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THE COUNTRY OF DEATH

Stalemate on the Western Front

> The result of the fighting here [in Artois] is to show that the Germans can be driven back at the cost of an enormous effort, but that the thing is possible. . . . People in England must be prepared for a long war and I am afraid there are no brilliant or sudden victories to be expected—the best stayers will win in the end.
>
> —Letter from British General Sir Charles Grant to his father-in-law, April 15, 1915

As 1914 ended, the problem facing the Allied armies was at once deceptively simple and immensely complicated. The simple part lay in the obvious need to push the Germans out of those parts of France and Belgium that they occupied. The British, French, and Belgians all agreed on this war aim, unifying them at least on this one level. The complication came from the immense operational and tactical challenges posed by the new style of war. By the end of the year, a solid line of German defenses reached from the North Sea to the impassable terrain of the Alps. There were no longer any flanks to turn; consequently, strategic envelopments, like the one the Germans had so daringly executed at Tannenberg, were virtually impossible. To make the problem even more complicated, in 1914 and 1915 the Allies could not count on any significant superiority in manpower, nor did they have access to any weapons that the Germans did not also possess.

The Germans had decided to conduct their main offensive for 1915 in the east and therefore determined to fortify their defensive positions in the west. They connected and improved the haphazard system of field entrenchments that had developed during the

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Although trenches began as a haphazard effort to protect men from the elements and enemy fire, they rapidly became sophisticated, as this diagram of an ideal trench system shows. (Imperial War Museum, Crown Copyright, E. R. Heaton)

Race to the Sea and protected them with thick tangles of barbed wire. They added concrete in places and buried telephone and telegraph lines to protect them from enemy artillery fire. The typical trench system zigzagged, both to prevent enfilading attacks and to create interlocking fields of fire whereby any given point could be covered by more than one machine gun, rifle, or artillery piece. Thus the ground between the two trench systems, known as No Man's Land, could be constantly observed and any point fired

upon simultaneously by multiple weapons. Front-line defenses often contained as many as three separate parallel lines of trenches, connected by communications trenches running roughly perpendicular to the front.

The war on the western front did not represent the first use of trench warfare, nor were most Europeans entirely ignorant of it. Both the American Civil War, in its later phases, and the Russo-Japanese War had witnessed extensive static field trench systems. The latter conflict especially preyed on the minds of farsighted officers in the Great War, some of whom had been observers during the earlier war. Most senior commanders, however, thought that trench warfare was a temporary aberration, not the normal condition of warfare. For the men, the trenches in early 1915 were not yet the squalid, muddy, rat- and lice-ridden places that later became symbolic of the war. In 1914 and early 1915, trenches offered vital protection from machine guns, artillery, and the elements. One German soldier noted in the war's early weeks that trench life was "more agreeable than a long march; one gets used to this existence if the bodies of men and horses don't smell too bad."[1] In early 1915, trenches were not yet associated with indefinite stalemate. Even in the Russo-Japanese War, where defensive firepower often dominated, determined infantry frequently took enemy trenches and fieldworks, albeit with heavy losses.

In the early days of trench warfare on the western front, therefore, many officers saw trenches as a problem to be overcome, but certainly not an insurmountable one. Once the enemy's trenches had been neutralized or bypassed, they fully expected the return to a war of maneuver. Throughout the war, operational plans repeatedly called for the massing of cavalry to exploit any gaps that the artillery and infantry would open in the enemy's trench systems. Only in very rare instances did cavalry actually play a significant pursuit role on the western front, but the continued call for its preparation testifies to the persistence of the belief that trench sys-

tems could be broken. Indeed, there were just enough successes and near-successes to convince generals to keep trying.

One should not, therefore, criticize the generals of the western front without first fully appreciating the problems that they faced. Few Allied generals could expect to keep their jobs for very long if they remained a firm advocate of defensive warfare. The peoples and governments of the Allied nations expected their military minds, most of whom they still held in high esteem, to find a solution to the stalemate and liberate occupied regions. Trench warfare placed these men in increasingly unfamiliar intellectual terrain. Many of them failed to make the necessary adjustments, and many ineffectual generals kept their jobs much longer than they should have. That they remained in command despite their failings was often a function of there being no one with any obviously better solutions to take their place.

Historians have recently worked hard to debunk the conventional stereotype of the unfeeling general, safe behind lines, blithely ignoring the casualty figures presented to him.[2] Like any war, World War I had its share of effective generals and ineffective generals. Those that succeeded often had to relearn everything they thought they knew about modern warfare. Those few whose formative experiences had been in the Wars of German Unification (1864–1871) found themselves dealing with entirely new technologies, doctrines, and scales of operation. As for those too young to have fought in those wars, many had made their name in colonial operations in Africa or Asia, hardly adequate preparation for the western front. Several had reached the rank of general without ever having heard a shot fired in anger.

