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'In 1900, the West, or, more accurately, the North-West, appeared to have all the trumps, to have discovered some end-of-history formula. It produced one technological marvel after another, and the generation of the 1850s – which accounted for most of the generals of the First World War – experienced the greatest “quantum leap” in all history, starting out with horses and carts and ending, around 1900, with telephones, aircraft, motor-cars ... In 1914, in other words, a strange new world was coming about.'



NORMAN STONE WORLD WAR ONE A SHORT HISTORY

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On the very day the Caporetto offensive was officially halted, a Bolshevik delegation arrived to arrange an armistice at Brest-Litovsk, the headquarters of the German army in the east, a town ruined in the retreat of 1915, few of its major buildings usable. To begin with, the Bolsheviks had supposed that, if they just appealed for peace, the ordinary soldiers would throw down their arms and call it a day. Trotsky announced that his foreign policy would be 'to launch a few proclamations and then shut up shop'. He published the 'secret treaties' – the agreements, which he found in the archives, as to the carving up of the world by the Entente. However, despite some fraternization and, somewhat later, some sympathetic strikes, 'imperialism', as the Bolsheviks saw it, did not collapse. The Russian army had disintegrated, the capital was in chaos, and the soldiers were going home, 'voing with their feet', as Lenin said. There was not much else that the Bolsheviks could do but negotiate an armistice and hope that the propaganda would strike a chord in the war-weary of all nations. Their rather motley gathering, peasant and all, arrived at Brest-Litovsk, there to be treated to another of those surreal scenes that marked the German war effort: a banquet, the peasant sitting between Austrian aristocrats who asked him about the planting of onions. The armistice was arranged, and terms of peace were discussed. These discussions were interminable, at times philosophical,

at times historical: both sides were playing for time, the Germans in the expectation that the non-Russian peoples of the Tsarist empire would declare independence, the Bolsheviks in the expectation of universal revolution. In the event, the Germans delivered an ultimatum, signed a separate peace treaty with the Ukraine, marched in to protect their new satellite, and moved forward into territory vacated by Russian soldiers, especially in the Baltic regions. For the Central Powers, expecting that the blockade would be tightened, the resources of these areas mattered greatly, and for the Austrians – the population of Vienna below the bread line – it was a matter of life and death. Would the Bolsheviks recognize the satellite states – Finland, Georgia, the Ukraine, and so on? Lenin persuaded the Bolsheviks: go back to the Russian heartland, recoup, and wait to see what happens. He persuaded them, and on 3 March the Bolsheviks signed a treaty that turned much of Tsarist Russia into a huge German protectorate. General von Eichhorn ran the Ukraine; General von Lossow wandered into Georgia, to control the oil of the Trans-Caucasus; there were plans for U-Boats to be transported to the Caspian itself. Ludendorff talked of invading British India; Otto-Günther von Wesendonck, grandson of the woman who had inspired Wagner's songs of that name, opined that 'even the idea of a German land-route to China can no longer be dismissed as fantasy.'¹

Forty divisions were now transferred from east to west. This gave Germany superiority at least until the Americans arrived – a process that took the Allies time, and even disrupted the trade in vital raw materials. The war-economic position of Germany was now such that her alternatives were outright victory or outright collapse. The Hindenburg programme had involved an enormous effort, with huge investments in machinery and factories. Output was at its maximum. But it was at the expense of the longer term: the railway network was

