PETER HART

THE LAST BATTLE

ENDGAME ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1918

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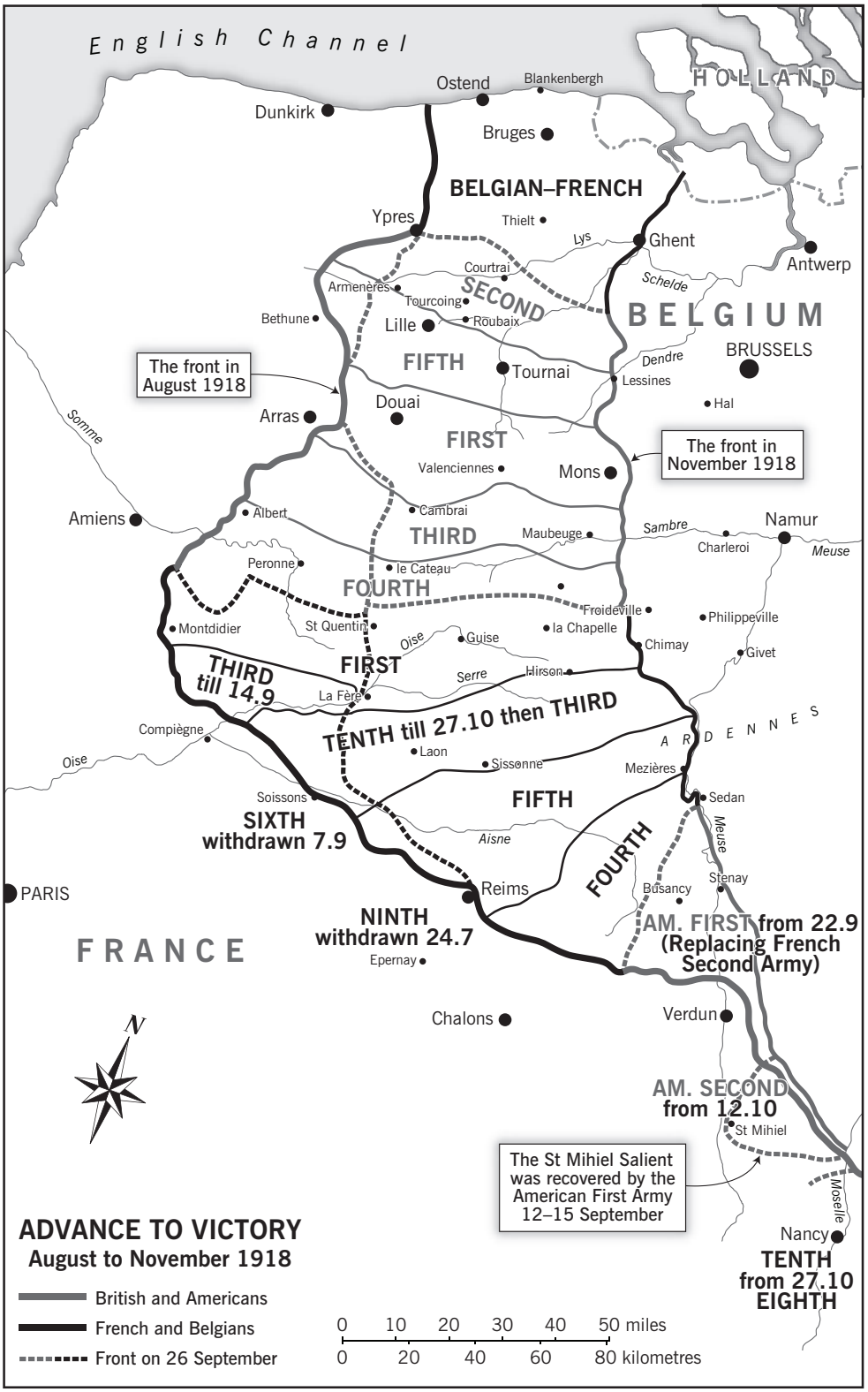
English Channel
HOLLAND
Ostend
Blankenbergh
Dunkirk
Bruges
BELGIAN–FRENCH
Ypres
Thielt
Lys
Ghent
Antwerp
Courtrai
Schelde
Armenières
Tourcoing
SECOND
BELGIUM
Bethune
Lille
Roubaix
The front in August 1918
FIFTH
Tournai
Dendre
BRUSSELS
Lessines
Douai
Hal
Somme
Arras
FIRST
The front in November 1918
Valenciennes
Mons
Cambrai
Amiens
Albert
THIRD
Maubeuge
Sambre
Namur
Charleroi
Meuse
Peronne
le Cateau
FOURTH
Froideville
Philippeville
Montdidier
St Quentin
la Chapelle
Oise
Guise
Chimay
Givet
THIRD till 14.9
FIRST
Serre
Hirson
La Fère
TENTH till 27.10 then THIRD
ARDENNES
Compiègne
Laon
Oise
Sissonne
Mezières
Soissons
FIFTH
Sedan
SIXTH withdrawn 7.9
Aisne
Meuse
FOURTH
Stenay
PARIS
Reims
Busancy
NINTH withdrawn 24.7
AM. FIRST from 22.9 (Replacing French Second Army)
FRANCE
Epernay
Chalons
Verdun
AM. SECOND from 12.10
St Mihiel
The St Mihiel Salient was recovered by the American First Army 12–15 September
Moselle
Nancy
TENTH from 27.10
EIGHTH
N
ADVANCE TO VICTORY
August to November 1918
British and Americans
French and Belgians
Front on 26 September
0 10 20 30 40 50 miles
0 20 40 60 80 kilometres

