

3. THE DEFEAT OF 1918

In November 1918, after more than four years in the trenches, Adolf Hitler was in hospital away from the front, temporarily blinded by a gas attack. As he was recovering, he was told of Germany's surrender and the overthrow of the Kaiser. 'Again,' he later wrote, 'everything went black before my eyes.' He went on:

And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations; in vain the hunger and thirst of months which were often endless; in vain the hours in which, with mortal fear clutching at our hearts, we nevertheless did our duty; and in vain the death of two million . . . Was it for this that these boys of 17 sank into the earth of Flanders? Was this the meaning of the sacrifice which the German mother made to the fatherland when with sore heart she let her best-loved boys march off, never to see them again?

Like many others in Germany, Hitler struggled to find an explanation for Germany's apparently sudden collapse. How could it all have gone so wrong, so quickly?

Defeat was all the more puzzling since only a few months before, in spring 1918, victory seemed within the Kaiser's grasp. After years of stalemate, the war took a sudden turn in Germany's favour. Early in 1917 the Germans decided to wage unrestricted submarine warfare – attacking civilian vessels – and U-boats were sinking a monthly average

of more than half a million tons of shipping bringing supplies to Britain. The Americans had entered the war as a result, but it was taking a long time for them to mobilise. Allied troops were war-weary, and widespread mutinies in the French army, involving up to 40,000 men, were a stark reminder of the fragility of morale. In October 1917, German reinforcements enabled the Austro-Hungarian army to win a major victory at Caporetto: 265,000 Italians surrendered and 400,000 fled in confusion, while the pursuing forces advanced fifty miles in just over two days.

Most important of all, the October Revolution and the disintegration of the tsarist army took Russia out of the war. This enabled the Germans to redeploy huge numbers of troops – their forces on the Western Front increased from 3.25 million to more than four million men by April 1918. Paul von Hindenburg, a stolid general who effectively replaced the Kaiser as the figurehead of the German war effort after being brought out of retirement to win spectacular victories on the Eastern Front early in the war, and Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff, the real driving force behind those victories, decided to capitalise on Germany's strong position by launching a final, overwhelming attack on the Allied armies in the west.

Operation Michael, as it was named, deployed new and highly effective artillery tactics: enemy guns and command posts were targeted before a 'creeping barrage' that moved ahead of the advancing infantry was laid down, forcing the defenders to stay under cover until the Germans were almost upon them. With a superiority of more than two to one in men and guns, the Germans launched their attack on 21 March, firing more than three million rounds in the first day. Allied command posts some thirty miles behind the front were badly hit, along with gun positions, in the largest artillery bombardment of the war. As the German infantry swarmed over the Allied trenches, their advance concealed in a number of places by thick fog, the British and French were forced back along a fifty-mile front. The losses on both sides were the heaviest of any single day in the war. On 9 April, a second major German attack further north was equally successful and

was followed by an advance on Paris, creating panic in the city. In a relatively short space of time, the long stalemate on the Western Front had been broken. The Allied military leadership was traumatised, and by the end of June, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were celebrating a series of stunning victories. Yet little more than three months after that, the German leaders were suing for peace. How did this happen?

A first explanation has to do with military intelligence. Both sides in 1914-18 used traditional methods: gathering intelligence from POWs and from captured documents and equipment, keeping careful watch on the enemy front line and sending spies out to gather information behind it. They also employed aerial reconnaissance and intercepted telephone and, increasingly, radio messages, decrypting them if necessary. Though they had not anticipated the spring offensive, the Allies were well prepared for the final German attack on 15 July. But the Germans never established an effective espionage network behind Allied lines, could not decrypt Allied signals and easily fell prey to deceptions and feints.

Second, the war in the air was now being won by the Allies. It extended far beyond the front line. In 1916, anti-aircraft fire led the Germans to abandon Zeppelin raids on London, but they now developed large bombers such as the Gothas and, most remarkably, the Giant, a monster with a 138-foot wingspan which was so solidly built that none was ever shot down. These caused considerable damage in 1917, and forced up to a quarter of a million Londoners to take shelter in the Underground every night. In May 1918, forty-three German bombers attacked London; but this was their last major raid. The shortage of raw materials in Germany had become so serious that new planes could not be built in sufficient numbers, and those that were built were shoddily constructed and often broke down. By the summer the Allies were producing many more planes than the Germans: only eighteen of the costly Giants were ever built. Meanwhile, the British and French had begun to launch bombing raids on the Rhineland, though they were on too small a scale to be really effective, especially since the Germans organised effective countermeasures. In the last year

of the war, the British dropped 665 tons of bombs, a high proportion of which missed their targets. The real importance of the air war was at the front, in Italy as well as France and Belgium. By mid-1918 the Allies' air superiority was preventing German reconnaissance planes from finding out very much about their preparations for attack, while they themselves were gaining accurate information about enemy dispositions.