starting to give out, so was agricultural machinery and industrial plant. If the war were not speedily ended, Germany would plunge. There was a clear choice: to make the last great effort at outright victory, or try for peace. In fact, around this time came the only really serious move towards a general agreement, when Kühlmann, the foreign secretary, hinted to the British that Germany might give up Belgium in return for a free hand in the east. Niall Ferguson rightly says that at this moment the Allies' morale was lower than at any other point in the war. It has also rightly been remarked that, since about 1850, there has only really been one question in British foreign policy: Germany or Russia? A few despairing conservatives and some farsighted socialists might agree, in the end, on Germany. They were isolated: every measure of public opinion shows huge support for war to the bitter end, and Lloyd George, after some hesitation, responded to it. He would be The Man Who Won the War, not The Man Who Made the Peace. He said himself: a Germany running Russia would be unbeatable; would swallow up everything else. And in any case, there was America; and by now other states were queuing up to declare war on Germany, with a view to taking over ships and property. Lloyd George told his allies about Kühlmann's approach, and declared that he regarded the French claim to Alsace-Lorraine as a British war aim. Kühlmann became enraged. It did him no good: Ludendorff soon engineered his dismissal, and he was replaced by Admiral von Hintze, who did what he was told. The might-have-been peace ran into the sand; there would be no British representative at Brest-Litovsk. Much ink has been spent on peace initiatives during the war, but Kühlmann's was the only serious one from Berlin. President Wilson also produced a plan that was serious: the 'Fourteen Points', in essence about the self-determination of nations. The Germans at Brest-Litovsk could have accepted these then adapted them in detail. Instead they went ahead for outright victory.

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On the ground, it looked very promising. Recent battles – Riga, Cambrai, Caporetto – had shown that the German army had found a method of restoring mobility to the battlefield, and the professional talent of generals such as Otto von Below, Georg von der Marwitz, Oskar von Hutier, the architects of these victories, was beyond compare. Besides, the Germans in the west now had superiority of numbers. There had been 147 German divisions in the west as against 178 Allied ones. There were now 191 German divisions, thanks to the Russian collapse: 137,000 officers, three and a half million men, with the horses to keep matters mobile. In other words, the German superiority could be concentrated, with crushing effect, at any single spot on the line (as had been achieved at Caporetto). A set of operations, with code-names, was planned, and the first, named after the Archangel, was 'Michael'. Other code-names, for parts of the German line, came from Wagner's *Ring* – 'Siegfried', 'Kriemhild', 'Hunding-Brünhild', for example.

Common sense dictated that, if you were attacking two enemies, you attacked the join, where their armies met. Each enemy would look after himself, maybe retreating in different directions – in this case, the French to cover Paris and the British the Channel ports, from which they could get away to England. This had nearly happened back in 1914. Now, the British joined up with the French just beyond the old Somme battlefields, around St Quentin. Between there and Arras, to the north, stood the British Fifth Army, commanded by Gough, a gallant man with a history of bad luck. Only nine of some fifty British divisions had not undergone the miseries of Passchendaele, and morale was not brilliant. Officers noticed that the men no longer sang the (superb) songs that they had made up earlier. The mood in the British army was characteristic, 'we're here because we're here because we're here because we're here'. Besides, the new principles of this war were not so well understood on the British side as on the German. Otto von Below,

especially, understood how to combine infantry and artillery, as at Caporetto. He was now moved to northern France, for Ludendorff's offensive. But if offensive techniques had now been vastly improved, so, too, had defensive ones. The new principle was 'defence in depth'; Passchendaele had been a model of it. Gough and his staff had not absorbed the logic of it, for various reasons – partly because they did not have the numbers of men required, partly because they still reckoned that a strong front line was in itself a good thing, partly because they did not trust their men to make complicated manoeuvres under fire, partly because they underestimated the Germans (who were supposed to have been demoralized by Passchendaele), but mainly because of a very British notion that things would be all right on the night. Nearly 90 per cent of Gough's battalions were within 3,000 yards of the front line, far too close to enemy artillery. But there was a deeper weakness. The British had suffered 800,000 casualties in 1917, and were again under a million in strength; after Passchendaele, the men were not inclined to trust the staff, and the general reserve, of eight divisions, was in the north, in Flanders. The Americans had begun to arrive, but they had not been trained and had only a single division ready for battle. Finally, Haig himself, surrounded by creepy young officers, helping him on and off with his coat – like Cadorna before Caporetto – showed no signs at all of worry. Why should the Germans, if they did attack, do any better than he himself had done?