PREFACE

> I remember someone saying before the war that he imagined that when troops were in action under fire, each man thought to himself that whoever else might be hit, he himself would be alright. Well I don't think this is correct – at any rate not in this war. I think men fully expect to be hit or killed, but carry on just the same. Personally, I was always thinking I was going to get hit or killed and was often surprised when I found I wasn't.[1]
>
> Captain Henry Owens, 57th Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps, 57th Brigade, 19th Division

IMAGINE IT IF YOU CAN. You have been fighting for four long years. Somehow you have survived, although many of your friends are dead. Now, just when your ordeal seems to be coming to an end, you are required to make one last effort, risking life and limb in the closing battles to hammer home the defeat of the German Army. Not everyone can take it easy on the final straight; not every soldier can 'shell hole drop', falling back during attacks and leaving others to lead the way. The temptation to shirk must have been enormous. Yet, for the most part, men dug deep within themselves to summon up the resolve to fight on and 'finish the job'. For many it would prove the greatest sacrifice. They were fatally struck down just when a resumption of their civilian life was almost

within touching distance. The Allies may have been winning, but the casualty rates in the closing six weeks of the war were excruciating. Open warfare may have freed them from the grim tyranny of the trenches, but it left them exposed to even greater perils. The beckoning necessity of finishing the war, to avoid the spectre of a new harvest of death in 1919, meant that corners had to be cut, risks taken and lives lost. It may have been logical, but it was no less painful to the individuals caught up in their own personal Armageddon.

A great deal of attention is paid to the opening moves made in wars. This is particularly evident with the Great War. Much of the media interest during the recent centenary celebrations was taken up with an exhaustive coverage of the 1914 campaigns, with British attention focused almost entirely on the Battle of Mons. The treatment of the rest of the war has concentrated on the Allied defeat at Gallipoli, or the long drawn out tragedies of the Somme, Verdun and Passchendaele battles. There is also an obsession with the brilliance displayed by Germans in their tactical conduct of the Spring 1918 offensives. The result of such fixations is that the ultimate Allied victory a few months later must come as a real surprise as – 'suddenly' – the war is all over in November 1918. We need to explain what happened in the last few months of the war. From where exactly did the Allied victory emerge? Was the German Army really beaten? What haven't we been told in many of the conventional accounts of the war?

Certainly, one underlying truth of the Great War *must* be driven home: the war finished with the collective armies of France, Britain, America and Belgium achieving total domination over the German Army on the Western Front. It was in fact a rejection of this that formed the basis of the puerile Nazi voices of the inter-war years that told the Germans that they had been 'stabbed in the back'; that their army had never been defeated, that it had stood tall and strong, only to be overwhelmed by a combination of enemies within the state, in particular Communist agitators, their 'fellow travellers' in the Labour movement and – from their crazed perspective – the Jews.

