Chapter 7
1917: The Year of Crisis

Tactical Developments on the Western Front

It still remained an open question whether the United States' entry into the war could save the Allies from defeat. As 1917 wore on, this seemed increasingly doubtful.

Ludendorff did not intend to waste any more German lives. He now planned to stand on the defensive in the west until the U-boat offensive had achieved its expected results. A tour of the Somme battlefields had appalled him. Falkenhayn's policy had been to hold every inch of ground regardless of cost. As a result, the sufferings of the German troops at Verdun and on the Somme had been at least comparable with those of their attackers. Given that the German front lay deep inside French territory, some elasticity in defence seemed quite justifiable. Ludendorff therefore ordered a general withdrawal from the projecting salient between Arras and Soissons, abandoning all the Somme battlefields that had been so bitterly defended, to a shorter and well-fortified 'Hindenburg line' (the British title) some twenty-five miles in the rear. In the course of this withdrawal German troops trashed or burned all habitations, slaughtered the cattle, and poisoned the wells – activities commonplace enough on the Eastern Front, but only confirming the barbaric image that Germany now presented to the west.

The new defences were laid out on new principles. No longer were

troops crammed into front-line trenches to provide easy targets for enemy artillery. Trench lines were replaced by defended zones, based on widely separated machine-gun emplacements in concrete 'pillboxes' defended by barbed wire and covered by pre-ranged artillery. The bulk of the infantry was kept back out of range of the enemy guns, ready to counter-attack. Behind these forward zones lay others in sufficient depth to make any breakthrough almost impossible. Not only would such positions require fewer troops to defend them, but enemy artillery fire would fall largely on open ground and only add further obstacles to infantry attack.

The offensive riposte to such defences had already been explored on the Eastern Front the previous year with Brusilov's offensive: brief but intense artillery barrages in great depth on selected targets, followed by infantry attacks with reserves held well forward to penetrate between enemy strong points and cause confusion in rear areas. The French had also been thinking along similar lines. Their new commander-in-chief, Robert Nivelle, had had some success with them at Verdun, and was anxious to try them out on a larger scale. But what had worked against an Austro-Hungarian army already on the brink of dissolution would not necessarily work against the Germans, and the British were a great deal more cautious. They had themselves been developing caterpillar-tracked armoured vehicles, 'tanks', and had experimented with a few on the Somme; but the early models were so clumsy and mechanically defective that only their most enthusiastic protagonists expected that they could do more than help the infantry break into the enemy first line of defence. British tactical doctrine had been developing along different lines. For the British the 'queen of the battlefield' was now the artillery. By 1917 they possessed guns and ammunition that were both reliable and available in sufficient quantities. Improvements in observation, whether from aircraft or by sound ranging or flash sightings, now made possible almost pinpoint accuracy in counter-battery fire. Improvements in mapping, air photography, and meteorological analysis now enabled gunners to target objectives from map references without losing surprise by

firing sighting shots. Instantaneous fuses and gas or smoke shells made possible heavy and lethal barrages that did not make ground impassable to assaulting infantry. Finally, British gunners had perfected the 'creeping barrage' – an advancing line of gunfire behind whose cover the infantry could assault to within yards of the enemy positions.

The trouble was that all this demanded the most exact timing and elaborate staff work. The infantry themselves were adjusting to meet the requirements of trench warfare, with light machine guns, hand grenades, and trench mortars supplementing if not replacing rifles as their staple armaments; but their action was still confined within a rigid framework determined by the needs and timetables of gunners with whom communications were still primitive; and, once the battle began, those communications still fell apart. Further, once the initial objectives had been attained, the guns had to be re-ranged, if not physically moved forward, to engage further targets. As a result, the British High Command had developed a technique that became known as 'bite and hold': carefully prepared attacks against limited objectives, which were then fortified and held while preparations were made for the next phase of attack. Within its limits this technique was very successful; but not only was it of little value in achieving the 'breakthrough' of which Haig himself still dreamed, but it discouraged the kind of initiative at lower levels of command that was now commonplace within the German army.