Ludendorff performed prodigies of concentration, by stealth. He brought up 750,000 men – seventy-six divisions against twenty-six (300,000). He also brought up three quarters of the entire artillery of the western front – 6,600 guns – giving a superiority of three to one. The new weaponry was to hand – light machine-guns, portable by one or two soldiers, grenades that could be fired from a rifle rather than thrown by hand – and infantry tactics could therefore become much more flexible.

The German army's greatest strength lay in the profusion of non-commissioned officers – sergeants and corporals (Hitler was one, and he got two Iron Crosses for bravery). These were men who, without being officers, knew how to command small bodies, whereas in other armies you had to have an officer (in the Russian case, even now, they man the telephones). There was a special school in Belgium to train infantry that would move forward, fast, dodging and weaving, giving each other cover fire. Such were the *Sfosstrupps*. They were not to try and deal with enemy posts but to move forward and destroy communications. Enemy forces holding out would be covered by other troops, not similarly trained. But there were other advantages for the attackers. Aircraft had come into their own, and the Germans could photograph British gun positions and identify them from a map reference without registering through a gunnery observer. There were now 2,600 aircraft, made of metal and single-wing.

The British Fifth Army was to face this extraordinary machinery. It then had a final piece of bad luck – Gough's fate. Dawn on 21 March occurred at 4.40 a.m. and it was a very foggy morning. The British gunners could not see what they were doing. The German bombardment, in seven phases, went on until 9.40, over a million shells being fired off, firstly against the artillery and finally on the front lines, against which 2,500 trench mortars were fired. An especially irritating gas was used, which caused some of the defenders to tear off their gas masks to scratch the itch, whereupon one or other of the poison gases took effect. The British rear areas were shattered, communications breaking down, and Gough, commanding the Fifth Army, lost control, as Capello had done at Caporetto, though his northern neighbour, Byng of the Third Army, held the bastion at Arras, to finally decisive effect. On the southern side, at La Fère and St Quentin, there was an exceptionally rapid advance: in a week, the Germans advanced forty miles on a

fifty-mile front. They inflicted 300,000 casualties, and the tactics of fast-moving infiltration meant that one third of these were prisoners. The British lost 1,300 guns.

They retreated back over the old Somme battlefield, and fell back on Amiens, the essential railway junction, distinguished by a cathedral that is the most accomplished, in terms of mathematics, of all the great French cathedrals. It was an extraordinary success for Germany, because mobility had been restored to the western front, such as had not been seen since 1914, when it had still been possible for cavalry to canter grandly over open fields. Now, the twentieth century had happened: there were immense advances in technology of all sorts, and Germany was leading the field. The success was such that Ludendorff himself lost any sense of perspective, forgot the lessons of Caporetto, and took his foot off the brake – a German weakness. He forgot that, however victorious an army, it would lose steam as it advanced. He sent troops in, first to the left, to reinforce the success, on the St Quentin–La Fère side – and then thought that he should perhaps try to take Arras on the other wing. But the troops were only able to carry light weaponry and the guns could not be easily dragged over the mud of the old Somme. The German offensive ended up with a ridge just short of the railway junction at Amiens, from which, with very careful firing, the heaviest German guns could reach the station, but only just. And then the rules of this war re-asserted themselves: the importance of reserves, in this case brought up by a British classic, the red, double-decker London bus. Besides, German troops, falling upon masses of British stores, gorged themselves in a way unthinkable behind their own lines.

There were two great differences from Caporetto, other than mountainous terrain. In the first place, as mentioned, German guns could not be easily hauled over the slough of despond of the old Somme battlefields, whatever Porsche's engineering

genius; quite apart from the shortage of petrol, there was a near-absence of rubber, such that wooden or iron tyres were used for lorries, and these churned up the roads. Secondly, the Cadorna factor – preposterous obstinacy in error, and preposterous blaming of everyone else – did not come into play. The British infantry were at last well-served by their commander, who now did what he should have done before, and accepted a French commander, who would have charge of the reserves. On 26 March, at Doullens, he put himself under Foch, who, unlike so many other generals, learned instead of just repeating himself. He had in reality learned vastly since his days on the Marne, and he had a genius for making himself trusted by all parties. He controlled the reserves and thereby could dictate the strategy, which, with tact, he now did. By London bus, by lorry, by railway, twelve French divisions and some of the British reserve from Flanders came to the Amiens lines. There was no muddled retreat in different directions (as had happened at Gorlice in 1915 and at Caporetto), and by 4 April the German offensive was called off.

