

# The Great War

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Graham Darby provides a timely reconsideration of why the conflict went on for so long and why the Central Powers lost.

'Home before the leaves fall and 'Over by Christmas' were just two of the misconceptions harboured by contemporaries in 1914. Perhaps knowledge of the American Civil War (1861-5), with its gatling guns and trench warfare, should have made people less optimistic. Yet German strategy depended entirely on the quick victory and one of the great misconceptions that led to this catastrophe was this false assumption by the German government that it could still win the war quickly in the year of 1914.

The decision-makers in Berlin – von Moltke, Bethmann Hollweg, von Jagow, von Falkenhayn, and of course the Kaiser – were all of the opinion that Germany was surrounded by hostile powers, that Germany's position was slipping and that by 1917, when Russia's Great Military Programme was complete and the Schlieffen Plan rendered redundant, Germany's situation would be quite hopeless. Thus the idea grew up that a war would be better 'sooner rather than later', that war should occur now 'while we can still win'. However, this idea was in fact totally wrong. The Germans had already left it too late: there was a remarkable balance of power in 1914. Had they decided to launch a war in, say, 1905 when Schlieffen finalised his famous plan, when Russia had been defeated by the Japanese, when the French army had not been reorganised and when Britain had not yet developed a close relationship with the French (and had not even thought of the expeditionary force), then the Germans might well have won. But by 1914 it was already too late – no one power had sufficient military preponderance to achieve a quick victory – and that is, basically, why the war went on so long.

The Central Powers, Austria and Germany, had to achieve a quick victory in 1914 because they did not really have the numbers to match their opponents; they could not win a war of attrition if the Entente powers stuck together. The Germans believed that their superior army would enable them to deliver a knock-out blow'. However, modern weaponry, especially the machine gun, was a great equaliser, a great leveller in both senses of the word. Failure in 1914 led to a stalemate – there was a military stalemate brought about by comparable technology and resources, a political stalemate because the alliances held and a diplomatic stalemate as no one was willing to compromise. German success on the Eastern front led to another opportunity in 1918, but the arrival of US troops on the Entente side nullified any German advantage. The failure of the offensive in 1918 brought defeat.

## Failure in 1914 - The Events

First of all the Germans met unexpectedly strong resistance from the Belgians, both in military terms and in terms of the destruction of infrastructure. Railway lines and bridges could be replaced but the destruction of railway tunnels caused considerable hold-ups. Soon the Schlieffen Plan was falling behind schedule, though Liege was taken only two days late. However, the delays enabled the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to land and play a part in delaying the Germans at Mons and Le Cateau. At the same time the French Plan XVII (the advance into Lorraine) failed at the cost of 300,000 casualties (Joffre sacked 140 generals). However, Joffre did not lose his nerve and he now had a clear idea of how to deal with the real German advance which he might not have done had he been allowed to advance into Lorraine as in Schlieffen's original plan. On August 25th 1914 Moltke mistakenly sent two corps (c.

60,000 troops) to the Eastern front to deal with the unexpected Russian invasion; given that he also had to leave two corps to deal with the Belgian army, his crucial right wing was now reduced from 16 to 11 corps. The last day of August proved critical as the French halted the German Second Army (under Bulow) at Guise and Kluck wheeled south-east to assist (September 2nd), thereby changing the direction of his advance to the east rather than the west of Paris. The capital could not now be encircled. The shortage of men was forcing all the German armies to close up on each other in any case. By the time the Germans reached the Marne they were exhausted, having marched a considerable distance from their railheads; they were short of supplies and had only six days left in which to win and then turn east! Their right wing was now exposed to a flanking attack from the direction of Paris.

The French counter attack – the Battle of the Marne – began on September 5th. A gap appeared between Army Groups 1 and 2 and the BEF stumbled into it. All was confusion. It would appear that at this decisive moment, when a decision had to be made, there was no communication between the Army Groups 1 and 2 and Moltke for four days (September 5- 9). Eventually Moltke empowered a deputy to make the appropriate decisions, and he (Hentsch) ordered a retreat to the Aisne which Moltke later confirmed. However, by now the latter was a broken man, believing the war to be lost, and he was quietly replaced on September 14. Whether or not the Germans had needed to retreat at this point has been debated ever since. Nevertheless the great gamble had failed and there existed no fall-back plan.