The Allied Offensives in Spring 1917

Using such techniques as these, the Allied High Command hoped that their offensives of 1917 would not repeat the disasters of the previous year. But the losses suffered at Verdun and on the Somme had eroded the confidence that the French and British governments had hitherto placed in their military leaders. Joffre, as we have seen, had been replaced by Nivelle. Lloyd George did not quite dare do the same with Haig, but in a devious intrigue he subordinated

him to French command – a manœuvre from which relations between British military and civilian leadership never recovered. Nivelle's own optimism was not shared by his fellow-generals. His political support was undermined by the overthrow of the French Premier Aristide Briand, whose successors had little confidence in Nivelle's military plans. When on 16 April Nivelle launched his much-heralded offensive across the Aisne against the wooded heights of the Chemin des Dames, it was under the worst possible auspices. The Germans had received ample advance warning; French plans had been disrupted by the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg line; and the weather was terrible. Instead of the promised breakthrough, there was a painful advance of a few miles that had to be called off after ten days, by which time the French had suffered over 130,000 casualties. Nivelle was replaced by Pétain, the hero of Verdun, but by now the French army had had enough. It collapsed, not so much into mutiny as into the equivalent of a civil strike, whole units refusing to obey orders and return to the front. Pétain gradually nursed it back to health with a minimum of severity, largely by improving its conditions and refraining from any major offensive actions, but the French army on the Western Front could make little further contribution for the remainder of the year.

The British did better – at least to begin with. A week before the opening of the French offensive across the Aisne they had attacked further east, at Arras. The first phase of the operation succeeded brilliantly, with Canadian troops seizing the dominating Vimy Ridge. Haig again hoped for a breakthrough, but the new German defences baffled him. The British offensive once more gradually slowed down until it was broken off at the end of May with a loss of a further 130,000 men. But there could be no question in Haig's mind of suspending his attacks. By this time not only the French, but also the Russians, were *hors de combat*; no effective help would be forthcoming from the United States for another year; and, worst of all, the German submarine campaign seemed to be succeeding. As a wag put it at the time,

'The question is, whether the British Army can win the war before the Navy loses it.'

Sea and Air Warfare

At first unrestricted submarine warfare seemed likely to achieve all the results the German navy had promised. Their target had been to sink 600,000 tons of shipping a month, doubling the previous rate. They reached it in March. In April they went on to sink 869,000 tons. There they peaked. Sinkings hovered around the 600,000 ton mark all summer, were down to 500,000 tons in August, and by the end of the year had fallen to 300,000 tons. Why?

The most obvious reason was the introduction of convoys, a system that the Admiralty had declared impracticable since, among other reasons, it believed that it did not have enough destroyers to escort the amount of shipping involved. Since it included all coast-wise shipping in its calculations, it was proved badly wrong, and when, at the insistence of Lloyd George, convoys were introduced at the beginning of April, their success was immediate. Once the Americans began to make their weight felt, they were able not only to reinforce convoy protection but to build merchant vessels faster than submarines could sink them. The Germans had also miscalculated the cargo space available to the Allies, the degree of British dependence on grain imports, and above all the British capacity for counter- measures in the form of commerce control and commodity allocation through rationing. The British government indeed operated a siege economy so successfully that by the end of 1917 its grain reserves had actually doubled.

None of this, however, was apparent in the summer of 1917, when the population of London was subjected to yet another ordeal: daylight bombing from the air.

The importance of air power had not been underestimated by any of the belligerents before 1914. For ten years previously imaginative

fiction had depicted the horrors of air bombardment of cities by aircraft that had yet to be invented, but the military themselves were more concerned with the effect of aircraft on surface warfare – in particular their capacity to carry out the reconnaissance operations that could no longer be undertaken by cavalry. But, since such reconnaissance was possible only if uninterrupted by enemy aircraft, the main function of the air arm rapidly became to establish command of the air over the battlefield, whether by direct air combat or by destruction of enemy airfields. In single combat between air aces above the mud of the trenches, the traditional romance of war enjoyed a very brief revival.