But Ludendorff's main idea was to clear the British from Flanders and capture the Channel ports – expelling the British from the Europe that Brest-Litovsk implied. The March offensive had drawn in forty-eight of the fifty-six British divisions, together with forty French ones, and Haig had only a single division in reserve. At Ypres, the British were in a very vulnerable position, and could be fired upon from three sides – a position that they had worsened for themselves by taking Passchendaele, part of a ridge at the tip of their salient. The German trains rolled again, and those thousands of guns were transferred. The aircraft identified British gun positions, and the guns fired against map references, without giving any indication beforehand that they even existed on the ground. At least the British had had the sense to abandon their thin salient at Passchendaele, but, even so, they were stretched too thinly

on ground that reasons of prestige and propaganda forbade them to give up. On 9 April, two German armies attacked, again with the methods of 21 March, and again with the luck of very favourable weather. On the southern side, they struck at two divisions of Portuguese. They, like the Italians, were being made to run so as to learn to walk, or even to toddle. Their men were therefore used as cannon-fodder to get British support for the maintenance of the Portuguese empire in Africa. They were not enthusiastic. They broke. In the Ypres salient, defence in depth could not be organized in any event, given that the whole thing bulged out into German-held territory. There was another notable German victory. On 12 April the Germans not only took back the Messines ridge but, later, went on to seize a continuation of it, Mount Kemmel, the highest point all around. This was the moment at which the British were threatened by collapse, and Haig responded: he told his men the truth – 'backs to the wall' – and from then on displayed qualities (not least, an ability to learn) that come as a surprise. But he was helped by Ludendorff, success having gone to his head. He repeated his mistake of 21 March, and kept on. Then he ran into reserves brought up by red bus and rail – in this case, twelve French divisions. The railway lines at Hazebrouck and Bethune remained in British hands, the Germans arriving over shattered countryside on foot, and exhausted in attacks over what was now marshy country on the river Lys (which gave its name to the battle). The Allies had lost 150,000, the Germans 110,000 (to which the quarter-million of the March offensive should be added) and these were losses that the Allies could afford, the Germans not.

There followed a long pause. The last conscription-year of Germany was being called up early, as the schoolboys took their final exams. There were also prisoners of war, returning from Russia, and Austria-Hungary was prevailed upon to send

some men (they arrived without boots at Metz). The ranks were refilled, and the munitions production of the Hindenburg programme was still considerable, although there were signs of overheating. Ludendorff's idea was still to take the Channel ports and disrupt the arrival of Anglo-American troops, but he needed to drain off the reserves that had been built up in that region since the Lys battle. He opted for a stroke against the French front north-east of Paris, on the Aisne, at the Chemin des Dames, and was again lucky. The French commander was one Duchêne, a man of singular inability to learn. He placed most of his men in the front positions, where they were most vulnerable to bombardment, and there were also five British divisions that had been withdrawn because they had had a very bad time in the March offensive and needed to rest in what was supposed to be a quiet area. The noise of German movements was concealed by, of all things, the croaking of frogs in the Aisne, and the surprise was almost complete. On 27 May, 5,300 guns opened up, against 1,400, and two million shells were fired off in four hours, with the usual favourable weather.