French commander Joseph Joffre was one of those generals whose military experiences in Madagascar and Indochina had shaped his outlook. His plan to fight a war of maneuver in 1914 had led his army to the position of deadlock in which it found itself at the end of the year. Not one to sit idly by while the enemy

occupied a large swath of his nation's territory, Joffre sought a place on the line where an offensive stood the best chance of changing the situation in France's favor. The greatest danger to France, Joffre believed, lay in the giant salient stretching from Arras to Craonne that bulged toward Compiègne and sat just sixty miles from Paris at its westernmost extreme. The face of the salient sat between the towns of Noyon, on the German side of the line, and Soissons, on the Allied side.

THE CHAMPAGNE OFFENSIVE AND NEUVE CHAPELLE

On December 20, 1914, Joffre ordered attacks on the salient in the hope of achieving a breakthrough. The northern attacks struck Noyon, while the southern attacks pressured the line between Reims and Verdun. These attacks, which amounted to ill-coordinated advances against heavily defended positions, resembled the frustrations of the Battle of the Frontiers more than the fluidity of the Battle of the Marne. They failed, demonstrating that frontal assaults not only cost exposed infantry units tremendous casualties, but also stood little chance of creating an opening in the enemy line.

On January 8, the Germans learned a similar lesson when they sought their own rupture in an offensive toward Soissons. Although they gained some small bridgeheads south of the Aisne River and held Soissons until September, they could not achieve a breakthrough any more than the French could. Once again, the ill-fated kaiser had been invited by his staff to come to the front and witness the capture of a major objective, this time the Champagne capital of Reims. Once again, he had to look on as German forces failed to complete their mission. In both the French attack and the German counterattack, the defense had held supreme, underscoring the tactical disadvantage that modern weapons gave to the attackers.

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A French Spad 11 aircraft patrols the western front. Note the machine gunner aiming his weapon behind the plane. In 1916 the Germans introduced a machine gun with an interrupter gear that allowed pilots to fire through the arc of the propeller, giving birth to the true fighter. (United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)

The impact that the war was having on nature and on the men who fought emerges from a letter written by a French soldier to a friend in February 1915:

> When we arrived here in the month of November, this plain was magnificent with its fields as far as the eye can see full of beets, strewn with rich farms and filled with wheat. Now it is the country of death. All of its fields are upset, trampled, the farms are burned and ruined and another crop is born: tiny hills topped with a cross or simply a bottle turned upside down in which someone has placed papers of the man who lies there. Many times death has brushed its wings against me when I run sunken along

> the trenches or paths to avoid the "shrapnel" or the tac-tac of the machine guns.[3]

This writer was one of the lucky ones. He survived the war.

The Champagne offensive demonstrated beyond any doubt the difficulty of offense. "The existence of the front continues to impede all maneuver," concluded an internal French study on the campaign. "Only frontal attacks remain possible. To prepare them and to put them in place requires crude work." Defensive firepower, most notably from machine guns, made almost any advance suicidal. "If a single machine gun remains in action [after the artillery phase]," concluded the same study, "losses can be great."[4] The great Napoleonic charges that the generals had studied in classrooms and emulated during war games simply did not work in the age of automatic weapons. The remainder of the war saw vigorous efforts by all sides, especially the Allies, to neutralize or bypass that firepower.

As this process of doctrinal change began, other processes reformed the armies, which became instruments of the generals' experimentation. In August 1914 British Secretary of State for War Horatio Kitchener had called for volunteers for the New Armies, men who would replace the professional soldiers of the BEF. Kitchener and the British government hoped to enlist 100,000 men. Instead, 1,186,000 men joined the colors in Great Britain within five months. By the end of 1915 2,466,719 Britons had volunteered for military service, complemented by 458,000 more from Canada and 332,000 from Australia.[5] Because Great Britain did not have universal military service before the war, few of these men knew even the most rudimentary details of military life; many did not know how to fire a rifle.

What these men lacked in experience, they more than made up for in cold determination. Journalist Philip Gibbs described their attitude as less of militarism than of resignation. Few of the men that Gibbs interviewed claimed to understand the diplomatic chain of events that had led Britain to war, and several had almost

as many suspicions about the French as they had about the Germans. Nevertheless, they understood on a deep personal level that their nation was in danger and had called them to the colors. The thought of the British Empire in peril was, Gibbs noted, the "real call" that drove men to enlist. Gibbs summarized their attitude as "I hate the idea, but it's got to be done."[6]

Even though they did not see much action until the fall, the mere creation of the New Armies radically changed the British military system. Britain's wars had traditionally been the responsibility of volunteer professionals, who always stood apart from British society. Now the army was a mass citizen force with intimate links to the larger society. As such, the citizenry demanded changes in the nature of the army's operations. In 1914, Kitchener had succeeded in keeping journalists away from the army. But virtually everyone in Britain had a friend or relative in the New Armies, and they wanted to stay informed about the activities of their loved ones. Consequently, in March 1915 the British Army reluctantly accredited its first five war correspondents. Although Gibbs noted that British headquarters saw the reporters as "hardly better than spies," the generals had no choice but to accept this link between the army and the society that supported it.[7]

