20 were actually produced. It was a clumsy machine, with the tracks encased in the armored chassis, which limited their mobility. Most of the vehicles deployed in April 1918 were actually captured British tanks. On April 24th an historical event took place at a locality called Villers-Bretonneux: the first tank battle in history. In reality only a handful vehicles were employed by each side, and the skirmish ended with few losses without a clear winner. Anyway, the basic techniques and tactics of combat between tanks were employed, so it remains a milestone in military history. At this point a question surges almost spontaneously: would the Germans have won if they had had a mechanized force in the spring 1918? Probably no one can answer this question better than Heinz Guderian, the father of the panzer forces: "We cannot declare categorically that the Germans would have accomplished the breakthrough if they too had possessed mobile troops, but it is a question which

<sup>10</sup> Hogg I.V., Weeks J.S. *Military Small Arms of the 20th Century*, Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2000, p. 387.

we cannot ignore when we look back on this episode. In view of the appalling condition of the roads behind the German front at the time, and the considerable volume of transport which was needed to sustain the infantry divisions and the artillery, it is very likely that only armored units with full cross-country mobility would have had any chance of success; the opportunity was magnificent – of that there can be no doubt, for the enemy were heavily depleted and in a state of considerable disarray”<sup>11</sup>.

Guderian’s words seem to reflect the belief that a German mechanized thrust would have been decisive. It seems a reasonable assumption, provided that for mobile troops one does not only mean a collection of tanks, but also the accompanying infantry armored carriers and tracked supply vehicles, indispensable to negotiate the disrupted terrain on which the advance took place.

### “Blücher”

The third German offensive, “Blucher”, showed the OHL at its best regarding both preparation and execution. Bruchmüller, now nicknamed “Durchbruchmüller” (Breakthrough Müller), was given sole charge of the artillery. He planned the barrages in a masterly way. Assault and reserve divisions moved to their allotted areas with the smoothness and the precision of a clockwork. Especially the precautions for ensuring surprise were elaborated to an unprecedented extent. All the vehicles had their wheels greased and padded, no troop movement was allowed by day, and if a unit was spotted by an enemy aircraft, it turned about as if it marched to rear areas instead than to the front. But maybe the greatest contribution to Blücher’s success was given by the enemy. Both British and French were convinced that the next

German offensive would have been again directed to the front north of the Somme River. Only the Americans claimed that the next enemy offensive would be across the Chemin-des-Dames. But America was still the junior partner in the Alliance, and its warnings were not listened. Even worse, the commandant responsible of the area that would have received the attentions of “Blücher” was General Duchesne. Choleric and stubborn, he ignored Petain’s dispositions about a defense in depth, and packed the French and British troops under his command in the forward trenches. The French front-line divisions and the British 50th and 8<sup>th</sup> Divisions were sandwiched between the Ailette and the Aisne, with a depth of only few miles. The preparation of artillery was even more intense than for “Michael”, and by evening the attacking troops had already reached the river Vesle. In his memories Ludendorff wrote: “I had believed that we would succeed merely in reaching the region of Soissons and Fismes.” But the point is that “Blücher” was intended as a diversion to attract French troops away from the Flanders. It was not intended to advance so much. But, as B. Pitt points out, “nothing succeeds like success”.<sup>12</sup> At this point Ludendorff forgot its overall plan and started feeding troops to the offensive, instead of interrupting it and shifting forced to the north as originally planned. The result was that the attackers were funneled into a salient that ultimately assumed the form of a trap. Far from having the possibility to reach a decision by trapping enemy forces, the Germans managed just to stretch their defensive lines to a vulnerable position, where they were in danger to be attacked on the flanks and cut off. The Germans got closer to Paris, but it was a dead end.

<sup>11</sup> Guderian H. *Achtung-Panzer!*, London: Arms & Armour Press, 1995, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Pitt, B. 1918 – *The Last Act*, London: Cassell, 1962, p. 148.

It is important to pay attention on this aspect of "Blücher". Here the German generalissimo fed apparent victory rather than defeat, but at the expense of the overall operational plan. Ludendorff acted correctly at the tactical level, while committing a mistake at the operational-strategic level. Infiltration tactics indeed require to reinforce success. But on the operational and strategic level, feeding success in the wrong place can be useless and detrimental to the overall plan. With "Blücher" the Germans only gained a badly defensible position, and paid it with huge losses of troops that could have been employed elsewhere.

