

## A WAR AGAINST CIVILIZATION

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### *The Chantilly Offensives and the Somme*

They were singing some music-hall tune, with a lilt in it, as they marched towards the lights of all the shells up there in the places of death. I watched them pass—all these tall boys of a North Country regiment, and something of their spirit seemed to come out of the dark mass of their moving bodies and thrill the air. They were going up to those places without faltering, without a backward look and singing—dear, splendid men.

—Philip Gibbs, “The Historic First of July”

LIKE Falkenhayn, Joffre and the other Allied generals reflected on the meaning of the events of 1915. Joffre concluded that Germany’s success had been due in large part to two factors. First, Germany had taken advantage of interior lines, which meant that the Germans could move forces between fronts across the excellent German rail network in a way that the Allies obviously could not. In this manner, the Germans had been able to concentrate forces for offensives such as Gorlice-Tarnów. Second, the Central Powers had never faced a concerted effort by all of the Allied armies at the same time; they had had the luxury of dealing with just one enemy at a time.

#### THE MEETING AT CHANTILLY

Joffre could do little about the geography of Europe, but he could attempt to coordinate Allied offensives. Accordingly, he hosted a high-level meeting at his Chantilly headquarters in December 1915 attended by senior members of the British, Russian, Italian, and

Serbian armies and governments. Joffre argued that by midsummer 1916 the Allies would be ready to conduct simultaneous offensives on multiple fronts, thereby impeding Germany's ability to transfer forces and placing pressure on the Central Powers from all sides. By the summer, he predicted, three conditions not only would make such a strategy possible, but also would guarantee its success. First, the British New Armies would at last be ready for large-scale combat. Second, French industry should have delivered sufficient quantities of the heavy artillery pieces that Joffre thought were vital to success. Third, Russia should have recovered from the disasters of 1915 sufficiently to resume the offensive. Secondly, the abandonment of sideshows such as Gallipoli and Salonika could provide more men for the offensives Joffre envisioned.

Chantilly in theory represented a major step toward the Allies fighting the war as a single entity. It fell far short, however, of creating a unified command structure, or even a permanent mechanism for discussing strategy. Like all alliance efforts, the Chantilly agreement amounted to a series of compromises. Russia agreed to undertake an offensive in 1916 in tandem with its allies only if Joffre agreed to keep the Salonika front open. Joffre reluctantly conceded, meaning that the forces in Greece would stay there instead of moving to theaters he envisioned as primary combat areas for 1916. The British, too, forced Joffre to agree that some of the troops evacuated from Gallipoli would be sent to Egypt instead of France.

Joffre and the generals at Chantilly hoped to wait until midsummer to launch their grand offensives, meaning that the Germans would have to oblige them by remaining on the defensive themselves. As we have already seen, they did not. Verdun threw into question all of the conclusions reached at Chantilly. The French army, rather than leading the summer offensives, was now in a desperate position. The Chantilly offensives thereafter needed

to draw German resources away from Verdun, thereby giving the French a chance to survive.

Falkenhayn had counted on the British launching an offensive to assist the French at Verdun. He hoped that by striking at Verdun early in 1916, he could compel the British into attacking prematurely, before their New Armies and artillery support were in place. His forces could then destroy the inexperienced British as they advanced. The Germans would have the advantage of high ground and well-prepared defensive positions wherever the British attacked. Haig did not fall for the bait, insisting to an increasingly ardent Joffre that he had to wait until midsummer to launch his offensive. When he finally did, on July 1, the first days generally matched Falkenhayn's prediction.

The first Chantilly offensive came in March 1916 from Luigi Cadorna and the Italians. In order to help his French ally, Cadorna launched the Fifth Battle of the Isonzo weeks ahead of schedule, before the spring thaw had melted the Alpine snows. Cadorna was far less concerned about the fate of the French than the fate of the Italians if the Germans attained victory on the western front and could thereafter focus additional strength against Italy. Despite the terrible weather conditions and the decreasing morale of his army, Cadorna was unusually confident. He held a 350 to 100 advantage in infantry battalions and a 1,400 to 467 advantage in artillery pieces.<sup>1</sup> He therefore did not worry about the deep snow or the complications involved in speeding up an offensive by a matter of weeks.

Cadorna also remained blithely unconcerned about the strength of Austro-Hungarian positions all along the high ground. From these positions, Boroević and his staff had been able to monitor the Italian massing of men and materiel for the offensive. They therefore moved their men away from their front-line positions at the start of the Italian preparatory bombardment. For forty-eight hours Italian shells struck the Austro-Hungarian first line, damag-

ing trenches and positions; most soldiers, however, had moved back, away from the front line. Enveloped by fog and snow, and lacking any real objectives beyond moving toward the town of Gorizia, the Italian army moved slowly and uncertainly. After five days, Cadorna decided that he had done enough to comply with the spirit of the Chantilly agreement and called the battle off. The battle cost each side thousands of pointless casualties and had no impact on the fighting at Verdun.