There was also a shift in the balance of power where the gas war was concerned. Few of the statistics David Stevenson gives in *With Our Backs to the Wall* (London, 2011), his book about the conduct of the war in 1918, are as striking as those involving poison gas. The Germans released 52,000 tons of gas on the Western Front, twice as much as the French and three and a half times as much as the British, killing or wounding 300,000 soldiers with the loss of only 70,000 to gas attacks from the other side. In 1918, the Germans produced nearly twenty million gas shells: half or more of the shells fired in Operation Michael were chemical. By the late spring, however, the British had developed an effective gas mask, while their own new fast-acting Livens Projectors – a mortar-like weapon that launched large drums filled with chemicals – caused widespread fear among German troops, whose masks proved useless against them, and were in any case not being produced in sufficient numbers because of a shortage of rubber. The Allies were mass-manufacturing gas, and knowledge of this was one more factor in prompting the Germans to sue for peace.

By the summer of 1918 the Allies had also changed their offensive tactics, using artillery not to obliterate but to neutralise pinpointed enemy positions and cut barbed-wire entanglements, laying down a curtain of fire behind the front line to stop reinforcements and deploying mobile units to surprise and outflank enemy positions. By this time tanks were also being used in large numbers, but they could move only at walking pace and ran out of petrol after sixteen miles. Here the Germans were very far behind, failing to produce enough tanks till it was too late. Although tanks often broke down and could easily be destroyed by artillery fire, they caused panic among German troops;

in 1919 Ludendorff gave the prospect of facing thousands of them as a major reason for having sought an armistice.

Economically, the Allies eventually proved stronger than the combined productive might of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and their allies Turkey and Bulgaria. The French produced huge quantities of armaments, supplying the American Expeditionary Force with most of what it needed, while the British could draw on the resources of the empire as well as on their own manufacturing base. It was the Americans, however, who had by far the largest economy, and US supplies of food, steel, munitions and equipment were crucial in keeping the Allies going in the final phase.

The best chance for the Germans lay in destroying American shipping in the Atlantic as it brought men and supplies to Europe. The British tried many methods of protecting shipping from U-boats, including arming merchant vessels or breaking up their outlines with geometrically patterned 'dazzle painting'. But the most effective by far was the convoy system: ships sailing in groups and accompanied by spotter-balloons and destroyers armed with depth charges were difficult to sink without incurring serious risk. U-boats in this period were not true submarines – they had no air supply and could remain below the surface only for quite short periods – and were relatively easy to spot and sink. In the end, there were simply not enough of them to win a decisive victory. Too many broke down or were damaged and had to limp back to port for repairs; nor were there enough trained personnel to man them. Plans for an enormous increase in construction came too late to make a difference.

The German government diverted as many resources as it could to arms and arms-related industries, neglecting agriculture and food supplies. The Allied blockade cut off essential agricultural imports, and by 1918 the death rate among women in Germany was nearly a quarter higher than its prewar level, with women weakened by poor nutrition succumbing to pneumonia and tuberculosis. Rations were below the minimum needed to survive, and a huge black market developed, while food riots led by women and children convulsed the major cities

in the winter of 1915-16. The next winter, generally known in Germany as the 'turnip winter' because of the failure of the potato crop, was even worse. Malnourishment led to declining productivity in war-related industries. More than half a million German civilians are reckoned to have died from malnutrition and related diseases during the war.

Conditions were even worse in Austria-Hungary, where soldiers were not only weak from hunger when the Italians launched their final, successful attack in 1918, but arrived at the front in their underwear and had to take uniforms from the bodies of those killed in front of them. Bulgaria was in the worst situation of all, with mass starvation averted only by American grain deliveries after the armistice. It was this that caused Hitler to decide that conquest of Europe's 'bread basket' in Ukraine would be a central war aim for the Nazis. Germans did not starve in the Second World War as they had in the First: millions of Eastern Europeans were made to starve instead.

Malnutrition and disease affected the quality of new recruits in the final phase of the war. Hitler recalled that in August and September 1918, 'the reinforcements coming from home rapidly grew worse and worse, so that their arrival meant, not a reinforcement but a weakening of our fighting strength. Especially the young reinforcements were mostly worthless. It was often hard to believe that these were sons of the same nation which had once sent its youth out to the battle for Ypres.' The German spring offensive had cost too many lives. In April 1918 alone, 54,000 soldiers were reported killed or missing, and 445,000 had to be taken off duty, wounded or sick. By July, the number of men in the field was 883,000 lower than in March and most units were below strength. One of the few major gaps in Stevenson's account is his failure to deal adequately with the role of the medical services: trench fever, typhus, gas gangrene and many other, often fatal infections grew more common as the war went on, and must have worsened combat effectiveness and morale. It would have been interesting to have an estimate of which side dealt with this better.

In the early stages of the war, eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds made up

10 per cent of German fatalities; by 1918, the figure was nearly 25 per cent. Inexperienced and poorly trained, they were demoralised by the spring offensive's failure. Things were made worse by the miserable rations, described graphically in Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. From May onwards, discipline began to break down, and from July huge numbers began to desert or surrender – 340,000 in all, nearly as many as were lost to enemy action or disease in the same period. Their spirits were dampened not least by millions of propaganda leaflets dropped over German lines from Allied balloons or planes, offering good food and comfortable quarters to anyone who gave himself up. By contrast, as they first stopped the German advance in its tracks, then turned it back, the Allied forces began to experience a fresh optimism, boosted during the summer by the arrival of large numbers of American troops. By November, the Central Powers were outnumbered by the Allies on the Western Front by a factor of nearly two to one.