The fourth German offensive, although small in scale compared with the three gigantic battles that preceded it, was significant in revealing the lessons being learned by the respective army commands. The first lesson concerns the value of time co-ordination in war. Twelve days had been allowed to elapse between the end of the main German advance towards Amiens and the opening of "Georgette", while twenty-six days had gone by from the end of "Georgette" to the start of "Blücher" across the Chemin-des-Dames. Observers from both sides started to understand that such a lapse of time between two attacks lost for the second one opportunities which may have been created for it by the first. Ludendorff's chief of operations, Oberst-leutnant Wetzell, tried to remedy to this mistake. During the planning stage of the "Blücher" attack he had suggested that as soon as the Chemin-des-Dames had fallen and the main purpose of Bruchmüller's artillery train had been accomplished, it should be immediately transferred a few miles westward, to the stretch of line immediately adjoining the "Blücher" front. This front - between Noyon to the east and Montdidier to the west - was still held by von Hutier's Eighteenth Army. Wetzell's suggestions were not accepted at

the time, since Ludendorff still thought he would move the artillery train back to the Flanders against the British. But once this idea was substituted by the alluring hope of reaching Paris after the success on the Chemin-des-Dames, then the benefits of a second attack westward to support the main advance became apparent. The task of transferring a huge artillery train through roads crowded with reserves and supplies being flushed to the main advance was formidable. So it was six days after "Blücher" had been called off that von Hutier could announce that he was ready to launch another offensive. It was an improvement upon the previous performance, but it was not enough. Moreover, General Pétain had not been distracted enough by the battle to the south to forget other sectors. If the Germans could make initial gains, it was largely due to the reluctance of the French Generals Humbert and Debeney to apply the defensive dispositions of Pétain, even if their disobedience was not as complete as that of Duquesne. Pétain was able to have his plan for an elastic defense partially adopted, and the German offensive did not go far. Ludendorff was clearly disappointed: "The action of the Eighteenth Army", he wrote, "had not altered the strategic situation... nor had it provided any fresh technical data"<sup>13</sup>.

It is interesting to see how in the meanwhile the proportion of forces had changed. On paper, if one looks at the number of divisions deployed, both contenders had grown stronger. By the middle of May, the 192 German divisions employed at the start of "Michael" had increased to 207. The Allies showed on paper that the number of their divisions had grown to 188 over the same period. The extra German divisions were all late arrivals from the eastern Front, while the increase in the number of Allied

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.



divisions had been caused by the transfer to France of British divisions which had been serving in Italy, Salonika and Palestine, together with the arrival of more Americans.

Looking at the number of divisions may be deceptive, however. The real point is, of course, the maintenance of divisional strengths. In this regard it is significant that by the end of the battle of Noyon the average strength of German field battalions had been reduced from 807 men to 692, and this despite the arrival at the front of 23,000 recruits of the 1899 class as well as 60,000 men withdrawn from such services as the Field Railways, the Motor Transport and even the Air Force. The Germans were close to scrape the bottom of the barrel. The British and the French were themselves not far from it, but there were important differences of degree. There had been 88,000 men on leave from the British Army – incredible though this may seem – on the evening of March 21, and another 30,000 attending courses or at depots in France, and this had been partly responsible for the low rifle strength of many of the Fifth Army battalions. When the battalions suffered losses, these men were immediately available as replacements. There had also been 100,000 men retained in England for several reasons - the official one being as a guard against a possible invasion. The Government's decision to lower the age limit of troops made available for service overseas from nineteen to eighteen and-a-half created a pool of 170,000 men ready to replace those lost in the battles.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, while after the attack on Mt Kemmel in March Haig had been forced to reduce ten of his divisions to cadres, by July they had all been reconstituted. And of course, as far as the Allied manpower was concerned, the immense human reserves from

America were being made available just as fast as Britain could ship them across the Atlantic. By the end of May, some 750,000 men in their prime had arrived in France, and there were many more to come<sup>15</sup>.