On March 19, Borojević counterattacked, taking back some of the high ground the Italians had won. The Austro-Hungarians were careful to limit their goals and the resources they committed, and the operation was a complete success. Suffering just 259 casualties, the Austro-Hungarians took 600 Italian prisoners and inflicted an equal number of killed and wounded. The latest Isonzo failures lowered Cadorna's stock in the eyes of the Italian politicians, but the general continued to insist that he answered only to the nominal Italian commander-in-chief, King Victor Emmanuel III. The king was a shy, but personally brave, man who often visited the front and occasionally came under fire. He saw the problems at Cadorna's headquarters, but retained an unwarranted faith that the general would learn from his mistakes and set the problems right.

Contrary to what one might expect, Conrad and the Austrian general staff had grown as frustrated with the Isonzo stalemate as Cadorna had. Conrad, under pressure to prove his worth as an ally to the Germans, had long planned an offensive of his own. He hoped to take advantage of Italian concentration in the Isonzo valley to attack out of the South Tyrol region onto the Asiago plain. If successful, the Austro-Hungarian army might threaten Verona, Padua, and Vicenza, and maybe even cut northern Italy into two indefensible zones. Conrad argued that by creating a second front for the Italians, he could at the very least relieve the pressure from the Isonzo and stretch Italy so thin that a decisive breakthrough on one of the fronts would become possible. Falkenhayn dis-

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

*Wounded soldiers await transportation to a field hospital on the Isonzo front. Untold thousands of soldiers in all the armies died needlessly of minor wounds because of a lack of proper sanitation and medical care.  
(United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)*

agreed, but allowed Conrad to go ahead as long as he used only Austro-Hungarian soldiers. Germany, occupied at Verdun, would not contribute.

The massive Austrian offensive on the Asiago plain began on May 15, 1916, and caught Cadorna completely unprepared. Two Austro-Hungarian armies overran the Italian First Army, capturing thousands of prisoners and seizing important high ground. Cadorna at first saw the offensive as a feint. A spring snowstorm at the end of the month stalled the offensive and provided the Italian general staff a respite, giving Cadorna time to see the severity of the situation and reinforce the sector with eight divisions, constituted as a new Fifth Army. The Italians had taken 148,000 casualties and lost several key strategic positions, but they had held their

secondary positions and had inflicted 100,000 casualties on the Austrians, who were close to the end of their manpower reserves. Fortunately for Italy, in early June the strategic situation changed again when the Russians launched their Chantilly offensive under the command of their most impressive general, Alexei Brusilov.

#### THE BRUSILOV OFFENSIVES

The Austro-Hungarians' focus on the Asiago offensive led them to misread several important indications of an impending attack from the Russian southwest front, commanded since March 1916 by Alexei Brusilov. An aristocrat and cavalryman from a military family, Brusilov had the rare gift of being able to understand that the tactics of the nineteenth century were ill suited to the twentieth. Like Ferdinand Foch, Brusilov soon set out to unlearn everything he had once believed. Before most Russians made the transition, Brusilov had determined that machine guns, artillery, and careful staff work had replaced individual heroism, the horse, and the bayonet. As commander of the Eighth Army he had experienced moderate success and enjoyed a reputation as the finest commander in the Russian army.

From intelligence reports that included aerial reconnaissance, Brusilov developed a reasonably accurate picture of the Austrians' intentions. He correctly divined that Italy had become an obsession to Conrad and his staff, a notion that the Asiago offensive served to underscore. Six Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions had been transferred to the Asiago front, leaving the Galician front undermanned. Brusilov also knew that the Austrian lines opposite his southwest front amounted to a strong forward crust with little in the way of elastic defenses behind it. If he could crack the line, he might be able to impose a defeat on the Austrians similar to the one Germany had imposed on Russia at Gorlice-Tarnów.

Brusilov also had the rare Russian military gift of subtlety. He did not intend to fight the ensuing battle by pushing forward with

massive weights of shells and men. Russian munitions shortages forbade such an approach in any case. Instead, Brusilov carefully trained his men to infiltrate enemy lines and encircle the Austrian defenders, capturing them alive and hopefully reducing his own casualties. He built carefully designed training centers behind the lines and, most importantly, concealed key elements of his plan from the hangers-on at the tsar's court, among whom he suspected were many pro-German sympathizers.

Alekseev and the tsar originally opposed Brusilov's plan. They argued that Russia lacked the strength for a major offensive plus the several large-scale feints that Brusilov had planned. They preferred a maximum concentration of Russian effort in one small area. Brusilov insisted, even threatening to resign if Alekseev made major modifications to his plan. The Asiago offensive's threat to Italy and the German threat to France at Verdun forced a decision. The tsar approved Brusilov's offensive. The Russians believed that they did not have much time to waste. As a result, the offensive was scheduled for June 4.