'Strategic bombardment', attack on the civil resources of the enemy, was slower to develop. German dirigible balloons, named after their chief sponsor the Graf von Zeppelin, had attacked Antwerp in August 1914 (British aircraft responded against Zeppelin sheds in Düsseldorf in October) and began night raids on the United Kingdom the following January. But their navigation was too inaccurate and their destructive power too slight for these raids to be more than a dramatic nuisance; one, however, that provided propagandists with further evidence of German 'frightfulness'. By 1917 more reliable long-range aircraft had been developed, and that summer German Gotha bombers carried out daylight raids on London. The physical damage and casualties were slight but the moral effect was enormous. Against the advice of the military, who needed all the resources they could get for the war in France, an Independent Air Force was formed, based in eastern France, with the task of retaliating against German territory. Since the only targets within range were the towns of the upper Rhine the immediate impact of these operations was negligible, but in the long run their implications were far-reaching. On the very inadequate evidence of their success the newly formed Royal Air Force was to build a doctrine of strategic bombing that would dominate British and later American strategic thinking for the rest of the twentieth century.

The Collapse of the Eastern Front

Meanwhile the Eastern Front was disintegrating. In January there was still hope that the Russian army, now well supplied with guns and ammunition, might still play its part in a joint spring offensive. But in February its commanders confessed that morale was so low, and desertion so general, that they could no longer rely on their troops. The morale of the army only reflected that of the country as a whole. Revolutionary agitation, common enough before the war but anaesthetized when hostilities began, was now almost unchecked. In March bread riots in Petrograd turned to revolution when the police and army made common cause with the rioters. The Czar was persuaded to abdicate. A regime of bourgeois moderates took over the machinery of government, but an alternative focus of power was established in the capital by a council (Soviet) of soldiers and workers, which established a network of alternative authority throughout the country and called for an immediate peace.

These events were at first welcomed in the West, not least in the United States. Czarist Russia had been an embarrassing ally in a war fought to make the world safe for democracy, and the new government under Alexander Kerensky declared its intention of continuing the war for the defence of the Russian homeland. In July Brusilov attempted to repeat his triumph of the previous year with a major offensive on the Galician front, with some initial success. Then the Germans counter-attacked in the north. The Russian defences crumbled. Retreat became a rout, and the speed of the German advance was determined only by their ability to keep up with Russian troops now 'voting with their feet' and going home. In September the Baltic fortress of Riga fell after a hurricane bombardment devised by the innovative genius of a certain Colonel Bruchmuller. Meanwhile in Petrograd a revolutionary leader, Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov Lenin, whose views had been regarded as too extreme by all but his closest colleagues and whose return from exile in Switzerland had been sagaciously facilitated by the German

High Command, had been voicing the demands of the huge majority of his countrymen in three simple words: bread, land, and peace. In November he precipitated a second *coup d'état*. This created not a vacuum of power as had that in March, but a ruthless dictatorship whose immediate aims commanded the support of the Russian people even if its programme and ideology did not. Lenin immediately asked the German High Command for an armistice, and in December both sides met to discuss peace terms at Brest-Litovsk.

Passchendaele

Although disaster on so catastrophic a scale had not been foreseen by the Western allies in the summer of 1917, they had no illusions about the state of the Russian army. Indeed its weakness provided one of the strongest arguments in favour of continuing pressure on the Western Front, and against the policy, increasingly attractive to the French High Command, of remaining on the defensive and awaiting the arrival of the Americans in 1918. By then the Russians might well be out of the war and the Germans able to concentrate all their forces on breaking the Western allies. But the French were no longer calling the shots, and their collapse left the British High Command, for the first time, in a position to determine its own operational strategy.

Sir Douglas Haig, with some reason, now saw the outcome of the war as resting on his shoulders and the armies of the British Empire under his command. He had little expectation that the Americans would arrive in time, and in sufficient numbers, to prevent disaster. In his view the only hope of victory was to continue the grinding pressure on the German people through the attrition of their army. This should now be done in Flanders over the old battlefields round Ypres, where the British army could fight unencumbered by its allies and where a substantial advance might capture the Belgian ports used by the U-boats as their forward bases – an idea endorsed, naturally enough, by the Royal Navy. Such an advance, Haig