Thus from the start of the German offensives the numerical odds had progressively shifted to the side of the Allies. Nor there was evidence of a significant qualitative superiority on the part of the Central Powers. Ludendorff's policy to concentrate the best troops in assault divisions gave the Germans an initial advantage. This policy was a gamble, because when the battle raged on without reaching a decision these elite troops, bearing the brunt of the fighting, received disproportionately high losses. Gradually the German Storm troops were reduced and annihilated by the attrition during the offensives. As a result Ludendorff was soon to be left with an army from which the finest elements had been drained and consumed, and thus impaired in its ability to carry on a prolonged resistance.

### The Second Battle of the Marne

It may seem exaggerated to state that in the last offensives "the Supreme Command renounced further plans for a decisive battle, and made other diversionary offensives in the hope of something turning up."<sup>16</sup> But undoubtedly, as we have seen, the strategic direction of the OHL was very uncertain, and it worsened with the last German effort. Ludendorff made several errors. Probably the greatest was with regard to morale, for he allowed the attack to be called "Friedensturm" – "Peace Offensive" - and encouraged the belief that this was the final stroke which would win the war for Germany, and thus release the soldiers from the abattoir at the front and their families at home from the grip of hunger and disease. This may

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

have given impetus to the first attack, but it was to retort against him during the following days, precisely as the realization that the deceptively announced Grouchy's troops were in reality Prussians turned the French at Waterloo from hope to despair and lost the day to Napoleon.

In the preparation of the offensive, Ludendorff disregarded two essential tactical factors. The first was the time element, because the battle of Noyon had ended on June 11th, while "Friedensturm" didn't begin until July 15<sup>th</sup>. Time aids the defender more than the attacker, at least when the defender can watch the attacker's moves, and prepare himself accordingly. Unfortunately for the Germans, this was actually the case, since Ludendorff ignored the factor of secrecy over his concentration of forces. This lack of secrecy is the more difficult to understand if one considers the exceptional efforts he made to mask his intentions and strength in his first three offensives. By the evening before the attack, all his plans were known to the Allies: 49 German divisions, in three armies, were to attack on either side of Rheims, while successively 31 divisions under Crown Prince Rupprecht were to renew the battle of the Lys in the north.

East of Rheims the Allies had prepared an unpleasant surprise for the Germans. They had evacuated the front line trenches, leaving only scattered machine gun positions, and prepared their main defenses in the rear beyond the range of the German artillery. As a consequence in this sector the German offensive ended in a bloody failure. West of Rheims, instead, the German attack was initially very successful. The Allied troops here manned the forward positions in force, and had to endure the ordeal of the German bombardment. The German advance was so successful that, even if it could not hope to link up as had been intended with the attack on the east,

it progressed far enough to almost cut off the vital position of Rheims itself. Then, enemy reserves and exhaustion brought it to a halt.

It is evident that, had the German adopted their usual secrecy precautions so as to prevent the Allies to adopt appropriate defensive countermeasures, the attack east of Rheims would probably had been successful. The fall of the Rheims position would have probably forced the Allied to move in this sector their strategic reserves, allowing Ludendorff to renew the Lys offensive with good prospects of success. The consequence of the German setback was not only the abandonment of the renewed attack on the Lys sector, but a crack in the German morale. Now that the "Peace Offensive" had failed, hope turned into despair for the German soldiers. The subsequent Allied offensives were to accelerate the moral – even more than the physical – collapse of the German Army.

### Consequences of the defeat

The five German offensives largely consumed the German reserve of manpower. Perhaps even more decisively, they consumed the moral reserve of the German Army in exchange for five wedges of French soil imbedded in the Allied lines. As a consequence, when the Allied started their new offensive phase, there was little left to meet them. On the paper the German Army, with more than 200 divisions, still looked impressive. But in fact it was a shadow of what it had been on March 20.

When the Allied attacked at Amiens on 8<sup>th</sup> August, it became the "Black Day of the German Army". Traditionally the Allied victory has been attributed to the use of the tanks en masse. Even if there is much truth in it, even more importance should be attributed to the moral collapse of the Germans. It was not the first time that the Ger-

mans dealt with tanks, but this time seven divisions were routed. Perhaps even more important than the collapse of the front troops – from which they partially recovered – was the disheartening of Ludendorff himself.

The battle of Amiens was followed by a continued offensive on a broad front, which was to lead to the rupture of the so-called “Hindenburg Line”- in reality a complex network of defenses extending from Lille to Metz. It was to be the first time on the Western Front that a powerful defensive position organized in deep was completely broken. The final consequence was German surrender and the armistice of 11 November 1918.