Brusilov planned the main attack to occur near the towns of Lutsk and Kowel. Control of the latter would cut the north-south railroad that supplied Lemberg. If successful, the offensive might even permit a renewed drive on Cracow and Warsaw. His former unit, the Eighth Army, would lead the assault under the command of a Brusilov protégé, Alexei Kaledin. Opposite Kaledin sat the Austro-Hungarian Fourth Army, led by the Archduke Josef Ferdinand, godson to Kaiser Wilhelm. Like many aristocrats, he owed his position exclusively to his noble birth. Unlike most aristocrats, he refused to compensate for his ignorance by listening to the advice of the professionals around him. He preferred hunting and the company of the women at his headquarters to the daily operations of his army, leaving his men without even nominal leadership. The archduke held the Russians in utter contempt and judged them incapable of breaking his defenses.

The archduke received a rude present on June 4, his forty-

fourth birthday. Russian gunners made a virtue out of their ammunition shortages by firing intense, accurate, and brief “hurricane” bombardments. The heavy pieces targeted the Austro-Hungarian artillery batteries, which Russian aircraft had spotted and marked. Lighter guns struck the enemy wire. As Brusilov had predicted, the Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the front line sought shelter from the guns in their deep dugouts, leaving them unable to fire on the advancing Russians. Thousands became prisoners when the Russians overtook their positions and surrounded them. Ethnic Czechs, Ruthenes, and Serbs, unhappy with the war and fed up with Austro-Hungarian leadership, surrendered the fastest, although all groups felt the weight of the Russian steamroller.

By the end of day one, Brusilov had achieved a breakthrough that most World War I commanders had only dreamed about. The gap in the Austrian lines was twenty miles wide and five miles deep. Conrad refused to believe the reports coming into his headquarters because he did not believe the Russians were capable of such a success. Even if there had been losses, he proclaimed, counterattacks would soon recover them. “At most,” he told a staff officer, “we will lose a few hundred yards [of] land.” Neither he nor Josef Ferdinand thought the crisis serious enough to warrant leaving the birthday dinner being held in the archduke’s honor.<sup>2</sup>

Within a few days, however, Conrad realized his error. With no substantial defenses behind the first line of trenches, Brusilov’s men moved quickly, capturing more than 200,000 demoralized Austrian troops in just three days. The Austrian Fourth Army had virtually ceased to exist, with its 110,000 men having been reduced to just 18,000 effectives. On June 8, Conrad went to Berlin to ask for help. Rather ungracefully, he demanded that Falkenhayn move German forces to Asiago under Austrian command because, he told Falkenhayn, the Asiago offensive was succeeding whereas Verdun was not. Falkenhayn lectured Conrad on his failure to prepare for the Russian attack so intently that Conrad later told



his staff that he would rather have “ten slaps in the face” than turn to the Germans again.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his annoyance with Conrad, Falkenhayn could see the realities of the situation in the Carpathians. Accordingly, he transferred four German infantry divisions from France and five more from the general reserve. He also told Conrad to abandon his Asiago offensive and move four divisions from that sector to the Carpathians. The new German and Austrian forces came under the command of German General Hans von Seeckt, sent by Falkenhayn to assume control of all Central Powers forces in the east. Conrad was deeply humiliated by Falkenhayn’s rebukes, but the German reinforcements prevented Brusilov from crossing the Carpathians and likely saved the Austro-Hungarian Empire from a complete collapse.

The first phase of Brusilov’s offensive had yielded spectacular results, even if they came against the demoralized and wholly unprepared Austrians. The second phase depended on the actions of Russian western army front commander Alexei Evert. Brusilov’s advance had been so dramatic that his forces had outrun their supply lines and created an exposed salient. Although they had inflicted heavy casualties, the Russians had taken casualties as well and were worn out. Brusilov ordered his army to halt and rest on June 9. Evert was to occupy Austrian forces and cover Brusilov’s northern flank by advancing with fresh troops and supplies. He was well supplied for the attack, possessing two-thirds of the Russian army’s artillery pieces and more than a million men.

Evert was to have begun his attack on the same day that Brusilov halted. In some variants of the Brusilov plan, the Russian general staff had envisioned Evert’s attack as the main one and Brusilov as an early diversion. Evert had to attack if the offensive were to retain its momentum. But he claimed that his forces were not ready and spuriously complained that his army was insufficiently supplied with shells. Evert’s natural caution had grown after the beat-

ing his soldiers took during Gorlice-Tarnów when, separated from all the other Russian armies, they had fought a retreating action for 300 miles. Evert wanted no part of another offensive in 1916 and continued to invent excuses for his inaction.

Brusilov railed at Evert, telling Alekseev that Evert's failure to follow the plan would "turn a won battle into a lost one." Brusilov's men began referring to Evert as a traitor and disparaged his German-sounding last name.<sup>4</sup> Without a supporting attack to the north and short on supplies and reinforcements, Brusilov could not go forward. His northernmost army, the Eighth, could not resume the offensive because of the risk of exposing a flank. Kaledin therefore ordered it to halt and prepare for an enemy counterattack. Brusilov was furious, but had to acquiesce.<sup>5</sup>

By June 20, the Germans had completed an impressive feat of logistics. They had added ten infantry divisions to the front opposite Brusilov. Under German supervision, the Austrians had built solid lines of defense, reestablished discipline, and prepared for the next Russian move. Alekseev unwisely ordered Brusilov to resume the offensive against these new forces on July 28. The new Central Powers divisions, with Germans often in charge down to company level, repulsed the attack, with considerable Russian losses. Brusilov tried once again in a bloody offensive from August 7 to September 20. Russian forces approached the Carpathian foothills, but wore themselves out. The offensive petered out in October as Brusilov's army group ran out of supplies and reinforcements. Evert's western army group never attacked in force sufficient to draw German and Austrian forces away.

