# Chapter 5
# 1916: The War of Attrition

## The Home Front

By the end of 1915 the war that had generally been expected to be over within six months had lasted for nearly a year and a half, and no one any longer expected a rapid conclusion. What had made it possible for it to last so long?

There is one simple answer: the continuing support of all the belligerent peoples, who not only endured the huge military losses but accepted without complaint the increasing controls and hardships demanded by the conduct of the war. Everywhere governments assumed powers over the lives of their citizens to a degree that was not only unprecedented but had previously been unimaginable. Where governments did not take control, volunteer organizations did. The expected financial collapse at the outbreak of war did not occur. Insurance rates were pegged, government loans were oversubscribed, printed currency replaced gold, labour shortage produced soaring wages, and government contracts created unprecedented prosperity for some sections of the business classes. Agrarian producers suffered severely from shortage of labour, but the demand for their produce was greater than ever. Indeed, after a year of war many sections of the population in all belligerent countries were better off than they had ever been before. But by the end of 1915 the mutual blockade was beginning to bite. Exports declined; prices rose; the inflation

resulting from the growing flood of paper money hit the salaried classes; imported raw materials for industry dwindled or disappeared. The combined pressures of the blockade and the demands of the armed forces resulted in growing shortages of food, fuel, and transport; and during 1916 the civilian population began seriously to suffer.

It was the well-organized and cohesive societies of Western Europe – Germany, France, and Britain – that coped best. Indeed, war only made them better organized and more cohesive. The class struggle between capital and labour that had everywhere dominated politics during the first decade of the century was suspended. Labour leaders were given positions of administrative and political responsibility. Labour shortage gave them new bargaining power. Bureaucracies, reinforced by experts from universities and businessmen, took control of more and more aspects of national life, and in many cases were never to lose it. By the end of the war every belligerent European state, even libertarian England, had become a command economy – Germany most of all.



The German, or rather the Prussian, bureaucracy had, like the Prussian army, always been regarded as a model of its kind. It had played little part in preparing for the war: mobilization and everything connected with it were in the hands of the military authorities. There was a good 'war chest' in the *Reichsbank*, but that was as far as civilian war preparations went. In spite of German vulnerability to blockade, nothing had been done to stockpile imported raw materials essential to war production. It was only on the initiative of the civilian Walther Rathenau, creator of the huge electrical combine AEG, that the War Office set up a War Materials Department, initially under his leadership, to control and distribute essential stocks. At the same time the shipping magnate Albert Ballin took the lead in creating a Central Purchasing Organization to rationalize the acquisition of essential imports. Both these organizations were largely run by the businessmen whose activities they controlled. The German chemical industry, the finest in

Europe, again took the initiative in developing substitutes (*ersatz*) for unavailable raw materials – wood pulp for textiles, synthetic rubber and nitrates for fertilizer, and explosives synthesized from the atmosphere. Even so, by the end of 1915 both food and clothing were becoming scarce. Rationing and price controls were introduced and generally accepted as fair; but in spite of the victories of their armies, the German people were becoming shabby, anxious, and, in the cities, increasingly hungry.

The British were no better prepared for a prolonged war, but the government had been ready with the initial military and political measures. A 'War Book' had already been prepared giving control over ports, railways, shipping, and insurance rates, and a Defence of the Realm Act was rushed through a unanimous parliament giving the government virtually plenary powers. The government itself, liberal and pacific under the relaxed leadership of Herbert Asquith, initially left the conduct of the war in the hands of Kitchener. Like so many of Britain's military leaders, Kitchener had spent most of his career overseas and was quite out of his depth in the job, but, unlike most of his contemporaries, he realized that the war would be a long one and would need a large army as well as a large navy to fight it. He planned to expand the existing six divisions of the Expeditionary Force to seventy, and appealed for volunteers to fill the ranks. The response was immediate. By the end of 1914 a million men had joined up, far more than could be armed and equipped. But these were less than a quarter of what would ultimately be needed, and by the summer of 1915 the supply of volunteers was drying up. Conscription was anathema to the Liberal government, and a series of half-measures was attempted, until in May 1916 it very reluctantly introduced compulsory military service for all men between 18 and 41.