The German Seventh Army (Hans von Böhn) then performed a near-miracle of advance, scaling almost vertical ridges, crossing the river Aisne to capture bridges intact, and even struggling across marsh. They reached the river Marne, from where a heavy gun, 'Big Bertha' (named after the wife of the arms-manufacturer, Krupp), sent shells to Paris, forty miles away. Then Ludendorff once again repeated his mistake of 21 March and 9 April. He went on, and on. German troops with light weaponry were taking on Allied reserves arriving, with heavy weaponry, by rail – thirty French reserve divisions. There were also now the Americans, who at Châneau Thierry and Belleau Wood had their first experience of European war, and acquitted themselves well. On 2 June a Franco-American counter-attack by twenty-seven divisions held the Marne line, and a German attack at Montdidier on 9 June, on the northern side of this

battlefield and adjoining the old British Somme lines, failed. It was a sign of what was to come. Ludendorff's attacks had created three very large salients – extended lines, some of them sketchy, in open country, and open to attack – and the active front had been extended from 390 to 510 kilometres, while the German troops, buoyed up for all-out victory, were necessarily cast down by the failure of the Allies to collapse. And 200,000 Americans were arriving every month – a fact of which Allied propaganda made much.

The most vulnerable of Ludendorff's great salients was that created in the Marne battle, and its edges were marked by Soissons to the north-west, and Rheims to the south-east. Here, on 15 July, the last German offensive occurred. The Kaiser himself appeared, and the affair was billed as an imperial battle, or even as *Friedenssturm*, 'peace assault'. Fifty-two divisions were mustered, and the usual crushing artillery. However, the Allies now knew what to expect (and French intelligence worked very well, advertisements in the Luxembourg German-language press being used to convey messages detailing German railway movements). They also understood that the way to deal with Ludendorff's methods was counter-battery fire – that is, to conceal gun positions, and then to open up on the enemy artillery in mid-bombardment, once its positions had been made clear. East of Rheims, defence in depth meant that the Germans were tired out before they reached the main French positions. Pétain used his reserves, and the Germans were halted on 17 July.

Now came the riposte – a counter-attack on the other side of the salient, from the forest of Villers-Cotterêts (the birthplace of Alexandre Dumas). The French had developed a light and fast-moving tank. Two generals, Debenay on the British right, and Mangin, to his right, began the tactics that were to become famous in 1940 as *Blitzkrieg* – tanks, fast-moving infantry, and aircraft flying low to keep the German gunners' heads down.

Three hundred tanks (Renault) and eighteen divisions, two of them American, struck in open cornfield, entirely by surprise, and went five miles forward. With the whole of the German force in the Marne salient threatened by a cut-off, Ludendorff pulled back from it, back to the Chemin des Dames. By 4 August the French had taken 30,000 prisoners and 600 guns. Foch then discovered how this war was to be won: he stopped. No more battering with light weapons against reserves. The answer was to suspend the attack where it had succeeded, and attack somewhere else, keeping the enemy reserves on the move. Move, they did: demoralizing slow journeys by train, halts, countermandings, continuations, and all of it in hot weather.

German reserves were now being badly disrupted – in fact a third of the entire German army was to spend the last three months of the war in or near slow-moving trains. Ludendorff had been setting everything up for a great Flanders attack. Now he had to put it off again and again. His defence expert, Lossberg, wished to withdraw, even to the Meuse and Antwerp, but Ludendorff overruled him. The French maintained some pressure in the Chemin des Dames, but the next main Allied action was British, at Amiens, on 8 August. Here was a limited scheme, simply to push the Germans back out of range of the station, and the French example of 18 July was properly studied. The generals – Rawlinson on the British side, Monash and Currie on the Australian and Canadian – were eminently practical men who were able to persuade Haig, when the time came, not to persist with the attack beyond a few days. Air control was established, and there was now a great profusion of weaponry of all types, particularly light Lewis guns that could be carried by fast-moving infantry. The noise of tanks coming into line was masked by aircraft flying low, back and forth. There was no preliminary bombardment at all, and morning mist concealed the initial attack. The new Mark V

and Whippet tanks were much faster and more reliable than earlier ones, and a special development was the laying down of a curtain of gas and high explosive in the German rear areas, to disrupt any counter-attack. The result, on 8 August, was a triumph, the Germans taken by surprise, in almost open-country positions that had not been thoroughly prepared; a brigade staff was captured at breakfast. On the first day, there were 12,000 prisoners and 400 guns were captured; almost 50,000 prisoners were taken by the end of the operation.