While the New Armies trained and prepared, the professionals tried once again. The British made good the BEF's 1914 losses with transfers from India, temporarily providing needed reinforcements while the new recruits trained. Using these reinforcements, Douglas Haig's First Army designed a meticulous plan to seize the area around the town of Neuve Chapelle. The First Army staff prepared detailed maps of the area for officers to study and complemented these maps with accurate aerial photographs of the topography and German defenses. The British preparations so impressed Joffre that he ordered the plan translated and distributed to his own staffs as a model. Indeed, the quality of British preparations should put to rest the persistent stereotype that World War I officers were manifest incompetents.

Haig's plan envisioned creating a breakthrough not, as Joffre had done in Champagne, with brute force, but with as much finesse as military operations in 1915 permitted. Haig planned to make a virtue out of necessity by limiting his pre-attack artillery barrage to just thirty-five minutes. A brief bombardment would give the Germans limited time to reinforce the sector; in any case, shortages of high explosive artillery ammunition forbade the barrage from being much longer. Haig planned diversionary attacks to the north and south of Neuve Chapelle in order to disguise his true intentions. British aircraft would clear the sky of German pilots, guaranteeing that the Germans would not be able to observe British movements. The main British strike was to come over a narrow 2,000-yard front by a mass of 45,000 men with cavalry in reserve. By concealing the true intention of his plan, Haig hoped to concentrate his forces in a small part of the front, thereby achieving a local numerical superiority at the point of attack. His men were to move through Neuve Chapelle, then to the southeast, passing along the southern face of high ground known as the Aubers Ridge.

The strength of the Neuve Chapelle operation lay in its goals. Haig did not plan to smash in the face of the salient with the intention of killing as many Germans as he could. Instead, he hoped that his breakthrough would menace and ultimately cut the north-south rail lines to the east of Neuve Chapelle. The entire German position in this sector depended on the supplies that came over those rail lines. By cutting German communications to the supply centers of Lille and Douai, Haig hoped to force a general retirement of his enemy without massive casualties.

The plan very nearly worked, in large part because the British First Army still had a large enough complement of professionals to follow such a carefully crafted, and therefore complex, series of arrangements. Although limited to just thirty-five minutes, the British artillery barrage was intense. The British fired more artillery shells in those thirty-five minutes than they had fired in the

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Reconnaissance balloons like this one could both monitor movements of enemy units and help to correct the accuracy of artillery fire. They quickly became targets for enemy fighters. (National Archives)

entirety of the Boer War, demonstrating how much modern war had come to rely on industry. At 7:30 on the morning of March 10, 1915, British infantry began to advance, hoping that the artillery had destroyed the German barbed wire in front of them and interdicted German attempts to reinforce the Neuve Chapelle sector.

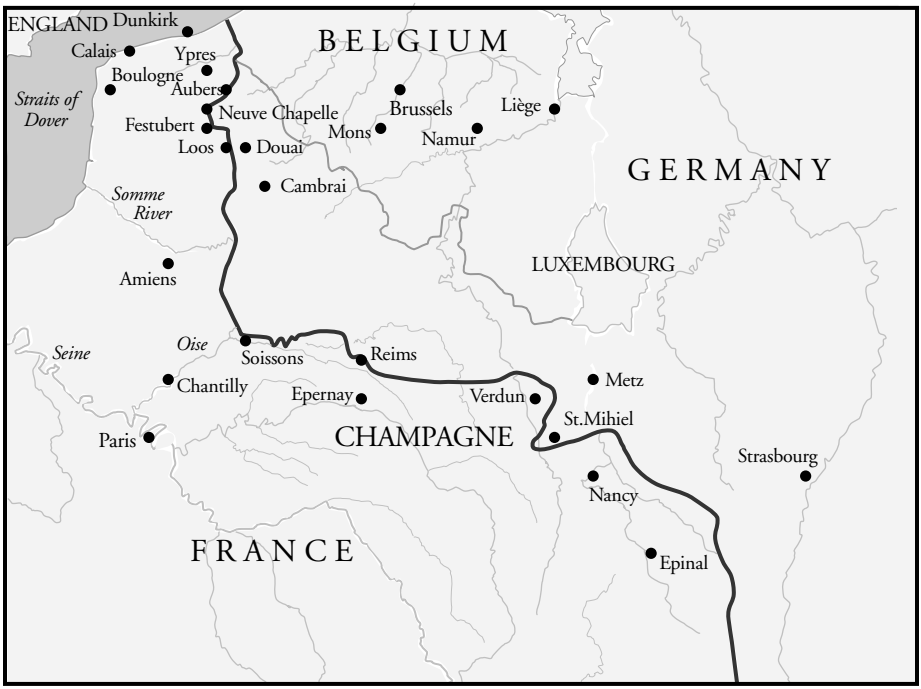
At first, all signs indicated that Haig and his staff had designed a masterpiece. As Haig had hoped, his preparations completely surprised the German defenders, forcing them into a headlong retreat. The town of Neuve Chapelle fell into British hands in just thirty minutes, a remarkable achievement by any standard of this war. East of the town, surprised and outnumbered German units retreated faster than the British could pursue them.