The place in the workforce of those who joined up was partly filled by women. Women had already been organizing themselves before the war in the 'Suffragette' movement to demand the vote, and the leaders of that movement now swung their influence behind the

**7. Women workers in a munitions factory**



war effort. Women rapidly became indispensable, not only in the nursing and welfare services but in offices and factories and agriculture, changing the whole balance of society in the process. By 1918 that change was reflected in a new Representation of the People Act, by which the vote was extended from seven million to twenty-one million people, including women over the age of 30. Almost as a by-product of the war, Britain became something approaching a full democracy.

Volunteers and reservists might fill up the ranks of the armed forces, but providing enough weapons and ammunition to arm them was a very different matter. By the end of 1914 practically all the belligerent armies had exhausted their stocks of ammunition, and it was becoming clear that not only men but industry would have to be mobilized for the war effort. In Germany this was done under the auspices of the military, in Britain by the civilians. There

the initiative was taken by the most dynamic member of the government, David Lloyd George, who over Kitchener's protests created first a Committee and then in May 1915 a Ministry of Munitions, which combined industry, labour, and civil servants under government control with plenary powers over every aspect of munitions supply. In 1917 further such ministries were created, notably of Food and Shipping, largely staffed by experts from the industries themselves, to handle the problems of rationing that arose from the increasing pressure of blockade. In consequence, although by 1918 much of the population was undernourished, the British never approached the levels of hunger and deprivation that their enemies were to suffer by the end of the war.

France had lost 40 per cent of her coal deposits and 90 per cent of her iron ores to German occupation; but she was still a largely agrarian country, and, although her political leadership was notoriously volatile, her administration was in the hands of the formidably efficient bureaucracy created by Napoleon. More important, she retained access to the resources of the western hemisphere, so her excellent armaments industry did not suffer. Her government, like that of Britain a broad-based coalition of centre and left, initially left the conduct of the war to General Joffre, the hero of the Marne. By the end of 1915 the French army had suffered such terrible losses, and produced so little in the way of results, that doubts were growing about Joffre's competence – doubts that were to be confirmed by his failure to foresee the German offensive against Verdun the following spring. But there was as yet no inclination to make peace. Traditional patriotism of the right, embodied in the president, Raymond Poincaré, united with the bitter Jacobinism of his harshest critic Georges Clemenceau in determination to win the war and destroy Germany's power ever to begin another.

Very different was the situation in the Russian Empire. In spite of her huge manpower and the rapid industrialization of her economy, Russia suffered from two major and ultimately lethal drawbacks:

geographical isolation and administrative inefficiency. The first crippled her economy, the second made her incapable of mending it. When war began, essential imports dried up and her export trade – largely grain from southern Russia, blockaded at the Dardanelles – declined by 70 per cent. Domestic production could not fill the gap, although native entrepreneurs made huge profits. The Russian armies, like all the others, rapidly ran out of ammunition – and not only ammunition but guns and even small arms. In the huge battles of 1914–15 Russian infantrymen had to attack unprotected by artillery barrages and often lacking even rifles. Unsurprisingly, by the end of 1915 the Russian army had lost about four million men.

The inability of the slothfully incompetent Russian bureaucracy to remedy the situation led to public outcry and the creation of unofficial councils, *Zemstva*, first to deal with welfare (including the huge influx of refugees from the war zone) but then with every aspect of war administration – food, fuel, transport, and even military affairs. But, whereas in Western Europe such voluntary agencies were welcomed and used by the government, in Russia their activities were deeply resented – both by the professional bureaucrats themselves, including those in the armed forces, and by the aristocratic clique that dominated the court, led by the Czarina and her sinister adviser the monk Rasputin, who opposed the war anyway. In August 1915 this clique persuaded the Czar to dismiss his uncle Nicolas from command of the armies and take titular command himself. In his absence at headquarters the Czarina was able to take charge of the government and block any further attempts at reform.

The result was tragic. By the beginning of 1916 the efforts of the *Zemstva* were showing results. There was now an abundance of guns and ammunition, while the High Command had been shaken up and was reaching a new level of competence that was to be revealed by General Brusilov's spectacular success the following summer. But domestically everything was collapsing. The transport

system was overwhelmed by the increase in traffic, which led to a breakdown in the supply of fuel and, more important, food for the cities. The winter of 1915–16 saw severe shortage of both in all Russian cities, especially the capital Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been patriotically renamed in 1914). In 1916 the situation was to grow rapidly worse, with growing strikes in the towns and widespread evasion of military service in the countryside. By the end of the year Russia had become ungovernable.