Brusilov's offensive struck a tremendous blow against an incompetent Austro-Hungarian general staff that led a demoralized army. It had, however, failed to achieve its principal objective, the elimination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the war. The German transfers meant that Russia could not hope to have a numerical superiority on the eastern front sufficient to resume the offensive in the near future. Even Brusilov understood that "to ad-

vance a few miles more or less was of no particular importance to the common cause.”<sup>6</sup> Alekseev and the tsar looked upon Brusilov’s offensive as a failure, although they might have more accurately turned their blame on Evert.

Austria-Hungary remained in the war, but the Brusilov offensives had destroyed it as an instrument capable of attacking. Estimates vary, but as many as 1.5 million men of Austria-Hungary’s 2.2-million-man army may have been killed, wounded, or captured in the course of the campaign. Russia, too, suffered badly, losing nearly a million men. The painful losses caused a major spike in the desertion and indiscipline levels on both sides. Brusilov, like many others, blamed the hopelessly antiquated tsarist system for the failure to exploit the early gains of the campaign. He began to believe that only a revolution could remove the tsar and give Russia a chance to modernize its war effort before it was too late.

The disaster of 1916 also spelled the end for Conrad’s command. Emperor Franz Joseph continued to hold him in high esteem, but Franz Joseph died in December 1916, at age eighty-six. When his successor, Emperor Karl, assumed the throne, one of his first military acts was to demote Conrad, sending him to command the weakened Austrian armies in the south Tyrol, where he played only a minor role in the war’s final years. For the Germans, Brusilov’s offensive had pushed them into assuming even more responsibility for the eastern front, although it did not seriously affect their effort at Verdun.

Germany was becoming stretched further and further. The British blockade continued to cut into both the economic health of the German state and, more importantly, the food supply of the German people. A study completed in 1928 calculated that from spring 1915 to February 1917 the caloric value of German daily rations fell from 3,000 to just 800. Hunger and privation “became the overwhelming fact of life on the home front” in both Germany and in Austria-Hungary.<sup>7</sup> The miserably cold winter of

1916–1917 became so difficult that it was dubbed the “turnip winter” because turnips were the only food source in ready supply.

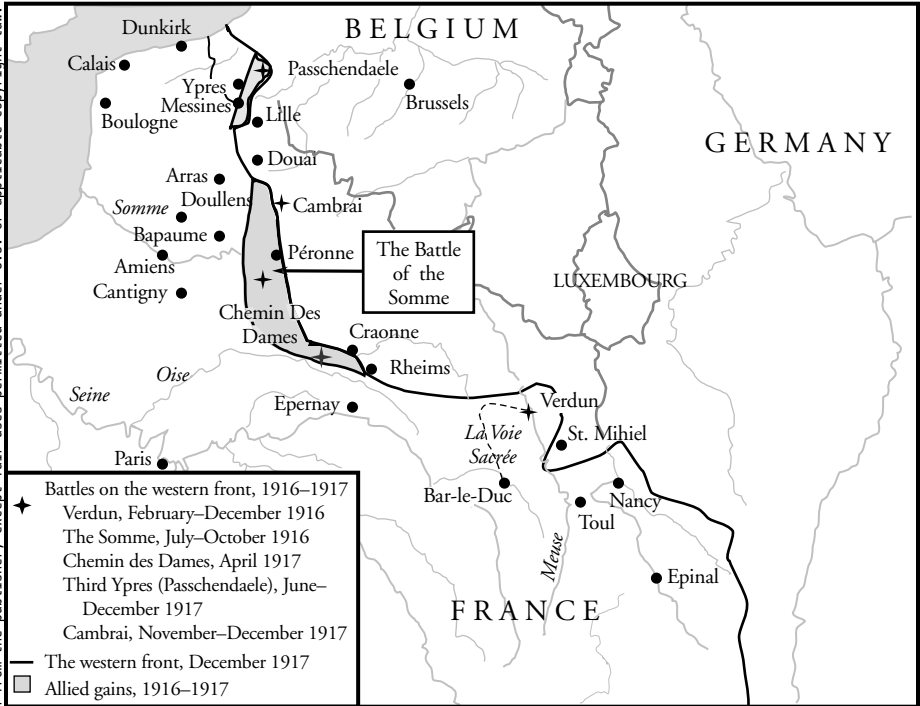
The kaiser and his family grew increasingly out of touch, symbolized by the crown prince’s playboy activities at Verdun. The kaiser himself barely understood the new way of war, spending part of a visit to the eastern front in 1916 ranting on about a pet project to supply arms to Japan if it would declare war on the United States.<sup>8</sup> His unrealistic pronouncements on the war increasingly embarrassed those around him who knew better. The German system was unraveling.