Despite this early success, however, the battle soon deteriorated. The elegance of the plan for Neuve Chapelle soon began

to work against itself. The relative paucity of artillery shells led Haig and his staff to centralize their use at First Army headquarters. Thus local commanders could not redirect artillery fire where they needed it. The lack of field radios led to an overly rigid plan that set goals for unit commanders but did not let them advance further without instructions from higher headquarters. In many places, British units had advanced so quickly that they had to wait for their own prearranged artillery barrages to lift before moving forward. In other areas, they faced no opposition at all, but could not receive authorization to advance quickly enough to exploit the opportunities in front of them.

While the British delayed, the Germans responded. Moving men, artillery, and machine guns into the Neuve Chapelle sector by 5:30 that afternoon, they effectively stopped the British drive midway between Neuve Chapelle and the Aubers Ridge. British forces now sat exposed in an area without trenches, leaving them vulnerable to German counterattacks on March 11 and 12. These attacks drove the British back almost to the original starting line. For 13,000 casualties (more than 4,000 of them Indian) the British had nearly achieved their aims, but instead were left with gains amounting to a strip of insignificant territory 1,000 yards deep by 3,000 yards long. German casualties were slightly higher, at approximately 15,000.

Neuve Chapelle was both a "glorious victory" and a "bloody fiasco" for the British.[8] It had shown what careful preparations could accomplish, but it also showed how quickly success could deteriorate into failure. It helped to end the illusion that the war might end after one large battle like Sadowa, Sedan, or Waterloo. The war, many came to believe, would not end soon. One of the generals on Haig's staff concluded from the battle, "I am afraid that England will have to accustom herself to far greater losses than those of Neuve Chapelle before we finally crush the German Army."[9] However subtle the plan for Neuve Chapelle, it had not resulted in the victory that Haig had sought.



The western front, 1915

Nevertheless, Haig and his staff concluded, with some justification, that their plan had not gone awry. "We looked upon the operation as a success," recalled one of its planners, "and thought that but for bad luck and little mistakes, we would have gone forward."[10] The failure to accomplish more at Neuve Chapelle, many staff officers alleged, had been due to inadequate supplies of artillery shells. Such an analysis ignored Haig's centralization of his artillery once the infantry phase began, but it did point out a problem in British supply. In just three days along a narrow front, the British had fired one-sixth of their total stock of artillery ammunition. By the beginning of May, British industry had provided only 2 million of the 6 million shells it had promised to replace those

used in the war's first months. Sir John French expressed his frustration with British politicians, whom he blamed for the shortages and the low quality of the shells that the BEF did receive, to Charles Repington, the influential war correspondent of the London *Times.* Repington published the charges, coining the phrase "shell crisis," which contributed to a crisis in confidence in the British government.

STALEMATE AND THE BEGINNINGS OF GAS WARFARE

Farther to the north, in Flanders, the British believed that they had the situation well in hand. Events in 1915 thus far seemed to demonstrate that the Germans would hold on the defensive all across the western front. The British took advantage of this seeming inactivity to improve their position. They tripled the number of soldiers they had in the Ypres area and seized nearby Hill 60 (so named because it was 60 meters high), one of the few high points in Flanders.

These preparations made the Ypres salient stronger, but Horace Smith-Dorrien still thought it unwise to base British defenses there. The salient bulged out into the German lines in a particularly well-defined backward "C." It therefore sat exposed to attacks from the north, east, and south. Smith-Dorrien proposed retreating behind the Ypres canal, which sat at the British Second Army's back, thereby straightening out the line and offering the Germans fewer attack options. Sir John, still angry at Smith-Dorrien for his disobedience at Le Cateau the previous summer, refused to consider this idea.

Believing that the Germans would remain on the defensive in Flanders, Foch spent much of his time in March and early April planning an attack on Vimy Ridge, a series of hills north of Arras from which the Germans could observe all Allied movements in the area. German forces had also used the ridge to bombard Arras, virtually destroying its two magnificent town squares. If the Allies

could relieve the pressure on the city, they could use it as a reliable supply and communications base for operations to the east. Foch became obsessed with capturing Vimy Ridge and the nearby Notre Dame de Lorette ridge; this view caused him to ignore threats in other sectors.