The only consolation for the Allies was that the situation in Austria-Hungary was little better. The Monarchy's only advantage – and it was not always seen as such – was that the Germans could bring direct help. Had this not been so, the Austrians might well have collapsed even sooner than the Russians. The national – or, rather, multinational – solidarity with which the war was greeted did not last. By the spring of 1915, after Conrad's disastrous winter campaign, the Austrian army had lost, as we have seen, over two million men, including the bulk of the professional cadres that had held together a force speaking a dozen native languages. Only increasing infusions of German 'advisers' and staff officers kept it going at all. In domestic affairs the Hungarians increasingly went their own way and, being self-supporting in foodstuffs, suffered little from the prolongation of the war. The Austrians had no such advantage. For food they became dependent on the Hungarians, who were reluctant to provide it. The Austrian economy suffered as much as did the German from the effects of the Allied blockade, but the genially incompetent bureaucracy, fearful of imposing any strain on the doubtful loyalty of its population, barely attempted to plan a siege economy or to administer a rationing system. Vienna began to starve even earlier than Petrograd.



## The Verdun Campaign

By the end of 1915 the German armies had been everywhere victorious, but their victories had brought the end of the war no nearer. The patience of the civilians supporting them was beginning

to wear thin. A substantial *fronde* at home, led within the army by Hindenburg and Ludendorff but supported also by Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, was calling for Falkenhayn's removal. Falkenhayn still retained the confidence of a Kaiser who resented this attempt to usurp his authority, and did not waver in his belief that victory could be won only in the west. With good reason he calculated that his main adversary was no longer a France now nearing exhaustion, but Britain. Britain's armies were still fresh and largely uncommitted, and her command of the seas was not only maintaining the blockade on Germany but keeping open communications with the United States, on whose supplies the Allies were becoming increasingly dependent. To deal with the latter Falkenhayn urged the waging of unrestrained submarine warfare, which we shall consider in due course. On land, however, he believed that Britain's principal weapon was still not her own untried armies, but those of her ally France. If France could be struck such a shattering blow that she was compelled to ask for terms, 'England's sword', as Falkenhayn put it, would be struck from her hand. But, given the tried and tested power of the defensive on the Western Front, how could this be done?



For the solution, Falkenhayn turned to the method that he had already used so successfully in the east: attrition. France should be quite literally bled to death, through the destruction of her armies. The French should be compelled to attack in order to regain territory that they could not afford to lose, and the territory in question would be the fortress of Verdun. Verdun had no strategic importance in itself, but it lay at the apex of a vulnerable salient and was a historic site associated with all the great military glories of France. Falkenhayn reckoned that Joffre could not afford *not* to defend it, or fail to regain it if it were lost. The German armies would inevitably suffer losses in their own attack, but these, he believed, would be minimized by effective use of the techniques used so successfully at Gorlice-Tarnow: surprise, good staff work, and above all massive artillery superiority. So on 21 February 1916,

after a nine-hour bombardment with nearly 1,000 guns, the attack began.

Falkenhayn was right. Joffre had regarded Verdun as strategically unimportant and done little to prepare its defence, but political pressure made it impossible for him to abandon it. Under the command of General Philippe Pétain, whose stubborn belief in the power of the defensive had hitherto denied him promotion by his offensively minded superiors, the French troops obeyed their instructions to hang on to every yard of territory, and counter-attack to regain any that was lost. Attrition cut both ways: the French inflicted as many losses as they themselves suffered. Pétain did his best to spare his troops by rotating them, but Falkenhayn had to throw in his men with increasing desperation. It was guns that dominated the battlefield: by the end of June, when the German attacks finally ceased, the artillery of both sides had created a nightmare landscape such as the world had never before seen. To their horror was added that created by gas and flame-throwers in hand-to-hand war. Between them both sides lost half a million men and how many still lie buried in that charnel soil may never be known. Verdun remained in French hands. For the French it was a magnificent victory, but one that had almost shattered their army. For the Germans it was their first undeniable setback, a heavy blow to the morale of both army and people, and Falkenhayn paid the price. In August he was relieved of his command, and the Kaiser summoned Hindenburg, the faithful Ludendorff at his side, to take his place as Chief of the General Staff.