In reality, the Allied victory arose from the accumulated strength and

proven fighting prowess of the Allied armies, their underlying materiel supremacy and the gradual collapse of German discipline in the face of inevitable defeat, exemplified by the arrival in strength of the American Expeditionary Force in the summer of 1918. The defining sequence of events had begun with the French defeat of a last gasp German offensive at the Second Battle of the Marne in July 1918. It had continued with the stunning victory achieved by the British on 8 August at Amiens, which then premiered the 'Hundred Days' advance to victory. It is the later stages of that decisive series of battles that concern us here. The Germans had fallen back in disarray, taking shelter in the comforting fastness of the Hindenburg Line. This had served them well in the past – they had high hopes that it would serve them well again and were confident that they could prolong the war into 1919, if not beyond. Yet the Allied Supreme Commander, Maréchal Ferdinand Foch, coordinated a sequence of offensives that cracked open the Hindenburg Line with the result that German resistance began to crumble. The Fifth Battle of Ypres, the Battles of the Sambre, the Selle and the Meuse-Argonne – all victories for the Allies. Yet what do we remember of them? Scant details appear in general books on the war; indeed there is little of relevance in most works devoted solely to 1918. All that seems to matter is the death of the (then) relatively unknown poet Wilfred Owen during the crossing of the Sambre on 4 November 1918. This – though sad – should not be our focal point in considering these huge offensives. They were intended to smash through the German lines, allowing no time to rest, no chance to bring up reserves, no time for the German commanders to catch their breath and review the situation rationally. The German High Command was left helpless, scrambling to react to situations that were already in the past. Unable to second-guess where the Allies would strike next, and without the manpower or resources to be strong everywhere, they stumbled from disaster to disaster.

But it had not been easy.

For the Allies did not have a monopoly in courage. The German Army may have reached the end of its metaphorical rope in the summer of 1918, but, even after four years of carnage, there were still plenty of

grim unbending soldiers willing to carry on fighting to the very end. Their spluttering machine guns and booming gun batteries took a heavy toll of the attacking Allies. Many German soldiers demonstrated an unbelievable resilience, contesting every yard of ground, despite the dawning realisation that their cause was hopeless. Their sacrificed lives bought time for their comrades to retreat, take up new defensive positions and continue the resistance. Heroism and tragedy were all around during the final days of that terrible war.

In order to secure victory in 1918, the Allied commanders had to take risks that would have seemed reprehensible a few months before – but they were desperate to keep up the momentum and prevent the Germans from settling into a new fortress line – where they could regain their strength, ready to renew the struggle. These risks maximised the advances the Allies achieved, but they meant troops were often caught isolated in open ground and casualties grew at a terrifying rate. When the German rearguards were overrun, there was little quarter given. This was fighting red in tooth and claw, with the additional frisson of men giving their all – yet still hoping against hope that they might yet stay alive and intact in a war that had killed and maimed so many of their friends. The all too frequent deaths so close to the Armistice gives a terrible poignancy to this last battle. This is not a dry military history recording the movements of every corps, division, brigade or battalion; the sheer scale of the fighting precludes any chance of that. The complexities of simultaneous campaigns occurring up and down the line has also required some juggling to maintain a coherent narrative. Nor have I dwelt overlong on the political machinations that ultimately would have delivered the Armistice on 11 November. My emphasis as a British historian is on the British Army, with an appreciative reflection of the massive contributions to victory made by the French, American and Belgian forces. I have tried to include some of the key German quotes to reflect what tough opponents the Allies faced on the other side of the trenches. This book reflects the essence of what happened in battle – and why. It is a tragic story told for the most part by those men who were lucky enough to survive. Many did not.

1

WHERE ARE WE?

> I think after the war I shall write a book, and in it I shall put everything that is filthy and disgusting and revolting and degrading and terrifying about modern warfare – and hope thereby to do my bit towards preventing another.[1]
>
> Lieutenant Burgon Bickersteth, Headquarters, 6th Cavalry Brigade, 3rd Cavalry Division

BY THE START OF 1918 it seemed as if all the participants were approaching exhaustion. Conflict between the great powers was not a matter of cunning plans and clever battlefield manoeuvres. It was total warfare, where armies of toiling millions smashed into each other repeatedly. An attritional nightmare, which would be determined by those with the greatest access to the raw numbers to feed the ranks, the productive capacity to manufacture the key weapons of war and unimaginable quantities of munitions, and the near unbounded economic resources required to pay for it all. As the original armies were eroded, new armies stepped forward into the trenches, year by year, to replace them. Conscription ensured enough men to feed the guns. The kind of war that

exerted a tremendous strain on any nation, exposing and testing any flaws to destruction.