Allied focus on Arras proved costly. Evidence soon began to trickle in that the Germans might not sit idle in Flanders. During a small-scale raid of German trenches, French soldiers had captured a German soldier with a crude respirator. Other prisoners had told French interrogators that the respirators were designed to protect German forces from poison gas, which the Germans had been concentrating in the Ypres area. A British trench raid even uncovered cylinders that the Germans planned to use to project the gas. Still, British and French headquarters issued only vague warnings of the possibility of gas weapons being used in the Ypres sector.

Allied commanders likely interpreted the information regarding gas as a feint. Gas weapons stood in contravention of international laws regarding war. Although all of the great powers had some chemical stockpiles, the British and French had no plans to use them and likely assumed that out of humanity the Germans would not use theirs. Operationally, the only method of delivering poison gas involved opening the gas from cylinders placed inside one's own lines and trusting a favorable wind to carry it over. The Germans suffered from the disadvantage of being to the east, which placed them in the face of the normally prevailing westerly winds.[11] For whatever reason, the Allies badly misjudged German intentions regarding the new weapons. Their mistake cost them thousands of casualties and nearly cost them the entire Ypres sector.

German commander Erich von Falkenhayn had three goals for the offensive. First, he hoped to reduce the Ypres salient that bulged into his lines and impeded his lines of communication. Second, he sought to divert attention from his movement of

four corps to the east to participate in the great German eastern offensive at Gorlice-Tarnow. Third, he wanted to inflict heavy casualties on the British Army defending Ypres. Falkenhayn, like many in the German elite, saw Britain as Germany's most implacable foe in the arenas of imperialism and international trade. He blamed Britain for, in the words of Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, denying Germany her place in the sun.

Like Haig's plan for Neuve Chapelle, Falkenhayn's preparations for what became known as the Second Battle of Ypres showed some dexterity, but had some flaws as well. Falkenhayn decided to attain the critical element of surprise by not amassing large reserves in the Ypres sector. As a result, British and French reconnaissance aircraft flying over enemy lines did not notice any unusual activity. He hoped to use gas in coordination with an intense artillery bombardment to open gaps in the enemy line. The greater the shock and panic caused by the novelty of gas warfare, the greater the chance to expose and exploit the enemy's position.

The attack began with a conventional artillery barrage on April 22, 1915. Later that day, when the winds began to blow east to west, German soldiers opened 5,000 canisters filled with chlorine gas. The green cloud caused a unit of French African Territorials to panic, opening a four-mile gap in the Allied line to the north of Ypres. The Germans moved forward cautiously, not wanting to move into the gas cloud themselves and fearful of a change of wind that might blow the gas back on them. Still, within twenty-four hours they had captured the northern one-third of the salient and sat just three miles from Ypres itself.

Falkenhayn's plan, like Haig's, carried the seeds of its own failure. The German decision not to mass reserves in the Ypres sector had produced the surprise he sought. The lack of reserves, however, limited Falkenhayn's power to exploit the gap caused by the gas. British soldiers soon learned to improvise temporary gas masks by soaking pieces of cloth in any liquid available. The First Canadian Division, with failed real estate salesman Arthur Currie

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Gas attacks, like this one observed from the air, depended upon favorable weather conditions. Unpredictable winds limited the utility and lethality of gas, although it still caused tremendous suffering. (National Archives)

as one of its brigade commanders, deployed to the north of Ypres and slowed the German advance. In June 1917 Currie became commander of the Canadian Corps and went on to lead it to spectacular victories. Under his leadership the Canadian Corps became, in Dennis Showalter's estimation, "the finest large fighting unit relative to its circumstances in modern history."[12]

Foch and Sir John ordered counterattacks that led to high casualties, but that managed to slow the momentum of German attacks. Renewed attacks in May led to the German seizure of the eastern third of the salient, but the town remained in Allied hands. The Second Battle of Ypres had been a victory for the

Allies only in the sense that they had held on. But it had been bloody (approximately 15,000 casualties for each side), and the embarrassing failure of the Allies to prepare for the gas cloud called for a scapegoat. Not surprisingly, Sir John offered up Smith-Dorrien, who was informed of his dismissal by telegram.

In his place, Sir John, whose own days were numbered, promoted Herbert Plumer. Portly and distinctly unmilitary in appearance, Plumer had a sharp mind and a knack for planning. Almost all observers of the British Army then and since have singled out him and Tim Harrington, his talented chief of staff, for special praise. Even Philip Gibbs, who spent much of the war as a journalist observing and criticizing the inner workings of the British generals, thought them a fine team. The promotion of Plumer partly counterbalanced the injustice done to Smith-Dorrien.

Neither Plumer nor most other British officers saw the tragic irony contained in the near-success at Neuve Chapelle: that it had been successful enough to lead to more frontal assaults on prepared enemy positions. This lesson posed the least challenge to traditional military thinking and therefore became the standard interpretation of the senior Allied generals. The most aggressive among them wanted to repeat the Neuve Chapelle operational plan, with some adjustments in the size of the artillery preparation, at another point in the line. With the Second Battle of Ypres over, Foch set his sights once again on Vimy Ridge.