Therefore von Falkenhayn tried to resurrect the Schlieffen plan. He reinforced the right and decided on an outflanking movement. In what has been inaccurately termed the 'race to the sea', each of the two armies subsequently tried unsuccessfully to turn the flank of the other before halting at the English Channel. This second failure shook Falkenhayn, and he informed the Kaiser on November 13th that the army was exhausted and that the campaign in the West had probably been lost. He stated: 'As long as Russia, France, and England hold together, it will be impossible to beat them'. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, however, refused to contemplate defeat at this early stage and the war went on.

Now the soldiers dug in to avoid the murderous fire of the machine gun, and soon a line of trenches 475 miles long ran from Flanders to Switzerland. Static trench warfare had begun. It was a stalemate.

In the East, the Russians had sprung a surprise by going on the offensive, but they had eventually been defeated at the battles of Tannenberg (August) and Masurian Lakes (September) and were thrown back out of Germany.

## **Analysis**

The first point to make is that the Schlieffen Plan had not failed; it had not been applied. The plan that was applied should more appropriately be termed the Schlieffen-Moltke Plan because of the crucial changes Moltke had made to it. It had serious flaws. Too few soldiers were on the right wing and too many were on the left. Thus Moltke did not have numerical superiority in the crucial areas where he needed it. Moreover he could not organise adequate supplies (he relied on horses rather than lorries) and took soldiers out of the attack to deal with the unexpected Russian advance. In addition, once the advance began to unravel near Paris and Army Groups 1 and 2 lost touch with each other, Moltke himself went to pieces and sanctioned a retreat which may not have been necessary. In sharp contrast Joffre showed stoic courage in the face of adversity. It remains to be said that the Allies were no push-over the Belgians offered unexpected resistance, the BEF fought valiantly and the French army was much better organised than in 1870. In addition, the machine gun greatly facilitated a defensive posture (the cavalry was the first casualty). The two sides were in fact pretty evenly matched. This is why it became a long war.

## **Stalemate 1915-17**

As we have noted, the opposing lines of armies dug in and the separate lengths of trench began to link up in an elaborate system of dug-outs, reserve lines, barbed wire entanglements, machine

gun posts, and communication lines that were up to four miles deep in places. All this combined to give defence a considerable advantage over attack. Indeed it has been estimated that the attackers lost at least one third more casualties than the defenders. No one came up with a way of overcoming this impasse. It is all very well writing about 'lions led by donkeys', but absolutely no one on either side knew how to break the deadlock. Here was a war in which the horse was redundant (an easy target for the machine guns and expensive to feed) and in which the internal combustion engine had yet to come of age: engines could not propel much armour and, when they could, they were unreliable. Many methods were tried. There was massed artillery, but this only served to churn up the ground and forewarn of an attack. Poison gas was used, but it was only really effective the first time, and its efficacy took the Germans by surprise, as did changes in the direction of the wind! Tanks were used by the Allies with some success at Cambrai in November 1917, but in reality they were very unreliable and were only a success in the last months of the war. There was thus no alternative to attrition, though this is not to absolve the generals from all responsibility. They were usually too far from the front to appreciate the true conditions and they had a tendency to repeat the same mistakes, for example, Haig repeated the Somme at Passchendaele and was totally unaware of the waterlogged ground there.

In 1915 the Germans tried to defeat the Russians. They came close to success as the Tsarist troops were thrown back 300 miles at the expense of 2 million casualties. However, Russia would not surrender, the Germans ran out of steam and the war went on. In fact in 1916 the Russians launched a successful counter-attack against the Austrians, reflecting the pattern that had emerged from the beginning on the Eastern front: the Russians could defeat the Austrians but not the Germans, and the Germans constantly needed to come to the Austrians' aid. Indeed from 1915 the Austrians ceased to operate as an independent army; and they now also had a southern front as Italy joined the Allied side (May 1915), though she failed to make much impact. Turkey had already joined the Central Powers (November 1914) and had successfully resisted an Allied attack on Gallipoli (also 1915). The Central Powers defeated the Serbs in 1915 and went on to beat the Rumanians in 1916.