There is a mysterious process in the defeat of any army – the point at which the men give up hope. In the Russian case, the point was reached towards the end of the Brusilov offensive in September 1916, with the endless bloody failures of the Guard Army in the marshes before Kovel and Vladimir Volynsk. The German army's morale began to break on 18 July, when the Villers-Cotterêts counter-attack was under way. The Kaiser, at the headquarters town of Spa, in Belgium, politely asked Ludendorff what had gone wrong, and Ludendorff said that the men were just not fighting any more – thousands were surrendering. A further sign was that men were reporting sick in greater and greater numbers. Curiously enough, if troops are well-led, they do not fall ill: before Trafalgar, in 1805, the French admiral had to leave 1,000 men behind in the West Indies, whereas the British admiral, Lord Nelson, lost no one in precisely the same area.² Ludendorff even allowed himself a note of reproach towards the Kaiser. His own belief (like Cadorna's) was that the political Left were being allowed to spread defeatism. But now, after Amiens, it was Ludendorff's own nerves that began to crack. He began to hit the bottle and provoked quarrels with his subordinates – even with poor old Hindenburg, who had been doing no one any harm and looked the very part of fatherly commander-in-chief; he even wrote to his wife, before the offensive had started, to the effect that the general staff were very busy, that he would have time on his

hands, and could he be sent the various German classics to be re-read? Now, Ludendorff was saying that he could only manage a defensive action. Foch showed him to be accurate.

Foch kept up the pressure, arguing in a clever memorandum that the key was to stop after the initial successes. The British army took the lead in these – Arras on 17 August, Bapaume in the Somme country on the 21st, an outrunner of the great Siegfried line called the Drocourt-Quéant switch on the 26th, St Quentin on the 28th, Mount Kemmel on 4 September. Meanwhile, the French re-took the entire salient created by the German success of 27 May, and on 12 September came a major American effort, in which half a million troops with 1,500 aircraft and 270 light tanks cleared the St Mihiel salient to the south-east of Verdun (though the Germans managed to withdraw most of their men in time). Then came a brief hold-up at Ypres, and, towards the end of the month, the Americans showed that they did not have much to learn from the British when it came to making mistakes and persisting in them. In the Argonne country north of Verdun, much of it devastated and studded with rivers and ravines that made use of tanks impossible, fifteen (double-sized) American and twenty-two French divisions went into operation with an eight-to-one superiority. But there was a logistical breakdown, and American commanders persisted in neglecting the tactical lessons of 1917: they used old-fashioned methods, and wasted much of the training time on rifle fire, itself now becoming almost obsolete. Then they ran into a prepared position, the Kriemhild line, and struck – the one real advantage being that German reserves (thirty-six divisions) had had to be concentrated there.

This enabled the British to stage what was to be almost a model battle and to crack the Siegfried line (referred to by the British as the 'Hindenburg line'). On 27 September an enormous force assaulted nine miles of it, before Cambrai. The defences were three miles thick, and a special feature was that

they included the St Quentin canal, which had fifty feet of sloping banks down to its six-foot depth of muddy water. The only way across for tanks seemed to be a great tunnel, through which the canal passed, but it was thickly covered with wire, and the tanks were held up. However, there was a prodigious bombardment, with 126 shells from the field guns alone landing every minute on 500 yards of trench, over an eight-hour period, and the counter-battery fire by the heavy artillery had been very well prepared, silencing the German heavy artillery. The defenders were in effect stunned. An element of luck supervened, in that the British had captured outline maps of the defences, and there was further luck at the canal, with fog, which allowed a single division to cross, clamber up the opposite bank, and breach the Siegfried line on a three-mile front. This feat of arms enabled Australians and Canadians on either side to move forward, and by 5 October the British were into open country. Haig again proposed to stop, but the German retreat went on, leaving the front early in November just short of Brussels and Namur. In mid October the Americans at last broke through the Kriemhild line, and could threaten the great German railway base of Metz.

