

## 4. LESSONS LEARNED AND HISTORY OF CONFLICTS

# THE GERMAN OFFENSIVES, 1918. AN ANALYSIS OF OPERATIONS AND LEADERSHIP (PART I)

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### ABSTRACT

The 1918 offensives were Germany's last attempt in World War I to achieve a decisive victory on the Western Front before the arrival of the American armies and the consequent shift in the balance of forces. This paper analyzes the conduct and performance of the German Army and High Command during these military operations.

The first part of the article, after a brief historical outline of the offensives, focuses on the judgment of renewed scholars on Germany's military leadership during this phase of the war, in particular on its war leader, Erich Ludendorff. First World War historiography has been strongly influenced by the British historian Basil Liddell Hart, who had a rather Anglo-centric outlook on the war. More recently, authors like Holger H. Herwig, Robert B. Asprey, and David T. Zabecki have focused on the German side of the war. Their analysis evidences that the German High Command, and in particular Ludendorff, while brilliant tacticians and organizers, lacked clear operational visions and goals, which seriously hindered the conduct of the offensives.

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### KEYWORDS

First World War; Western Front; Erich Ludendorff; historical tradition; tactical breakthrough; operational art.

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## Introduction

First World War was a climactic event, which has attracted the scholars' attention ever since. An enormous quantity of literature has been written on it, both by historians focused on military affairs and by those with broader interests. It is however true that this event has been partially shadowed, especially in the layman's at-

tention, by the even more destructive Second World War. And yet Second World War is clearly linked to the First,<sup>1</sup> as the famous phrase attributed to Marshal Foch after the Treaty of Versailles ("This is not Peace. It is

<sup>1</sup> Lukacs J., The coming of the Second World War, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 68, Issue 4, Fall 1989, pp. 165-174.

an Armistice for twenty years")<sup>2</sup>. suggests.

From the military point of view First World War brought many innovations. Of those five years of conflict 1918 is particularly interesting because it saw the partial end of the deadlock that had trapped the opposing armies since the end of 1914, and this partial return to mobile warfare started with the German spring offensives.

## Aim and questions

The aim of the present study is to analyze the German 1918 offensives on the Western Front between March and July 1918 with particular emphasis on the German leadership and the interrelation between the three levels of warfare (strategic, operational and tactical)<sup>3</sup>. Three main questions will be addressed.

The first question is how historians have judged the proficiency of the German Army and the High Command, with Ludendorff's offensives on focus.

The second one is if and how the German offensives could have reached favorable results, provided that certain errors had been avoided and different decisions had been made. Answering to this question requires of course an analysis of the errors committed by the Germans and some use of a counterfactual approach<sup>4</sup>.

The third question is if the German High Command had a real operational and strategic doctrine to match its tactical prowess and innovation.

## Structure of the article

The article will be divided in two parts. The first part will deal with three topics. First we will briefly discuss the nature of

the main sources and authors used in the article. Then there will be a concise, chronological description of the German offensives between March and July 1918. Finally we will discuss how the sources judge the performance and the strategic/operational ability of the OHL and of Gen. Erich Ludendorff.

The second part will analyze more closely the offensive operations, the mistakes committed and the eventual alternative courses that may have offered a different outcome. The last chapter will be dedicated to the conclusions. Images were taken on the Internet from the sources indicated, and modified with Adobe Photoshop.

## Main authors and sources

This paper will principally refer to four sources: Liddell Hart's *History of the First World War*, Holger H. Herwig's *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, Robert B. Asprey's *The German High Command at War*, and David T. Zabecki's *The German 1918 Offensives*.

It is not necessary to spend many words about Liddell Hart: he is one of the best known military historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work about the First World War is also well known. We will talk more about this particular book in the next chapter, but here one important observation must be made about this author. Liddell Hart's works about both world wars seem affected by an almost idiosyncratic necessity to criticize the military accomplishments of the Western Allies. The blunders of the Western, and particularly British, commanders are highlighted, their errors - and the flaws of the military system to which they belonged - are mercilessly evidenced. Even if there is undoubtedly a lot of truth in this criticism, his attitude has the effect to somewhat distort perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> Keylor W.R., *Diplomatic History*, Vol 38, Issue 1, January 2014, pp. 215-218.

<sup>3</sup> See the modern definitions on [Global.Security.org: https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/3-0/ch2.htm](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/3-0/ch2.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Hawthorn, G. *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

In simple words, reading many of the works of Liddell Hart and his school, one has the distinct impression that the Allied armies were a clumsy and inefficient lot led by incompetent generals. The Germans on the contrary appear a model of efficiency and military prowess, who lose both wars only because faced by overwhelming odds<sup>5</sup>.