#### TWO YEARS IN THE MAKING, TEN MINUTES IN THE DESTROYING: THE NEW ARMIES ON THE SOMME

Even as they contained the Brusilov offensives, the Germans had to deal with yet another crisis. On July 1, Britain began its largest battlefield effort to date in concert with the French from both banks of the Somme River in the south to the Ancre River in the north. Joffre had originally conceived the attack on the Somme as the major western front attack resulting from the Chantilly conference. As the Somme River represented the rough meeting point of the British and French armies, both forces would take part. From its first conception Allied generals designed the Somme as the “coalition battle *par excellence*.”<sup>9</sup> Joffre initially envisioned using 40 veteran French divisions to assume the main weight of the attack, with the inexperienced New Armies advancing to their north.

The dire situation at Verdun changed the calculus for the Somme dramatically. Joffre met the challenge at Verdun by moving increasing numbers of French units into the sector. Although he was still willing for France to play a role at the Somme, Verdun forced the French portion of the offensive to decline from 40 divisions to 16. Accordingly, the amount of the front that sat in the French sector also fell, from twenty-five miles to just eight. The campaign

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*The western front, 1916–1917*

therefore became increasingly dominated by the eager, but untested, British New Armies. Sir Douglas Haig accepted the new role, understanding all too well that Britain had to relieve some of the pressure from Verdun if the French army were to remain a viable fighting force.

German Second Army commander Fritz von Below expected an attack to come in his sector. Like most German generals, he guessed that the British and French would try an operation somewhere on the western front to relieve Verdun. His instincts told him that the British had his sector in mind. Aerial reconnaissance soon confirmed his belief. Falkenhayn, however, thought an oper-

ation near Arras or in Alsace more likely. He therefore did not send the Second Army the reinforcements or supplies Below demanded. Falkenhayn complicated Below's position even further by telling him that the Second Army must hold all of its ground if attacked and that any territory lost had to be reconquered as rapidly as possible.

The terrain of the Somme did not invite an easy Allied attack. From the Ancre to the Somme, the Germans had held high ground since 1914. The Germans converted the villages and farmhouses of the region into strong redoubts and had placed numerous machine guns in the region's most thickly wooded areas. The region's chalky soil permitted the digging of deep dugouts and the subterranean emplacement of powerful machine gun positions. Some of these dugouts went as far as 30 feet underground, often reinforced by strong wooden timbers and concrete. A British journalist who witnessed the campaign saw German dugouts with paneled walls, electricity, wine cellars, furniture, and, in one case, a piano.<sup>10</sup> The Germans had held these positions for two years and felt possessive about them. They did not intend to surrender them without a fight.

Below strengthened his position by creating as many as seven layers of defensive lines. Individual dugouts and redoubts were connected by subterranean passageways, and some were linked to headquarters by buried telephone lines. New coils of barbed wire, several feet thick in places, guarded many strongpoints. German defenses stretched back as far as five miles from the front. Below placed six infantry divisions in the forward defenses to prevent an Allied breakthrough and held five more divisions in reserve. These forces could either plug holes in the line or, in the event the Allies did capture some positions, they could counterattack.

The British and French understood full well the strength of the German position. Winston Churchill later called the Somme region "undoubtedly the strongest and most perfectly defended position in the world."<sup>11</sup> Haig would have to attack these formidable

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

*The armies of the war used artillery shells at astonishing rates.  
This munitions factory is stockpiling shells to feed the insatiable  
appetite of British artillery pieces. (National Archives)*

positions with green troops untested in modern warfare and short on leaders. Just 150 officers remained from the old BEF, which by July 1916 was just “an heroic memory.”<sup>12</sup> The French, too, understood the challenge in front of them. Ferdinand Foch, overall commander of French forces in this battle, called his task “impossible”; but, seeing the crisis at Verdun, he believed that his men must try the impossible, at whatever cost. “We have done everything and completely succeeded in preventing disaster [at Verdun],” he said in May, “but we have done nothing to achieve victory.”<sup>13</sup>

The solution, Haig believed, lay in the massive artillery batteries that the British and French had been constructing and assem-

bling for more than a year. Seemingly limitless stocks of artillery ammunition were stacked everywhere. The shell crisis had apparently ended. Now artillery fire could properly prepare the ground for the infantry. The British planned to clear the way for their infantry by annihilating the German positions with seven days of artillery fire. The untrained men of the New Armies should then be able literally to walk across No Man's Land and occupy the German positions.

The troops would then hold surviving German positions or dig new ones and repulse the inevitable German counterattacks. In order to do so, they carried a heavy load of supplies with them, including ample ammunition, food, entrenching tools, barbed wire, and grenades. This heavy pack, weighing in excess of sixty pounds, would slow the British troops when they made their assault, but British generals believed that to send their untrained men into the front lines without adequate supplies would leave them too vulnerable to subsequent German attacks.