As at Neuve Chapelle, the Allied staffs planned to interdict the German lateral lines of supply that ran parallel to the western front. Without these lines of supply, the Allies hoped, the Germans might be forced to retreat into open country where cavalry could pursue them. This time, the British and French planned to coordinate two offensives at the same general time in the same general area, thereby impeding the German ability to concentrate reinforcements. While Foch and the French attacked Vimy Ridge, the British would attack near Neuve Chapelle again, this time opposite the town of Festubert.

The British made one other adjustment to their thinking. Having seen the difficulty of attacking, the British developed the idea of "bite and hold" attacks. The notion involved seizing a piece of easily defensible territory, then enticing the enemy to counterattack it. This ingenious tactic placed the burden of attack on the enemy if he fell for the bait. Although many officers worked on the idea, General Henry Rawlinson deserves the most credit for it. Another general whom Sir John despised, Rawlinson had commanded one of the corps involved at Neuve Chapelle. Festubert thus represented a chance to begin a shift in British doctrinal thinking.

At Festubert Rawlinson commanded a corps under the overall direction of Haig. Although the two men had disagreements, they shared a disdain for Sir John's leadership thus far and therefore had grown closer professionally. Having concluded that the setback at Neuve Chapelle had resulted from inadequate artillery, Haig and Rawlinson did not want to make the same mistake twice. They still, however, faced the problem of low shell stocks, especially of the high-explosive shells needed to damage German trenches and wire. Instead, the British had a disproportionate amount of shrapnel, effective for killing men in the open, but virtually useless for killing them in trenches and dugouts. For Festubert, the British had just 71 guns larger than five inches in caliber; 92 percent of the shells they fired were shrapnel.[13] Shortages of ammunition limited their pre-attack shelling to just forty minutes, scarcely better than what they had used at Neuve Chapelle.

May 9, 1915, saw the French and British armies each advance on their respective targets. (Coincidentally, it was also the day when the first men of the New Armies embarked for France.) Neither attack proceeded well. The British soon found that their low shell stocks were only part of the problem. Many artillery pieces had fired more shells in the first months of the war then they had been designed to fire in a lifetime; as a result, many of their tubes were

warped and fired shells inaccurately. Many of the shells, moreover, turned out to be duds. One report claimed that soldiers saw shells filled with sawdust rather than explosives, although this story was likely just battlefield rumor that shifted the blame for the defeats of 1915 to saboteurs or war profiteers.

As a result of the poor quality of the artillery support, the infantry advance was unable to repeat the initial success of Neuve Chapelle. The Germans had learned from their experience as well and had dug in more deeply to protect themselves from enemy artillery. British and Indian soldiers advanced in such dense formations that German commanders gave the order "Fire until the [machine gun] barrels burst." During the battle, Rawlinson demanded of a brigade commander why his men were not advancing. The general replied, "They are lying out in No-Man's Land, sir, and most of them will never stand again." Aerial reconnaissance reports indicating that the Germans were reinforcing the sector led Haig to call the battle off. The British Army suffered almost 12,000 casualties in one day. They had gained nothing to make good the sacrifice.[14]

Farther to the south, near Arras, the French had fared even worse despite much more plentiful artillery stocks. Forgoing the element of surprise, Foch ordered a six-day artillery bombardment. French artillerists fired more than 300,000 shells at German positions. Foch confidently predicted that the artillery would cut the German wire, allowing French infantry to break the German lines. He told Joffre that the success of his Vimy Ridge operation would end the war on the western front in three months.

The French made some advances, temporarily capturing one of the three principal hills of Vimy Ridge and advancing up the near slope of another. By May 15, Foch's forces had moved the line three miles, but at tremendous human cost. The British failure at Festubert allowed the Germans to move reinforcements to Vimy Ridge, greatly strengthening the line. Still, Foch believed that the German line was ready to break and ordered another attack. He

Unlike their brightly clad mainland counterparts, African soldiers in the French Army went to war in khaki uniforms. Designed for war in Africa, they proved to be well suited to the war on the western front. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

continued the offensive into June with diminishing gains. In all, France suffered an astonishing 102,000 casualties while inflicting less than half of that number on their German foes.

With all sides low on ammunition and human reserves, the summer passed relatively quietly. Both sides needed to restock their ammunition and train replacements. They also had to take serious stock of their own ideas. Although the plans for 1915 represented significant advances from the rather crude approaches of 1914, they had failed to achieve the promised results. Allied generals, who had theretofore largely managed to avoid serious questioning of their handling of the war, came under increased scrutiny. Sir John, Joffre, and Foch all lost the air of competence that had seen them through earlier disasters. For their part, the generals blamed inadequate artillery. In the fall of 1915, British daily

shell production equaled just 22,000 shells. The Germans were producing more than ten times that number.[15] The "shell crisis" soon became the most important subject of conversation in Allied headquarters staffs and in its capitals.