There is no doubt that, by 1918, France was in a parlous condition. Since 1914, a key industrial region of their country had been under German occupation, with the front lines creating a gigantic salient pushing towards Paris. As early as 22 August 1914, the French had lost 27,000 men dead in a single day, and had suffered over 2 million casualties (killed, wounded and imprisoned) by the end of the huge attritional battles of 1915. They then endured the long torture of Verdun which had scarred a generation of soldiers in 1916, before the failure of the over-ambitious Nivelle Offensive in April 1917 triggered a dreadful series of mutinies. The French Army was, however, a resilient force. After a period of careful 'husbandry' under their Commander in Chief, General Phillipe Pétain, the French had managed to recover some of their vigour and remained a formidable foe in 1918. The scale of the French sacrifice was immense: by the end of 1917 some 1,280,000 had died.

Even worse, the Russian Army had lost approximately 2 million dead during the campaigns against Germany and Austro-Hungary on the Eastern Front. Despite these horrendous losses, there always seemed to be more teeming millions of Russians to fling into battle and more ground into which they could retreat. Whatever disasters they suffered, there was no point at which the Germans could credibly have claimed that the Russian Army was beaten. Yet, behind that impervious façade, the war had hammered open the fault lines running right through the monolithic Tsarist state. By 1917, the country was teetering on the edge of revolution.

The third of the major Allies was Great Britain. The British had only played a peripheral role in the Battle of the Frontiers in 1914. Although the dominant world naval power, their initial military contribution, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), was on a very small scale. There were some 400,000 regular soldiers, of which more than half were stationed at garrisons in various far-flung stations of the British Army. The BEF would grow steadily in size, but even so, their efforts at Neuve Chapelle, Second Ypres, Festubert and Loos in 1915 were mere adjuncts to the vast battles

raging between the French and Germans in the Artois and Champagne regions. By 1916, the British had finally mobilised their true strength, attaining a maximum strength of around 2 million on the Western Front, but they would be tested to the limit during their first real experience of continental warfare during the long-drawn-out agony of the Battle of the Somme. In 1917, they had suffered more terrible casualties during the Battle of Arras, before being almost drained during the hell on earth that was the Third Battle of Ypres. By the end of 1917, the British Empire had recorded 494,800 dead, 1,425,184 wounded and 176,523 missing or prisoners – a total of 2,096,507 battle casualties on all fronts.[2]

Confronting the Allies was the Imperial German Army. The German High Command were always cognisant that, in a war with the two great powers, France and Russia, they would be hard pressed to win. The 'Schlieffen Plan' for 1914 had sought to concentrate the bulk of the German Army in a swift war of manoeuvre to beat France in the first months of the war. Russia was merely to be held back until France was out of the way, and only then would the German Army move east in strength. The British entry into the war had further exacerbated the underlying strategic conundrum for Germany, as the British Empire had an obvious latent power that could – in time – be mobilised against them. The German defeat by the French at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 had doomed the Germans to fight on two fronts; a war they knew they were unlikely to win. In 1915, they had switched focus, attempting vainly to knock the Russians out of the war. Since the start of 1916, with the exception of the attack on the French at Verdun, the German Army had been on the defensive. Outnumbered and facing intense fighting on two fronts, they had fought with a desperate courage, skill and determination. As a major participant in most of the great battles of the war, it should be no surprise that they suffered accordingly. By the end of 1917, approximately 1,250,000 Germans had died.

Germany was allied to Austro-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. These allies were involved in much serious fighting: the Austro-Hungarians fought bloody campaigns with the Russians on the Eastern Front and against the Italians; the Turks were engaged at Gallipoli, Mesopotamia

and Palestine; while the Bulgarians engaged a French-British-Serbian force in Salonika. Yet the focus always remained on the main Central Power – Germany. The fighting against Germany would decide the war; anything else was a sideshow.