The artillery bombardment that began on June 24 impressed (or terrified) all who saw it. More than 1,500 heavy guns fired 1,627,824 rounds over a front barely ten miles long. On the morning of July 1, the barrage increased in intensity, leading one man who saw it to remark, "The enemy was being blasted by a hurricane of fire. I found it in my heart to pity the poor devils who were there, and yet was filled by a strange and awful exhilaration because this was the work of our guns and because it was England's day."<sup>14</sup> British forces also hit the Germans from below, detonating seven mines that they had tunneled through the Somme's chalky soil underneath enemy positions. The two largest mines contained 24 tons of explosives each, creating craters 100 yards wide.

After the detonation of the mines, the British guns changed targets to the German second line, and the infantry advanced. Many British soldiers quite logically concluded that nothing could have survived a week's artillery bombardment of that magnitude.



Seventy thousand soldiers climbed out of their trenches and began a slow advance on the presumably empty German lines. On one part of the front Captain Wilfred Nevill gave each of his four platoons a soccer ball with the words "The Great European Cup. The Final. East Surreys vs. Bavarians. Kick off at Zero." He offered a cash prize for the platoon that advanced its ball the furthest.<sup>15</sup>

Nevill and his men did not imagine the horror that awaited them. Unbeknownst to the infantry, one in four of the Allied shells were duds and two-thirds of them still contained shrapnel.<sup>16</sup> Had the Germans been in trenches, the shrapnel might have been more effective. Their deep dugouts and redoubts, however, could only be destroyed by a direct hit from high explosives, of which the British still had an inadequate supply. The Allied focus on heavy guns also led to insufficient production of gas shells, which, if available on the Somme, could have delivered poison down into the dugouts and caused tremendous casualties.<sup>17</sup> Haig compounded the problem by ordering that the shelling be spread to a depth of 2,500 yards, the extent of the German position that he hoped to capture on the first day. As a result, Gary Sheffield wrote, "artillery support was spread fatally thin."<sup>18</sup> The shrapnel shelling did prevent the Germans from moving food and water up to many of their men. Some went without both for a week. Many of these men, some of them dazed from the noise and driven half-mad by a week living underground, surrendered to the first British troops who found them.

Enough Germans, however, survived the bombardment to make the British advance anything but a walk. The surviving Germans quickly resighted their machine guns and began firing at the rows of slow-moving soldiers in front of them. In most places, the heavily laden British soldiers had to advance over a shell-marked No Man's Land that in most places stretched uphill for 200 to 400 yards. British casualties were horrendous. Philip Gibbs, who watched it happen, continually described the effect of the ma-

chine guns as being like a scythe. The heavy British shelling demolished many of the fortified villages and farmhouses, but had left piles of rubble, which the Germans used to conceal more machine guns. Some British units that managed to advance left their flanks open to enfilading fire from Germans to the right and left. Others were shot down from the rear after passing over redoubts from which hidden Germans emerged.

There were some successes on the first day, with an Ulster division capturing an important redoubt and other troops taking the appropriately named Crucifix Trench. British troops in that trench fired a red rocket to indicate that it was now in British hands and to signal that the British gunners should move their shells forward. Unfortunately, a German battery saw the signal as well, guessed its meaning, and fired mercilessly into the position. As in many places on July 1, British success proved to be short-lived.

In the first hour alone, the British had taken an astonishing 30,000 casualties—500 men killed, wounded, or captured per second. Fourth Army commander Sir Henry Rawlinson, who had been a corps commander at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, did not fully understand what was happening across the large front. He had initially disagreed with Haig's plan for the offensive, arguing for more limited objectives and believing that British forces could not hope for the breakthrough that Haig thought was possible. Now, in the first hours of the campaign, he continued to send men into the battle, and the scythe continued its deadly work. The British took portions of the German first line, but this accomplishment paled in light of the human cost.

July 1, 1916, remains the single bloodiest day in the history of the British army. Of the more than 100,000 men sent into combat that day, 57,470 became casualties; of these, 19,240, including Captain Nevill, were dead. Over the next few days combat continued as the British slowly pieced together the magnitude of the first

[To view this image, refer to  
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*Joseph Joffre (left), Douglas Haig (center), and Ferdinand Foch (right) meet during the Somme campaign. Haig and Foch were veterans of some of the western front's most important battles. Haig supported Foch's 1918 appointment as generalissimo of the Allied forces. The two men learned to work together, although their personal relationship was never warm. (Australian War Memorial, negative no. H08416)*

day's losses. On July 5, the Germans counterattacked, with heavy losses. A relative pause followed, allowing both sides to retrench and regroup.

To the south, French attacks proceeded with more success, leaving Joffre "beaming."<sup>19</sup> Foch's Northern Army Group, made up of western front veterans, fought with different tactics from those of their British counterparts. From Verdun the French had learned the value of advancing in small groups instead of in line, shoulder to shoulder. They also benefited from weaker German positions and stronger, heavier, and more accurate French artillery fire. On day one, the French seized all of their objectives, took

4,000 German prisoners, and did not even need to call in reserves.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the French attack was only a sideshow to the larger British offensive to the north.