10. The Western Front: the battlefield of Passchendaele

believed, could be achieved by a series of limited attacks following so fast on each other that the Germans would have no time to recover. Lloyd George, dreading a repeat of the Somme holocaust, was openly sceptical about the plans, but after his misjudgement over the Nivelle affair he felt in no position to veto them. Indeed, a preliminary attack launched against the Messines ridge south of Ypres at the beginning of June, with limited objectives, total surprise and massive artillery support (3.5 million shells were fired and the German front line destroyed by 0.5 million kilograms of high-explosive mines) proved one of the greatest tactical successes of the war. But when the main attack opened at the end of July, it ran into all the problems that had beset the campaign on the Somme. The preliminary barrage (4.3 million shells) had forfeited all surprise; its elaborate timetables were disrupted as usual by the friction of war; enemy resistance was in greater depth and more determined than had been expected; and heavy rain assisted the guns of both sides to churn the battlefield into impassable mud.

None the less, Haig battled on, achieving limited successes at huge cost, until at the beginning of November Canadian troops captured the ridge of Passchendaele, after which the entire battle came to be named. By that time the British had lost a further 240,000 men, 70,000 of them dead. German losses totalled about 200,000. Haig's critics look at the former figures; his defenders at the latter. If we consider the effect of this pressure on the German people themselves, it must be said that his defenders have a stronger case than has generally been admitted. But the price was almost unbearably heavy.

Haig's critics were provided with further ammunition when, on 20 November, he launched a second attack, at Cambrai. Part of his object was to try out on a large scale the new techniques that had been developing within the British army of close cooperation between the three arms of infantry, tanks, and artillery. Surprise was complete; German defences were overrun to a depth of four miles, and in England church bells were rung to celebrate the victory. They were premature. Ten days later the Germans counter-attacked and retook all the ground they had lost. As a result, Haig lost his last vestige of credit with his political masters, and Lloyd George took over the strategic conduct of the war.

Caporetto

The losses on the Somme in 1916 had left Lloyd George deeply sceptical about the wisdom of continuing to attack on the Western Front at all, and throughout 1917 he had been urging the High Command to look elsewhere. Two theatres appeared more promising: Italy and the Middle East.

The Italian front had been active throughout 1916. For the Austrians, as we have seen, Italy was always the preferred adversary. In May, much against the advice of his German allies, who saw no strategic advantage in doing so, Conrad launched a major offensive through the mountains of the Trentino. After an initial success it

had slowed to a halt. Admittedly Conrad could claim a major victory – the Italians lost about 286,000 men, 45,000 of them prisoners of war – but its main strategic consequence had been to reduce the resources available to the Austrians when Brusilov attacked the following month. Meanwhile the main Italian armies under General Luigi Cadorna had been assaulting the strong Austrian defences forty miles further east on the Isonzo river. They continued to do so until November in a prolonged battle of attrition on the stony plateau of the Carso, north of Trieste, which was renewed the following spring. By August 1917 Cadorna had lost over 200,000 men on this bloodiest of battlefields, and both the Italian and the Austrian armies had reached breaking point. But Ludendorff, having disposed of the Russians, could now spare resources to help his ally, and sent seven divisions to reinforce the Austrians on the Isonzo. Using all the artillery and infantry techniques they had now perfected on the Eastern Front, the Germans smashed through the Italian defences at Caporetto on 25 October, taking 30,000 prisoners. The entire Italian front collapsed, and only re-formed two weeks later seventy miles to the rear along the Piave, with the loss of 275,000 prisoners, 2,500 guns, and vast quantities of stores. In addition, about half a million Italian deserters had melted into the landscape.

For Lloyd George the Italian collapse was providential. Haig was summarily ordered to send five divisions from the Western Front, which effectively closed down his own offensive which, together with six French divisions, restored stability in the Italian theatre. More important, Lloyd George used the opportunity of an Allied conference at Rapallo on 5 November to collaborate with the new French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (a man after his own heart, one who had even less time for generals) in setting up an Allied Supreme War Council, consisting of the Allied political leaders with their military advisers, to lay down military policy, to allot forces to the various theatres, and, most important, to organize and allocate military supplies. Both Haig and Pétain intensely resented this usurpation of their authority, but their power had

been broken. Haig's independence was still further enfeebled by the replacement of his senior staff officers, and by the removal of his greatest ally in Whitehall, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir William Robertson, in favour of Lloyd George's own protégé, General Sir Henry Wilson. In both France and Britain civilian control of strategy was now complete.