It was obvious enough that Germany would be defeated. She had lost over a million men between March and July, and a further three quarters of a million in the succeeding months, half of them made prisoner. There was also a crisis in the war economy, with plant wearing down, and the Social Democrat leader complained that working-class north and east Berlin lacked the 4,000 railway-wagons used for transportation of the vital potatoes. No doubt the country could have fought on, into 1919, as it did in 1945, but the end was in sight. On 28 September Ludendorff's nerves cracked, and he raged against everyone, including in the end the Kaiser: the war would have to be stopped. 'No confidence can be placed in the troops,' he told his staff. Of course, the army could have made a stand on the

river Rhine, but everything was falling apart, and Germany's allies now dropped out. They had all been following events in the west and, with the failure of Ludendorff's great offensive, were looking to save what they could from the overall wreckage.

On 15 September the Allied force at Salonica, which had at last ceased to be what the Germans contemptuously called their greatest prisoner-of-war camp, moved forward, and the Bulgarians collapsed. They had not, anyway, been rewarded by the Germans as they had expected – no southern Balkan empire, as in days of (long-ago) yore. On the 28th they asked for an armistice. That cut the link to the Ottoman empire, but in any case the Young Turks were also angry at German interference in the Caucasus, and some were wondering whether they might not abandon the Germans and leave the Arabs to the British, while concentrating, with British support, on the Caucasus and its oil. Enver Pasha was thinking through the alternative to the Ottoman empire – a national Turkey which would take over Turkic Central Asia. The Young Turks left on a German submarine, to Odessa, and went their ways – Afghanisan, the Caucasus, Berlin, Moscow – to set this up. The Ottoman army withdrew from Syria, and an armistice was arranged on 30 October. Then the Austrians dropped out. Before then the Austro-Hungarian government had made noises about the acceptance of President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', and the Emperor appointed as prime minister a professor, Lammasch, who even believed in them (he ended, in exile, as a professor at Berkeley). But it was the end of the Habsburg empire. Hungary declared independence; so did national councils representing the various other non-German peoples. The Germans of Austria, curiously enough, were first in the queue: they expected to join Germany. At that, there was even a brief German invasion of Austria. The Italians took advantage of the confusion to round up hundreds of thousands of unresisting sol-

diers in the last days of October and called it the battle of Vittorio Veneto.

Germany still had some cards. True, the army was not what it had been, but elements of it were still formidable. She ran large parts of Russia and Turkey. Winter was coming up. The Rhine was an obstacle, and war-weariness was a considerable factor on the Allied side. So, too, was potential disagreement: would the British, with their empire, be happy with President Wilson's Fourteen Points, which included provisions for the emancipation of colonies? After all, Brest-Litovsk had meant self-determination for the non-Russian peoples of the Tsarist empire, and there was the further possibility that an appeal could be made for Germany to be kept going as the leading anti-Communist state. Ludendorff now had a puppet foreign secretary, and, late in September, after the Bulgarian armistice, he cobbled together a plan, not revealed to the Chancellor. President Wilson could be appealed to, and that would mean formally making Germany more democratically run. The German Left might as well make itself useful as a stage-prop in this sense. Ludendorff, and many other nationalists, were already blaming it for the drop in morale, for the disorders of the economy and for the inflation caused by high wages. On 30 September a new chancellor was appointed, Prince Max of Baden, a liberal-minded south German, and his cabinet included representatives of the Centre and Left parties. Prince Max did understand that, if he asked for an armistice, it might just break the morale of the people irretrievably: they would realize that that was that, and there might be a sudden collapse, which would leave no room for negotiations. He was, as it happens, right. The Kaiser made his last calamitous contribution to German history when he sniffed that, 'You have not been appointed to make difficulties for the High Command,' and a public note was sent to the United States in the night of 4-5 October. Ludendorff was really saving his own reputation:

he would encourage others to make an end to the war, then turn round and say it had not been his fault.