Throughout July, both the British and the Germans reinforced the Somme sector. Facing limited infantry reserves and dwindling artillery stocks, Haig reduced the size of the offensive zone at the Somme front from 27 kilometers to the southernmost 10 kilometers. The northernmost 17 kilometers became part of the reserve, with a purely defensive mission. This pause in the British attack allowed the Germans time to reinforce and create new defensive lines. By July 9, new German artillery batteries were offering greater resistance to both French and British attacks. On July 10, the French concluded that the German line was stronger than it had been at the start of the campaign.

To break this deadlock, the British called on all stretches of the empire. Every nationality and region soon came to know places on the Somme battlefield where its men fought and died. Today many of these areas are held in perpetuity by these nationalities, where they have erected monuments and, in virtually every corner of this part of France, built cemeteries. Thus Delville Wood will forever be associated with South Africa, Thiépval with Ulster, Beaumont Hamel with Newfoundland and Scotland, and Pozières with Australia. Although Australian forces are often associated with Gallipoli, they lost more men in six weeks on the Somme than they did in eight months in the Dardanelles.<sup>21</sup>

On July 14, Bastille Day, the men of the British Empire attacked again. Rawlinson prepared and oversaw a daring and imaginative night attack. Instead of attacking along the entire front, the British concentrated on a 6,000-yard front. Each position on this part of the German second line received five times the number of shells that it had on July 1. The artillery support amounted to 660 pounds of shell per yard of German line. British forces succeeded in capturing large portions of the German second line at relatively light cost. A German prisoner of war told Gibbs that al-

though the Germans had prevented a breakthrough by British forces, the latter's "amateur army" had inflicted a terrible blow on the Germans. "The English," he told Gibbs, "are stronger than we believed."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the British had captured only a few hundred yards of the first two German lines. At least two more lines lay beyond, with German reinforcements strengthening their positions every day.

The summer heat slowed, but did not halt, operations, principally due to the difficulty of getting sufficient supplies of drinking water to men in forward positions. The relative calm gave Haig a chance to reassess the fighting. He resisted French requests to resume the battle as a coordinated Franco-British offensive, preferring to continue local attacks where British forces had temporary advantages. In mid-August he wrote to Joffre that "the forces at my disposition are not sufficient to allow me to launch an attack along a large front."<sup>23</sup> The French, accordingly, cancelled plans for a coordinated offensive and limited themselves to operations in support of the British.

By this point, Haig had invented a new rationale for his battle. If he could not achieve a spectacular rupture in German lines, he could at least wear the Germans down sufficiently to make a future breakthrough possible. The logistical problems in the battle thus far had proven the impossibility of sustaining a breakthrough in any case. His new strategy of attrition might take longer to show results, but Allied failures to create a breakthrough had left him with little choice. A British officer came to the same conclusion in a September comment to Gibbs: "It was the [German] shell fire which made our position untenable. But in any case we put a large number of Boches out of action, and that is always worth doing, and brings the end of the war a little closer."<sup>24</sup>

For attrition to work, however, enemy casualties either need to be significantly greater than one's own or the enemy must have a greatly reduced capability to replace losses. Otherwise, as Dennis Showalter memorably put it, attrition becomes little more than

the “mindless mutual commitment of forces until at some unspecified time the last three surviving French and British soldiers would totter on aged legs across No Man’s Land and bayonet the two remaining Germans, then toast their success in prune juice.”<sup>25</sup> By midsummer 1916 both Verdun and the Somme had surely become battles of attrition, yet it remained far from clear which side would break first. All of the armies engaged had suffered enormous casualties and had few reserves upon which to call. In Britain, the situation grew severe enough to prompt the unprecedented step of introducing conscription. In short, the war of attrition that Falkenhayn, Haig, and, to a lesser extent, Joffre were fighting showed few signs of benefiting one side exclusively.

The generals’ policies of regaining lost ground wore their own armies down as effectively as any enemy offensives. The 330 separate counterattacks launched by the Germans at the Somme accounted for most of their casualties after July 1. The French desire to regain every inch of their soil at Verdun similarly proved to be tremendously costly, but is more understandable than Falkenhayn’s obsession with holding every inch of “German” ground at the Somme. Falkenhayn warned Below that “the first tenet of trench warfare must be not to surrender a foot of territory, and, should that foot nevertheless be lost, to commit every last man to an immediate counterattack.”<sup>26</sup> The Germans, like the French and British, often vacillated between the importance of holding ground and the importance of killing the enemy.