Within a month of the creation of the Supreme War Council, Lloyd George received even better news. On 11 December a British army entered Jerusalem.

The Middle East

The Turks had proved themselves a stalwart ally for the Central Powers. Their armies consisted of tough if largely illiterate peasants, whose lack of modern equipment was balanced by their own dogged courage and the leadership of young, energetic officers advised and reinforced by German experts. Their major front was the Caucasus, where they had suffered severely – first through the repulse of their unwise attack in the winter of 1914–15, then from a Russian offensive under the skilful leadership of General Nikolai Yudenich in the summer of 1916. It was in the course of that campaign that the Turkish government implemented a programme of mass deportations and massacres of the indigenous Armenian population so savage as to verge on genocide.

Simultaneously British Empire troops had invaded Turkish territory – not only from Egypt, but from the base they had established in November 1914 at Basra, at the head of the Persian Gulf, to secure the oil installations and to encourage local revolt. From there in 1915 they had advanced up the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, initially to safeguard their base but eventually in the hope of seizing Baghdad. Administratively the expedition was a disaster, its largely Indian units suffering huge casualties from sickness. It became a military catastrophe in April 1916 when, after a siege lasting nearly five months, a British force was compelled to

surrender at Kut-el-Amara, some eighty miles short of Baghdad. Of the 10,000 prisoners taken, 4,000 died in captivity – a fate not shared by their commander, Major-General Charles Townsend, who enjoyed a level of hospitality at the hands of his captors that awoke very unfavourable comment. A stronger expedition was then mounted in December, which recaptured Kut and the following March occupied Baghdad.

Egypt was a British *place d'armes* second only to the United Kingdom in importance, defending as it did the line of imperial communications through the Suez Canal. After the repulse at the Dardanelles the garrison successfully defended the canal against a wildly ambitious Turkish raid across the Sinai desert in July 1916. The British then themselves advanced through the desert to the border of Palestine – an achievement made possible only by the kind of meticulous logistical planning that was to become the hallmark of British military operations in both world wars. After several attempts to break the Turkish lines at Gaza had failed in March 1917, a new British commander was sent out in the person of General Sir Edmund Allenby. Allenby had commanded an army on the Western Front without conspicuous success, but he proved himself a master of the kind of mobile warfare that was still feasible in Palestine, using mounted units in a way impossible on the Western Front together with aircraft working in close cooperation with the ground forces. Allenby's German opponent was none other than Erich von Falkenhayn, now exiled by his enemies far from the centre of power; but with all his skill Falkenhayn could do little with forces now far inferior in numbers and equipment to the British. At the end of October Allenby took the offensive, swept the Turks out of Gaza, and pressed forward to Jerusalem to provide the British people, as Lloyd George had requested, with a 'Christmas present' – one that was all the more welcome after the four-month horror of the Passchendaele campaign.

The following September – 1918 – Allenby was to complete the conquest of Palestine by the sweeping victory of Megiddo – a battle

in which, for the last time in Western military history, mounted troops played a leading role. Pressing north, his troops had overrun Syria by the end of October, and the Turks sued for an armistice. In his advance up the coast Allenby's land flank was protected, and Turkish rail communications sabotaged, by friendly Arab forces recruited and led by the young archaeologist Colonel T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence's exploits were a marginal part of a marginal campaign, but they were to gain him a reputation that shone all the more brightly against the dismal background of the Western Front.

Allenby's victories were to establish a brief British hegemony in the Middle East. Among other things they made it possible to implement the promise made in November 1917 by the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, to establish 'a National Home for the Jewish People' in Palestine. Unfortunately the promise was made without consulting either the indigenous population or any of the Arab potentates who had been promised the territory in return for their military support. Nor had they been consulted about an understanding reached in 1916 by British Foreign Office officials with their French opposite numbers ('the Sykes–Picot Agreement') to divide the region between their two spheres of influence. The attempt to reconcile all these irreconcilable obligations was to keep British officials busy, and the region in turmoil, until the Second World War, and created agonizing problems that at the beginning of the twenty-first century still remain unsolved.