Shell and artillery problems affected France as well. The mainstay of the French army had been its 75mm field artillery piece. Agile, accurate, and capable of rapid fire, it fit perfectly into prewar French offensive doctrine. Its 75mm flat trajectory shell, however, could not damage the deep defenses of the German lines. In January 1915 France had just seventeen guns that fired shells larger than 155mm. Joffre and his generals blamed the lack of large guns for their early failures in 1915, although politicians rightly pointed out that Joffre himself had supported France's reliance on the 75mm gun in the years leading up to the war. Joffre's repeated arguments that lack of munitions prevented him from winning the war quickly grew thin. French Prime Minister René Viviani told President Raymond Poincaré that Joffre "wants to make us believe that it is our fault his offensive failed. When he began the [Champagne] offensive he knew full well what we had for munitions. He wants to throw back on the government the errors he himself has committed."[16]

The fever pitch that grew in the face of the shell crises contributed to shake-ups in both the British and French governments. The British formed a coalition government on May 9 and a Ministry of Munitions one month later. At its head sat the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, a former opponent of the Boer War. As a stopgap measure, the energetic Lloyd George dramatically increased shell orders from factories in the United States, and he began to reorganize industry at home, relying on female labor to replace the men who had left for the front.

At the beginning of the war, virtually all elected legislatures made public shows of solidarity to help their governments operate more smoothly. The truces eliminated partisan debate but effectively removed the legislatures from the decision-making process

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The departure of male factory workers to the front, combined with the expanded need for munitions, led to changes in the wartime workforce. All sides relied on female munitions workers, like these women in a British factory. (National Archives)

in the early years of the war. Executive authority also began to diminish, in large measure because few senior politicians understood the intricate workings of the military. Neither British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (prime minister from 1908 to 1916) nor French President Raymond Poincaré held a firm grasp of the economic, social, and political changes taking place around him. Prime Minister René Viviani played almost no role in high-level decision-making, resigning in favor of Foreign Minister Aristide Briand in October 1915.

The monarchical states suffered even more deeply from the developing vacuum of authority. Kaiser Wilhelm II believed that he knew much more about the military than he actually did. The prewar custom of the general staff of rigging war games so that the kaiser's side always won did not help the monarch to understand

the army as it was, not as he wished it to be. Beginning with the mobilization process, the kaiser's limited knowledge led to his increasing marginalization. With the German Reichstag having effectively rendered itself irrelevant, the military stepped in. Consequently, as the war dragged on the German Army came perforce to assume more and more responsibility for the political and economic direction of the war.

THE BATTLES OF ARTOIS AND LOOS

By early autumn, the Allies believed that they were ready to attack again. Their plan called for the largest operation yet. The main attack would come against the Noyon salient in Champagne, with thirty-five French infantry divisions totaling more than 500,000 men. As diversions, Foch would resume his attacks near Vimy Ridge and the British would attack just to the north near the vital mining town of Lens. The Allies hoped that their attacks in this sector would lead the Germans to believe that the Vimy Ridge–Lens area was again the main target and thus might leave the Champagne region less strongly defended.

Haig and several other BEF generals argued against the plan. They contended that if attacks of this nature had failed in this same region in the spring, they could only fail again given stronger German positions and lower Allied shell stocks. Many Allied artillery batteries had just half of their authorized allotment of shells, and the British still depended too much on shrapnel. Nevertheless, Joffre insisted that the British launch their offensive in order to support his own in Champagne and to bring some relief to the Russians, who were then in a desperate condition. Not for the last time in the war, an army launched an offensive not of its choosing in the interests of helping a struggling ally.

Their reservations notwithstanding, Sir John and his generals concluded that they had little choice but to attack. To launch the offensive with the artillery they had, however, would be to leave

the infantry without adequate fire support, thus condemning their army to certain slaughter. The offensive would also see the first large-scale appearance in battle of the New Armies. The British did not expect much tactical sophistication from these men, so adequate support became all the more critical. To square this circle and to avenge the Second Battle of Ypres, the British turned to asphyxiating gas. The surprise of gas, they hoped, would provide the cover for the infantry that the unsatisfactory artillery could not.

The coordinated Allied offensives began on September 25. At the Battle of Loos, the British used poison gas for the first time. As the Germans had done at Ypres, the British launched most of their gas from cylinders. Where conditions were favorable, gas forced many Germans out of their positions. Fickle winds and technical difficulties, however, led to a high number of friendly casualties. Because the British had used gas in place of large-scale artillery attacks, the German wire and trench systems remained only lightly damaged. The British suffered more than 60,000 casualties at Loos, more than twice what they inflicted.

The British never again used gas released from cylinders. Both sides appreciated the devastating effect that poison gas had on those exposed to it. Men not killed by the gas often panicked and ran away. Both sides quickly began to invest in chemical warfare. They developed projectors capable of launching gas over long distances, thus reducing the risk of exposing one's own troops to gas. They also began a deadly cat-and-mouse game, producing gases capable of passing through existing respirators. When one side upgraded its respirators to meet the challenge, the game began again.