At sea, the German High Seas Fleet could not really hope to match the strength of the British Grand Fleet. The only real head-on clash at the Battle of Jutland in 1916 had merely confirmed that status quo. Thrashing about for other solutions and despite previous warnings from the Americans, the resumption of unrestricted German submarine warfare was a desperate attempt to starve out the British, who were not self-sufficient in food. The result, predictably, was the sinking of several neutral ships with American passengers aboard, which triggered the entry of the United States into the war on 6 April 1917. The immediate impact of this was to assist the British in solving the submarine problem through the introduction of the convoys, which collected merchantmen together under the protection of an escort. Even if the U-boats could locate a convoy in the vastness of the oceans, they would find them under the close protection of destroyers. The Americans provided not only extra shipping resources in merchantmen, but also numerous destroyer escorts that were so crucial to running the convoy system. With their help, it was soon evident that the British would not be starved out of the war. In 1917, the American Army was negligible, in a sense mirroring the British situation in 1914, but the vast American continent offered the promise of teeming millions of recruits to form new armies. As such, it was a potential threat hanging above the German High Command.

The main hope for the Germans was that, almost simultaneously with America's entry to the war, the mighty Russian juggernaut had finally been brought to its knees by its own internal problems. The rigidity of the despotic Tsarist regime meant that it was incapable of adapting, in any meaningful manner, to the plethora of economic, political and social problems that were exacerbated by the incredible stresses imposed by the war. Shortages of food in the cities led to riots, alongside industrial strikes and widespread political machinations. Normally the iron fist of the military would have been deployed to crush dissent, but the Tsar's

armies were otherwise engaged with the German forces. In March 1917, Russia fell into chaos, afflicted by a variety of simultaneous revolts against a corrupt regime. Ultimately, Tsar Nicholas was forced to abdicate and a provisional government took over under Alexander Kerensky to try to control the situation. However, the underlying tensions remained, especially as fighting continued unabated on the Eastern Front throughout the summer of 1917. The result was a rise of the popularity of the Bolsheviks, culminating in the second Russian revolution, launched on 7 November 1917. The Allies refused to recognise the new Bolshevik government, well aware of its intention to make peace with the Germans. Naturally, the Germans were delighted – a provisional armistice was declared on 15 December and the mighty Russian Army soon melted away in nothingness. The formal peace would be signed on 3 March 1918. The war on two fronts was over for the Germans; but was it too late?

By February 1918, the war had reached a crucial stage. The removal of the 'Russian steamroller' from the war meant that many of the German divisions on the Eastern Front could be redeployed to the Western Front. The German Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung or OHL) figureheaded by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and his *eminence grise*, the Chief of Staff, Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff, intended to use these additional forces to launch a series of spring offensives, meaning to finish the war before the Americans could arrive in any real strength in the summer. They resolved to target the BEF with the massive Operation Michael offensive in the Somme area. The intention was to break through and then role up the line, pushing to the north.

The British Army that the Germans faced in March 1918 was a very different body from the small professional force of 1914. The regulars then had been well-trained infantry, but collectively had little grasp of working together at any level above the battalion. The BEF also lacked many of the essential accoutrements of trench warfare, such as howitzers, high-explosive shells, mortars and hand grenades. The original Commander in Chief was Field Marshal Sir John French, who showed little sign of coping with the extremely challenging requirements of the post. Since December 1915, the BEF had been commanded by Field Marshal

Sir Douglas Haig. Born on 19 June 1861, his army career before the war had earned him the soubriquet, 'The Educated Soldier'. Originally a cavalry officer, Haig had demonstrated exceptional organisational skills during military service in both the Sudan and the Boer War. In the years leading up to the Great War he held a string of key staff appointments and was much involved in the creation of the Territorial Force. Haig was also responsible for the 1909 revision of the Field Service Regulations Part I, a simple manual that laid out general tactical principles for the British Army in action. On the outbreak of war in 1914, he had served as commander first of I Corps, then the First Army, before being promoted to command the BEF. Since then, Haig had played a crucial role in overseeing the conversion of the BEF into a massive continental army, while at the same time confronting the threat of the German Army in the field. However, as he faced up to the task of thwarting the imminent German offensive in March 1918, he was hampered by a great deal of political interference from home.