In an effort to win this war to kill men, the British turned to a new machine. In September, as part of a third major effort on the Somme, the British used their first tanks. A year earlier, war correspondent Ernest Swinton had developed the idea of building an armored vehicle with caterpillar tracks capable of climbing five-foot ledges and spanning a trench. The army received the idea with caution, but Churchill saw great promise in the idea, secretly (and illegally) diverting £75,000 from Admiralty funds to sponsor initial work.<sup>27</sup> The machines were shipped to France in

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

*First introduced during the Somme campaign in 1916, tanks eventually became important tools in breaking the stasis of trench warfare. This British tank is shown crushing barbed wire to ease the advance of the infantry. (Imperial War Museum, Crown Copyright, P. 396)*

crates marked “tank” to deceive onlookers as to their contents; this rather unusual name soon gained favor over the not-coincidentally naval-sounding name “landship.”

By September 15, when the new vehicles first came into use, they still suffered from significant design flaws. Problems included a vulnerable fuel tank, a faulty steering system, and limited visibility. Still, the British rushed them into service in an attempt to turn the tide on the Somme. The Mark I tank, introduced at the Somme, came in two variants, both weighing almost 30 tons and requiring a crew of eight. The “male” version carried two six-pound guns and four machine guns. The “female” version carried six machine guns. They moved at approximately two miles per hour, and if they fell into a ditch they had to be abandoned. The

first sight of these tanks often elicited peals of laughter, noted Gibbs, “for they were monstrously comical, like toads of vast size emerging from the primeval slime in the twilight of the world’s dawn.”<sup>28</sup>

Of the 49 tanks brought into action on September 15, only 18 saw action. Most of the rest fell victim either to mechanical problems or the accurate artillery fire of German guns. Those that did enter the fray and survived had an enormous impact on the morale of the men who saw them. German soldiers fled, terrified, and British soldiers ran behind, laughing and screaming. A British pilot signaled back to headquarters that “A Tank is walking up the High Street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind.” The pilot then hung a sign from his plane reminiscent of London newspaper stands, reading “GREAT HUN DEFEAT. SPECIAL.”<sup>29</sup> Tanks helped the British break the German third line, but their overall impact lay more in the potential that Haig and others saw. Haig soon reported back to London demanding 1,000 more.

Soon after the introduction of the tanks, the Germans countered with their own machines, a new generation of airplanes. The new Halberstadt DII and Albatross models DI and DII took back the skies from British pilots. British mastery of the air had proved to be decisive in spotting artillery and observing German movements. The new German planes took that mastery away, effectively blinding the officers at Haig’s headquarters. The new airplanes were the first to be designed based on experiences from the actual combat of the war. Moreover, the Germans now organized their aircraft into “hunting squadrons” dominated by veteran pilots. Manfred von Richthofen, “the Red Baron,” scored his first kills as part of legendary ace Oswald Boelcke’s squadron.

A successful attack in late September proved that the British army had begun to learn from its errors. The target was a powerful German position on the Thiépvál ridge, site today of a massive memorial on which are engraved the names of 73,367 British fatalities at the Somme who have no known grave. Instead of charging



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

*The parents of E. R. Heaton, the volunteer from 1914 shown on  
page 31, waited nine months to learn the location of his grave.  
This graves registration booklet provided information as to the  
grave's location and the nearest railway station.  
(Imperial War Museum, Crown Copyright, E. R. Heaton)*

the ridge with a frontal assault, the British approached it from the east, capturing the ruins of Mouquet Farm first. With careful artillery preparation and men specifically trained to seize this one particular objective, British forces captured the ridge, which had been a goal of theirs since day one of the Somme campaign.

Haig had hoped that the seizure of Thiépval (on the anniversary of Trafalgar, no less) signaled a new phase in the battle. He sought a breakthrough once again, although it quickly became obvious that there was nowhere to break through to. The Germans had constructed several more lines of defense in front of the town

of Bapaume, meaning that any “breakthrough” would only involve a new series of attacks on a new series of defenses. Heavy October rains turned the torn-up fields around the Somme into a quagmire, further complicating any attempted move. In November, another bloody attack, this one by Scots at Beaumont Hamel, seized a part of the line that had resisted British offensives since July 1. Its capture, however, did not change the fact that no strategic objectives remained that were worth the likely cost in men.

Of Britain’s 56 infantry divisions, 53 fought at the Somme. More than 419,000 of the men in those divisions were killed, wounded, or captured as a result of the battle. French casualties amounted to more than 200,000. Estimates of German casualties range as high 600,000, on top of the 370,000 German casualties suffered at Verdun. In all, the lines moved no more than seven miles. About the only major strategic achievement the Allies could claim was their cutting of the road from Bapaume to Péronne, but both of these cities could be supplied from roads going east, so even this accomplishment amounted to little. The Germans did transfer several divisions away from Verdun, but their absence did not materially affect either side’s fortunes there.

Claims that the Somme had been worth the sacrifice because the Allies had attrited the Germans hold merit, but as the Allies suffered almost equal casualties themselves, it is hard to take much comfort from that idea. As 1916 turned into 1917 nothing was certain except that the war continued, with no clear winner in sight. The astonishing bloodletting of 1916 had brought neither side any closer to victory. A German prisoner at the Somme spoke for thousands of soldiers when he told Philip Gibbs, “Europe is being bled to death, and will be impoverished for long years. It is a war against religion, and against civilization, and I see no end to it.”<sup>30</sup>