It was this growing disparity in numbers, in addition to the potential deployment of a vast army of tanks, which most worried Ludendorff and prompted him to launch the spring offensive. Stevenson regards this decision as the cardinal error of the war, along with the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare just over a year earlier. In the First World War, attack was seldom the best means of defence. With bolder and more sophisticated leadership, the Reich might have stopped the Americans entering the conflict. But Kaiser Wilhelm II was too erratic to provide this, and at the crisis of the war the generals had pushed aside the civilian leadership and taken over themselves. Stevenson speculates that even after America's entry, Germany might have been able to make a separate peace by accepting Wilson's Fourteen Points, and forced the Allies to come to terms by sitting tight on the Western Front with troops transferred from the victorious East. Alternatively, if they were set on attacking, they might have done better to turn their firepower against British supply lines in north-west France instead of mounting a full-frontal assault in the centre. But even in 1918 Ludendorff was still pursuing the mirage of total victory.

Stevenson puts the blame for these failures on Germany's tendency to allow 'excessive influence for formidable technicians consumed by hubris, inadequately restrained by politicians whose judgements, if also deficient, were generally superior, but who could not depend on the emperor'. But Ludendorff was not just a technician: he was a highly political general. He loathed democracy and regarded the socialists – the largest political grouping in Germany, even if they were by now divided – as traitors. His section chief on the General Staff, the artillery expert Max Bauer, spent his spare time writing a rambling tract arguing for polygamy, and portraying war as the supreme expression of the masculine urge to rule the world through what he called 'detumescence'. Ludendorff was a modern general, but this went together with an equally modern form of politics that could fairly be called proto-fascist.

In August 1918, during a surprise Allied attack at Amiens, German troops, according to Allied observers, 'surrendered freely and in large numbers without any serious fighting'. Ludendorff, as Stevenson notes, began to fear that if this continued 'the army would become unreliable for domestic repression'. He was 'attracted by the plan to broaden the government, shifting blame onto those who had agitated so long against the war effort'. This would be only a temporary expedient, of course: as soon as peace had been signed, the old regime would return to power. In October, a quasi-democratic government led by the liberal Max von Baden and supported by the majority parties in the Reichstag was put into office. Ludendorff declared his keenness to continue with the submarine war, but the new government forced his resignation by threatening to resign itself – a neat reversal of the tactic by which he had got what he wanted from previous administrations. Armistice negotiations duly began.

When it became known that Germany was suing for peace, its army disintegrated: soldiers simply started going home. In Kiel, the naval command ordered the fleet to sail out to rescue its honour, severely compromised by having spent most of the war in harbour, with a final assault on the Royal Navy. Not surprisingly, the sailors rebelled,

arrested their officers and began to form workers' and sailors' councils. The German revolution had begun. Within a short time it led to the abdication of the Kaiser and the formation of a revolutionary council which after a few months ushered in the democratic Weimar Republic. The new regime was, as Ludendorff had hoped, obliged to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which was widely regarded as a national humiliation. Shortly afterwards, in March 1920, the old regime tried to make a comeback, with heavily armed troops and reactionary politicians and bureaucrats taking over Berlin, only to be defeated ignominiously by a general strike. In 1923, Ludendorff took part in the equally unsuccessful Beer Hall putsch, led by Adolf Hitler and his infant Nazi Party.

In the Allied countries there was general rejoicing at the victory. This had been, it was thought, the war that would end all wars. Those in the know were not so sure. On the day the armistice was signed, the French leader Georges Clemenceau's daughter said to him: 'Tell me, Papa, that you are happy.' 'I cannot say it,' Clemenceau replied, 'because I am not. *It will all be useless.*' And so it was.

David Stevenson's account of these events is absorbing and authoritative. Yet this is also a bloodless book. There are few quotations, and the biographical sketches Stevenson provides read as if they had been taken from official obituaries. Nevertheless, the way people experienced the war was vitally important. As Hitler lay in his hospital bed, struggling to find an explanation for Germany's defeat – according to his account in *Mein Kampf* – he experienced a blinding flash of revelation: Germany had not really been defeated at all. Instead, its victorious armies had been stabbed in the back by Jewish revolutionaries on the home front. Strikes and demonstrations, fomented by traitors, had undermined and finally destroyed the war effort. 'There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard either-or,' he concluded. 'I, for my part, decided to go into politics.'

Like much else in *Mein Kampf*, this statement smoothed over a more complex situation, and there were to be many twists and turns before he emerged the following year as a far-right politician. But long

before he came to power, Hitler had made it his mission to refight the First World War, this time with a different ending. The 'spirit of 1914', the mythical national community of all Germans in support of the Fatherland, would be recreated in the Third Reich; and the enemies of Germany, the Jews, would be destroyed. And next time, Germany would carry on fighting till the very end.