The stalemate on the Western front left the Germans in charge of most of Belgium and a large part of north-eastern France. Therefore the onus was on the Allies to drive the Germans out; and the latter just had to sit tight – which is largely what they did (Verdun being a costly exception in 1916). Allied offensives in 1915, 1916 (the Somme) and 1917 (Nivelle and Passchendaele) failed to make a breakthrough, though the Germans did shorten the line in 1917 (by which time they were considerably out numbered, with 2.5 million soldiers facing 3.9 million).

The year 1917 was in many ways a crucial year. The Russian war effort collapsed; the Tsar was removed in March and the Bolsheviks came to power in November, in effect eliminating Russia from the war. This was a terrible blow to the Allies but was more than compensated for by the adhesion of the United States (April), brought in by a combination of unrestricted submarine warfare, German intrigues in Mexico and considerations of economic and political affiliation. However, their entry did not make an immediate difference, and the end of the war in the east gave Germany a second chance. Just as the collapse of Russia gave Germany the incentive to carry on, the entry of the USA did likewise for the Allies.

But quite why the war had gone on this long also had a lot to do with the resolve of the powers to stick together and stick it out. What brought them into the war in the first place continued to be a valid reason for going on: no one on the Allied side wanted to see a Europe dominated by Germany. Similarly on the German side, surrender would mean the end of Germany as a great power, and the war had been entered not only to maintain Germany's great power status but to enhance it. Moreover it is worth stating that what is also remarkable is the enormous sacrifice ordinary people of all sides were prepared to make in a cause they felt to be just. Accordingly, given such resolve, the nations committed all their resources to the war effort. This was the first total war, in which governments extended their control over all aspects of life – manpower, food supplies, industrial and agricultural production – and sustained morale by propaganda, exaggerating successes, concealing setbacks, building up heroes and condemning the enemies' barbarity.

## **No negotiated settlement**

The basic problem was that the Germans considered themselves partially victorious and were reluctant to give up Belgium. In addition, their annexationist aims, brought to fruition in the east with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, made negotiations impractical. Moreover, intransigence was not confined to the Germans – no government wanted to restore a balance of power. Each side wanted a lasting peace and felt that this could only be achieved by total victory: the enemy must be defeated for all time – it was to be 'a war to end all wars'. And in any event, the enormous sacrifices that had been made in terms of loss of life made a compromise seem unworthy.

Nevertheless, by 1917 cracks were beginning to appear in the resolution of the belligerents. Russia collapsed, the French army was incapacitated by widespread mutiny (but the Germans did not notice!), a majority in the Reichstag called for peace, President Wilson of the USA called for a peace settlement based on his famous fourteen points, the new Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Karl I, made serious but unsuccessful attempts to negotiate and the Pope made an appeal for peace on the basis of a return of the status quo ante bellum (i.e. the position before the war started in 1914). Yet no one was listening and the war went on. The generals, the politicians and even the majority of the people (as far as we can tell) seemed stoically resolved to stick it out in the belief that ultimate victory would be achieved. From the Germans' point of view, victory on the eastern front had presented them with another opportunity to attempt a decisive offensive in the west.

## **Failure in 1918**

Because the Germans had been so greedy at Brest-Litovsk, Hindenburg and Ludendorff (in charge since 1916) had been forced to leave a million men behind in the east. Thus Ludendorff was only able to transfer 52 divisions to the west (less than a million men) and was still without the numerical superiority that was needed to ensure a breakthrough.