## The Battle of the Somme

By this time there had been a further development on the Western Front. We have seen how at the Chantilly Conference the previous November the Allied High Command had agreed that in 1916 they would combine their forces, east and west, in a common offensive. The western contribution would be an attack by the British and French armies at their point of junction east of Amiens on the river

Somme. Originally the forces contributed would have been about equal, but when the attack opened in July their heavy commitment at Verdun had reduced the French share to six first-line divisions as against the British nineteen. The British did not complain. This was the test for which their New Armies had been preparing for the previous two years. Their preparations were as meticulous, far-reaching, and clearly signalled as would be those for the landings in Normandy twenty-eight years later. Their attack was preceded by a week-long artillery bombardment in which a million and a half shells were fired: 'The wire has never been so well cut,' wrote General Haig on the eve of battle, 'nor artillery preparations so thorough'. So effective did he believe them to have been that many of the 120,000 men who went 'over the top' on the morning of 1 July were not equipped for an assault at all, but burdened with equipment to fortify positions already conquered for them by the artillery.



It did not work out like that. A large percentage of the shells fired, hastily manufactured by unskilled labour, were duds. Those that did explode failed to destroy defences dug deep into the chalk hillside, from which machine-gunners emerged, when the barrage lifted, to fire point-blank at the long lines of overloaded troops plodding across the bare chalk slopes towards them. Once the battle had begun, the careful co-operation between infantry and artillery on which so much depended disintegrated in the fog of war. By the end of the day 21,000 men were dead or missing.

Had the battle ended in spectacular success, these losses, which were no worse than those suffered by the French and Russian armies during the previous two years many times over, might have been regarded as an acceptable price to pay. But there was no such success. Instead they became, in the British group-memory, the epitome of incompetent generalship and pointless sacrifice. The attacks continued for a further four months. By then the Allied armies had advanced about ten miles, the Somme battlefield had been churned, like that of Verdun, into a featureless lunar

landscape, and the Allies had lost a total of 600,000 men. The size of the German losses has been a matter of furious controversy, but they were probably little less than those of the Allies, and the sufferings of their troops under continuous artillery bombardment had been no less terrible. Since the object of the attack had always been unclear – Haig's own expectations of a breakthrough had never been shared by his subordinate commanders – the Allies claimed a victory in terms of attrition. Indeed by the end of the year they, like their German adversaries, could see no other way of winning the war.

## Brusilov's Offensive



Paradoxically it was the Russians, now almost written off by both sides, whose contribution to the Allied offensive of 1916 was to be one of the most successful of the entire war. In March they had attacked in the northern part of the front towards Vilna, but, in spite of having accumulated a superiority not only in men but in guns and ammunition, they had been repulsed with a loss of 100,000 men. None the less they kept their promise to their allies by launching, in June, an attack on the Galician front under General Alexei Brusilov that tore a twenty-mile gap in the Austrian armies, penetrated to a depth of sixty miles, and took half a million prisoners. Brusilov's success can be partly attributed to the low morale of the Austrian forces and the abysmal quality of their High Command, together with the apparently limitless courage of the Russian troops themselves. But yet more important were the thought and preparation that had gone into the operation: the detailed planning, the close cooperation between infantry and artillery, the immediate availability of reserves to exploit success, and, above all, the measures taken to secure surprise. It was an indication that armies were at last beginning to feel their way out of the tactical deadlock.

For the Russians it was to be a Pyrrhic victory. Their armies suffered nearly a million further casualties, and never recovered. Their

success nerved their neighbour Romania, the last of the Balkan neutrals, to join the Allies, but the Rumanian army proved almost laughably incompetent, and was to be rapidly defeated in an autumn campaign by an Austro-German–Bulgarian offensive under the command of no less a figure than Falkenhayn, who was able to do something to retrieve his badly battered reputation. Rumania was overrun, together with oil and grain resources that the Central Powers were beginning so desperately to need. But it still brought the prospect of victory no nearer. The question was now being asked on both sides with increasing urgency: if there was no prospect of victory, why not make peace?