Joffre's Champagne offensive did not depend heavily on cylinder gas as Loos had, but it failed as well. The French Army had prepared the ground with what was then the heaviest concentration of artillery fire in history. By releasing industrial workers from military service, French industry had augmented its number of heavy guns and increased shell production from 3,000 rounds of

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

This soldier is wearing a gas mask while peeling potatoes in an obviously posed photograph. Armies fought a cat-and-mouse war to develop better gas masks while simultaneously introducing new gases capable of passing through the enemy's masks. (National Archives)

heavy ammunition per day in December 1914 to 52,000 rounds per day one year later. As a result, Joffre had ample stocks for the more than 900 heavy artillery pieces and 1,600 field guns that pounded the German front lines. Joffre confidently assembled his cavalry divisions to exploit the gaps he expected the artillery to create. The Germans responded by moving back to their second and third trench lines, as far as three miles to the rear. They effectively surrendered their first line, but in pulling back they rendered much of the French bombardment useless. As French troops advanced they saw a sign in the abandoned first line of German trenches that read (in French) "Land for sale, but at high price."[17]

In places, the French did open gaps in the German lines, but heavy rains complicated the rapid movement of both infantry and artillery. French forces thus had to advance over ground that was both muddy and broken by their own shelling. In all, the September offensives, including Foch's failed second attempt at the Vimy Ridge, had been disastrous. Total casualties reached 100,000 French, 60,000 British, and 65,000 German.

The ramifications of these losses reached deep. The most senior casualty was Sir John French. Haig, one of his subordinates and a former friend, had long been intriguing to have him removed. Lady Haig had close connections to the royal family; and Haig himself had maintained, by royal invitation, a personal correspondence with King George V. In letters to the king, Prime Minister Asquith, and Kitchener, Haig had complained about French's conduct of the war. Sir John's public rantings about government failures to provide him with shells adequate in quality and quantity did not help his position. Nor did Joffre and the French government believe in him any longer. As a result, the government removed Sir John from the command of the BEF on December 17, naming him commander of forces in the United Kingdom. In May 1918 he received the unenviable assignment of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the wake of the civil war then raging there.

In his place, the government named Haig, the very person whose intrigue had partly prompted Sir John's dismissal. A former top graduate of Sandhurst and son of a wealthy Scottish distiller, Haig was a soldier in every sense of the word. He was then, and remains today, controversial. Few generals ever inspired such loyalty from those around them and such condemnation from journalists, politicians, and many historians. Haig was so tongue-tied around British politicians that Lloyd George thought him a dunce. Thoughtful and creative at times, Haig could also be cold, aloof, and arrogant. His most important attributes in December 1915 were his superior ability (compared with Sir John) to work with Joffre and his absolute faith in the eventuality of a British victory.

Joffre survived 1915, but not without some difficulty. The heavy losses and minimal gains of the year notwithstanding, Joffre remained popular with the men of the French Army. As was the case in all armies, of course, few soldiers ever saw their commander. Joffre spent most of his time in the sumptuous Château de Chantilly, enjoying the finest foods and entertainers from nearby Paris. Still, his men continued to refer to him as "Papa" and, insofar as they thought about him at all, generally believed that he was as good a commander as they could expect.

Joffre's biggest problem had to do with his poor relations with French politicians. Joffre believed that war was the exclusive province of soldiers, and he reacted angrily at the mere suggestion that the minister of war, the prime minister, the legislature, or even the president had the authority to question his judgment. During the French government's four-month exile from Paris to Bordeaux, Joffre had created a "Zone of the Armies" in northeastern France, which he ran like a dictator. He banned many powerful politicians from entering the zone and once threatened President Poincaré with imprisonment if he strayed from the agenda set for him by Joffre and his staff. He also attempted to remove General Maurice Sarrail, a favorite with most left-leaning French politicians. In revenge, in October 1915 Parliament forced the resigna-

tion of Alexandre Millerand, a firm Joffre supporter, as war minister, replacing him with Joffre's long-time rival Joseph Gallieni, the hero of the Marne. Joffre's battlefield defeats and his attempts to sit above the French government weakened his position, but his popularity with the soldiers and on the home front spared him from Sir John's fate for another year.

Nevertheless, Joffre's days, too, were numbered. During the winter of 1915–1916 evidence mounted of a major German concentration of forces near Verdun. Joffre dismissed the possibility of a German attack there and reacted angrily to accusations that he needed to pay more attention to Verdun. He was particularly sensitive to these charges because he had denuded Verdun's ring of powerful fortresses of their heavy guns in order to provide extra firepower for his failed Champagne offensive. Joffre's critics, however, were right: the Germans were planning an offensive at Verdun for 1916. It became the longest, bloodiest, and most important of the war.