And yet between March 21st and mid-June 1918 the Germans made considerable headway, advancing 40 miles around the Somme and 35 miles in the south to the Marne – advances not seen since 1914. However, Ludendorff did not appear to have clear objectives and failed to confound Allied reserves by moving his attack around; there was no breakthrough – the Allied line held (in this extremity the British had accepted overall French command) and the Germans found themselves trying to hold a much longer line with far fewer men. In fact by the summer the Germans had lost about a million men and were back to around 2.5 million, whereas the Allies had gained about a million Americans. The game was up; Ludendorff's gamble had failed. Now the Allies struck back using planes and tanks, hitting the Germans in a number of different places, then breaking off and resuming elsewhere. At no stage did the Germans have time to draw breath and send in their reserves. In fact, fully one-third of the German army spent its time travelling by train from one sector to another. By the end of August, they had been forced back to their spring line. The Allied advance continued throughout September and October, pushing the Germans from most of their French conquests, but not from the greater part of Belgium and not yet into Germany (except for a small area in Alsace). Indeed the German line held and the Allies were making firm plans for warfare in 1919 and even talking of 1920.

When the end came in November 1918, it was very sudden and unexpected. The surrender of Bulgaria at the end of September and the capitulation of Turkey and Austria in October/early November deprived Germany of allies; but these were not the reasons for Germany's defeat – after all, Germany had been sustaining her allies throughout. Defeat came not from the battlefield, nor from the Home front, but from the very people who had started the war in the first place – the generals of the High Command. Ludendorff had completely lost his nerve by the end of September. On October 1 he stated that he anticipated a catastrophic defeat and urged the Kaiser to 'request an armistice without any hesitation': only a 'quick end' could save the army from destruction.

When the German government asked for an armistice on October 3rd (in the erroneous belief that President Wilson of the USA would grant a soft peace) it came as a complete shock to the German people as the true position had been long concealed from them. For many victory had suddenly turned into an inexplicable defeat. The Germans, who had stoically borne shortages created by the British blockade, now lost heart and the home front crumbled. Naval mutiny at the end of the month led to revolution and the collapse of internal order by early November. The Kaiser was forced to abdicate and Germany signed an armistice on November 11th. The war was finally at an end.

## Conclusion

What the generals did not appreciate was that the alliances had created a remarkable balance of power in 1914: no single country had sufficient superiority for decisive victory in the short term. There is no doubt that Germany could have beaten France on a one to one basis, just as Russia could have beaten Austria, but 1914 was not to be a rerun of 1870. Similarly, Austria could not have kept going after the defeats of 1916 (or even those of 1914), France would have collapsed in 1917 after the disastrous Nivelle offensive and the mutinies, and Italy would have done the same after Caporetto, had not each of them received timely support from its allies. The alliance system virtually guaranteed that the war would not be decided quickly. The one ally that did collapse, Russia, was strategically isolated and could not be bailed out by allies. Once the war became one of attrition, numbers and resources would count; and the Central Powers did not have the numbers and the resources. 'A calculation of manufacturing production in 1913 showed Germany and Austria together as having 19.2% of total world production, while France, Russia and Britain together had 27.9%' (Philip Bell), though it should be noted that it was Great Britain that really made the difference (as indeed the United States did later). In August 1914 the Entente Powers put 202 divisions into the field to the Central Powers' total of 143. Two years later the figure was 405 to 369. In numerical terms the Allied powers held the advantage throughout, with perhaps the exception of the beginning of 1918.

A glance at the statistical table shows that the Allies mobilised something like 40 million men during the course of the war, whereas the Central Powers could only manage about 25 million. Given these odds, it is remarkable that Germany had such military success and held out for so long. Clearly its central position and efficient use of manpower and resources counted for a great deal, as did the fact that Allied economic superiority could not be brought to bear instantly – but the fact remains that once it was (by 1918) the Central Powers could not really win. Accordingly, they suffered defeat and a complete breakdown of their economic and political structures. It was the price they paid for starting the war.

## Further Reading:

- Correlli Barnett *The Great War* (Park Lane Press, 1979)
- Keith Robbins *The First World War* (OUP, 1984)
- Martin Gilbert *First World War* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1994)
- Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War - Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (Edward Arnold, 1997) - very good.

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