At the end of the film *Oh! What a Lovely War* there is a scene of genius, as war graves, stretching all over the screen, have red tape slowly wound round them. This was what now happened. Officials and High Commands solemnly debated the ins and outs of the armistice for rather more than a month, and meanwhile the men went on fighting and dying, in tens of thousands. The German Note gave the Allies some trouble, because they were being forced to talk the language of democracy and self-determination whereas they were all resolved on vengeance and the creation of empires at the expense of the defeated. Even the Belgians thought that they should seize the Scheldt estuary from the Dutch. Getting a unified response, combining rapacity with sanctity, was difficult, though in the end British skills prevailed.

The Germans themselves were clumsy. The leaders of the Centre and Left – Matthias Erzberger and Philipp Scheidemann – sensibly wanted to adopt the Fourteen Points, but the generals only even looked at them on 5 October and the foreign office thought that they might be useful negotiation points and no more. The notes went back and forth – Wilson on the 8th, Berlin on the 12th, Wilson on the 14th, Berlin on the 20th, and then another exchange by the end of the month. Perhaps, if the Germans had been more realistic, something could have been saved. But they persisted with illusion, and on 12 October committed the blunder of sinking a British passenger liner, *Leinster*, drowning 450 people, including 135 women and children; in their retreat through Flanders, they were poisoning wells and ‘ringing’ fruit-trees. If Wilson began with hints of magnanimity, alarming his Allies, his demands now went up. Germany was to have proper democracy, a constitutional monarchy, and the submarines were to stop. Prince Max accepted. At this point, Ludendorff altogether reversed his original line,

and started manufacturing a very dangerous legend – that Germany had not really lost. He came to Berlin, without the Kaiser’s say-so, and said that Germany could fight on. On 26 October he denounced the terms being announced by his own nominees in the foreign office, and had a row with the Kaiser, whom he insulted; of Prince Max and his well-meaning left-wing associates he remarked, ‘these people can ingest the soup that they have brewed up for us.’ They did. The army leaders preserved their prestige intact. In due course, Ludendorff used his own to introduce Adolf Hitler into German politics,³ and, ten years later, in 1933, old Hindenburg, as president, appointed him chancellor.

Meanwhile, as German morale was collapsing, the final crisis was precipitated by another act of desperation. In a weird descendant upon the navy–army rivalry that had done so much to weaken the war effort, the naval authorities resolved on a last, mad move. Captain von Levetzow, chief of staff of the navy, could see the likelihood that Germany’s great ships would be interned, none of them left for the eventual reconstruction of the *Reichsmarine*. Better, he thought, ‘immortal fame at the bottom of the ocean’, and orders went out on 27 October for the High Seas Fleet to put to sea in the general direction of the Thames Estuary. The 80,000 sailors and stokers were not enthusiastic about the bottom of the ocean. They mutinied at Kiel, then at Lübeck and Wilhelmshaven, and insurrection spread to Cologne, then Munich, where an actor took over. There was now an air of Russia, with workers’ and soldiers’ councils being formed. The Social Democrats, already in government under Prince Max, knew that, if they were to avoid a Bolshevik revolution, certain things would have to be done. The war would have to be stopped forthwith and the Kaiser would have to go. The generals told him as much, and on 9 November he abdicated (escaping to Holland) just as the republic was being declared in Berlin. In any case, with the

country in chaos, the time had come for an immediate armistice. A deputation made its way to Foch's headquarters in the forest of Compiègne, and the guns stopped at 11 a.m. on 11 November. The terms were harsh: Germany would not be able to fight again. The Allies took the Rhine. There was no occupation of Germany – as things turned out, a fatal decision. But it was over.

NOTES

1. W. Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918* (Vienna, 1918), p. 174 ff. notes the importance of oil.
2. R. Atkinson, *Trayfalgar* (London, 2004), pp. 40 ff. – an extraordinarily erudite disquisition on medicine at that time.
3. In 1923 he led an attempt at a coup in Munich, together with Hitler, whom he made respectable. In the 1930s he was, however, the only public opponent of the Third Reich (he thought it was inadequately anti-Catholic) until someone noticed what he was writing. He had a state funeral in 1938, at which mourners wore weird helmets and made strange moan.