The British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had long coveted a greater influence on the military direction of the war. He belonged to a school of British politicians that sought an easier path to victory than the horrendous battles on the Western Front. These 'Easterners' sought to knock Germany's allies in the Central Powers out of the war. Back in 1915, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, had played a significant role in launching the disastrous campaign against Gallipoli to force Turkey out of the war and thereby relieve the pressure on Russia. Now, Lloyd George was equally keen to push the merits of 'Easterner' offensives against the Turks in Palestine and Mesopotamia, against the Bulgarians in Salonika, or against the Austro-Hungarians in Italy. Indeed, he seemed willing to deploy Britain's forces almost anywhere but the Western Front, despite few of his senior British military advisors agreeing with him. They were 'Westerners' and their stance was exemplified by the views of the long-standing Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir William Robertson, who was adamant that the war must be fought and won against the main enemy – Germany – on the Western Front. Germany was not propped up by her allies; if anything, the situation

was reversed. The defeat of Turkey, Bulgaria or even Austro-Hungary would not decide the war. The German Army *had* to be defeated; it was the backbone of the Central Powers alliance. Here then, Robertson and Haig stood united against the siren voices of politicians, warning that the diversion of precious military resources to sideshow campaigns could leave the Allies weakened on the only front that really mattered.

Frustrated by the perceived intransigence of Robertson's opinions, Lloyd George sought to replace him as CIGS with the more mercurial talents of General Sir Henry Wilson. Although Wilson had brains, his judgement had often been questioned, as had his apparent willingness to acquiesce to many of the outré ideas promulgated by both British politicians and the French generals. In the first year of the war, in 1914, Wilson had a deeply divisive impact during his brief period as Deputy Chief of Staff to Haig's predecessor, Field Marshal Sir John French, but since then had gained renewed influence acting as an unofficial military advisor to Lloyd George. Ironically, Wilson himself was a 'Westerner', but he was a far more biddable figure, and hence more agreeable to Lloyd George than either the gruff figure of Robertson, or the taciturn Haig. Many of the British High Command, however, held grave doubts as to the competence and motives of Wilson, as exemplified by the remarks of General Sir Hubert Gough back in 1917.

> We soldiers ask with wonder what has he done to establish a reputation? There is only one answer. He talks – but he can't act. He has neither decision, capacity for organisation, or 'drive'. As to his private character, he is an active and thorough intriguer and that is well known. As to his influence with the French, it is due to his capacity for intrigue – for talk – and to the French incapacity to form a sound judgment on English soldiers. Such is my opinion of Henry Wilson, and it is shared by a great many soldiers. So you can see my reasons for considering him a danger in any position of power.[3]
>
> General Sir Hubert Gough, Headquarters, Fifth Army

Nevertheless, in December 1917 Lloyd George sent Wilson as Britain's

military representative to the newly formed Supreme War Council designed to coordinate Allied strategic direction of the war. Robertson had no dispute with the formation of the council, but believed that as CIGS, in order to avoid a divided responsibility and an inevitable confusion in the overall direction of British military policy at the highest levels, he should have been Britain's military representative. After much adroit manoeuvring, Lloyd George, having calculated his options, finally took the plunge and, on 18 February 1918, replaced Robertson with Wilson as CIGS. Haig was not pleased, but, professional soldier that he was, he rejected the gesture politics of resignation and resolved to work to the best of his ability with Wilson.

Lloyd George was determined to restrict the number of men sent to the Western Front. The Prime Minister was convinced that Haig and his generals would merely waste any 'extra' manpower on yet more 'futile' attacks against the German lines. He saw no progression in BEF tactics; he saw only the butchers' bill of the Somme and Passchendaele. Political manpower committees restricted the reinforcements required to keep the British divisions up to strength. Hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers were retained in Britain, while the huge forces already committed to the campaigns in Italy, Salonika, Palestine and Mesopotamia helped further dissipate the strength of the Empire. The situation became so fraught that Haig had to reduce the size of his brigades from four to three battalions if he was to maintain his existing number of divisions. The ramifications of this difficult reorganisation had not yet been worked through when the German Army struck on 21 March 1918.

The German offensive tactics that day were based on a supremely effective barrage, which sought to eradicate any British artillery response while hammering the forward positions and targeting headquarters and communications to prevent any coherent response. Parties of storm troopers fed into the gaps, completing the chaos, and leaving the main body of troops following behind to overwhelm any remaining isolated pockets of resistance. The blow fell against General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army in the Somme area, thereby hitting an army which was already seriously overstretched, and where the planned measures for a new system of