## Conclusions

After this analysis, I want to summarize in a nutshell the answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay. First, the opinion of the historians: as we have clearly seen it is divided. On one side we have those historians like Liddell Hart, who overestimate the proficiency of the German Army and its leaders, probably with the purpose to further evidence the flaws of the Allied leadership. Among the Germans, after the war there has been a tendency to defend the reputations of Hindenburg and Ludendorff and to attribute the defeat to the so called “stab in the back”. On the other side there are historians, especially in recent years, which have evidenced how the German leadership was flawed at the operational, strategic and political level. These historians make large use of comments by German officers, because even if Ludendorff and Hindenburg had a formidable reputation in Germany, it was by no means unanimous. Those comments have been reported in this essay, and there is a large amount of evidence to indicate that indeed the criticism of the German High Command is justified.

With hindsight it is not difficult to see what mistakes could have been avoided in order to improve the chances of success. Regarding “Michael”, the sector chosen for the offensive should have been shifted in order to avoid the broken terrain of the old Somme battlefield, which obstructed the flow of supplies. Once “Michael” had been launched, Ludendorff should have sent more reinforcements to Hutier, even if he indeed gave him more divisions than to his colleagues. In a nutshell, for “Michael” the wrong “Schwerpunkt” was chosen. Regarding the subsequent offensives, their main purpose was to attract and consume the allied reserves. Here the mistake was that Ludendorff, lured by the initial success, did not halt the offensives when he should have.

Moreover, too long time was allowed to elapse between the various offensives, allowing the Allies to reorganize themselves and reform their reserves. Thus it was a problem of wrong timing. But above all, as we have amply discussed, it was a problem of lack of clear operational goals. Even if these errors had been avoided, it is still unlikely that Germany could have achieved a decisive victory. The fact is that Germany lacked the material, physical strength to overcome its enemies. This is also the opinion of Dr. Gerhardt Gross of the MGFA (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt) at Potsdam, with whom I have corresponded on the topic. Gross writes: “In my opinion the German army had no chance to lead a successful offensive in spring 1918 for despite tactical innovations in the field of attack neither the material nor the personnel resources of the German empire did suffice to achieve a victory over the Entente after the U.S.A. had entered into the war.” The best chances for the Germans probably would have been given by the capture of the crucial railway knots behind the Brit-

ish lines, which may have forced an evacuation. It is of course difficult to say how likely it would have been for the Germans to gain those objectives, even if the correct choices had been made.

According to Clausewitz an attacker has to have at least a 2,5 superiority over its enemy in order to have a reasonable chance of success. Even with the reinforcements from the East, the numerical superiority of the German army was far less than that, and in every case destined to last a very short time, since the immense human resources of the USA were flowing to Europe. Of course by careful concentration and surprise it is possible to achieve an overwhelming local superiority. But here comes a problem that is characteristic of the First World War: even if the attack enjoyed initial success, the defender could always move reinforcements and reserves by railway to the menaced point, faster than the attacking troops, moving by foot, could advance. This problem was never solved during World War I, and made a decisive strategic penetration virtually impossible. Only with the adoption of extensive mechanization it is possible to solve this impasse. But we have to wait for the next war to see that.

Another important issue is the relevance of these military operations to modern warfare. The immense technological changes occurred in the last 100 years may let assume that World War I does not provide many useful lessons for 21st century warfare. In this regard Gary Sheffield, professor of War Studies at the University of Wolverhampton and former historian at the United Kingdom Joint Services Command and Staff College, wrote: "The armies of Europe and the United States still train for essentially the same style of warfare that was developed on the Western Front in

1914-18..."<sup>17</sup>. And in *Forgotten Victory* (2001) he concludes: "This statement was written in 1987, but at the beginning of the twenty first century it still holds true"<sup>18</sup>.

In particular the 1918 German offensives show the interdependence between the levels of warfare. Tactical excellence in itself is not useful if it is not used in the frame of clear and sound operational goals. In turn, operational plans must serve the overall strategic, and ultimately political, objectives of war.

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<sup>18</sup> Sheffield, G. *Forgotten Victory*, London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001, p. 231.

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