Holger H. Herwig is professor of History at the University of Calgary, and holds the Canada Research Chair in the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. His work is extremely interesting because it focuses on the German and Austrian side of the story. His book is built on the full range of sources now available in the German language.

While he does not lose sight of the Entente and its strategies, he puts the Anglo-centric preoccupations of English-language historians into a more balanced perspective. He points out to two explanations of Germany's ultimate defeat. The first is that German military proficiency was not as high as both the Germans and their enemies believed. The second is that in the conduct of total war military proficiency is not enough: the possession of resources and the ability to manage them effectively is also fundamental. Even if the scope of Herwig's work extends to the whole conflict, his analysis is important for understanding the reasons of the failure of the German 1918 offensives.

Robert Asprey tries also to view the conflict from the German side. His approach is very critical about the German historical tradition of the war. Asprey focuses on the immense reputation and aura of invincibility acquired by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff during the war. Their demigod status was not undermined by

Germany's ultimate defeat: by the transference of the blame to the civil government and the population – the famous “stab in the back” theory – they managed to retain their formidable military reputations. These reputations survived also World War II and are still accepted today in the new unified Germany. Asprey criticizes this myth, using principally the accounts of German personalities not “converted” to the Ludendorff/Hindenburg cult, and the personal diaries, letters and memoirs of the German officials. All this makes Asprey's work essential for understanding this paper's issues.

Two key, recent works that cover this subject in detail are David T. Zabecki's *The German 1918 Offensives* and *The Generals' War*. The first of these essays can perhaps be considered the ultimate work on the German spring offensives. Most importantly, Zabecki focuses on the operational concepts (or lack of whereof) of Ludendorff and the OHL.

Another source worth mentioning is *Världskriget 1914-1918*, by the Swedish General C.O. Nordensvan. This author, who writes soon after the end of the war, shows openly his pro-German sympathies. His analysis is interesting because it reflects the German attitude in the inter-war period, which minimizes the mistakes of the OHL and exalts the valor of the German Army.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention Bruce I. Gudmunsson, which in his *Stormtroop Tactics* illustrates exhaustively the development of German infantry tactics during WWI, and Robert M. Citino, a leading author on the history of the German Army.

## Historical outline of the offensives – strength of the opposing armies

The German spring offensives, aimed at a decisive German military victory against the Western allies after four years of incon-

<sup>5</sup> This line of thought is today followed by British historian Max Hastings in his works on WW2 (see Hastings, M. *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45*, Macmillan, 2004).

clusive war, started on 21 March 1918 with "St. Michael" (codenamed after Germany's patron saint). In preparation for this great effort general Erich Ludendorff, nominally the Quartermaster General (Erster Generalquartiermeister) but *de facto* the "generalissimo" of the German Army, instituted an intensive training program. The collapse of Russia allowed to transfer units from the Eastern front, even if the quality of the troops from the East was questionable. The best units were reunited into assault divisions, trained in the new infiltration tactics.<sup>6</sup>

During the initial planning in November 1917 the possibility to attack the French Army on both sides of Verdun was discussed. Here the French salient offered the opportunity to pinch off a sizable portion of the enemy forces, and according to Kaiser Wilhelm's Chief of Staff, general von der Schulenburg, France would be broken by a military disaster, while Britain probably would not.<sup>7</sup> General Ludendorff opposed this solution, opting instead for attacking the British. For the opening blow, Ludendorff chose the British sector between Arras and La Fôre; here the Allied armies joined and the ground apparently favored the attack. In addition to "Michael", he continued meticulous preparations for successive offensives.

Plans for eleven offensive extending from the Flanders to the Vosges were made by Ludendorff and the OHL, but the majority of them were intended as diversionary operations.<sup>8</sup> In total the Germans had on the Western Front 192 division, of which 76

available for the offensive, against 169 Allied divisions, 57 of which were British.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1. Infantry Divisions on the Western Front

	31 October 1917	20 March 1918
French	104	98
British	62	57
Belgian	6	6
United States	2	6
Portuguese	2	2
<b>Total Allied</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>German</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>192</b>

Source: Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, London: Allen Lane, 1978.

As it can be seen from the table, since the previous autumn the Allied forces had actually declined in number. For the "Michael" offensive, three German armies were deployed: Seventeenth (under gen. von Below), Second (Marwitz) and Eighteenth (Hutier), with sixteen corps.<sup>10</sup> They were divided between two different army groups (see below), complicating command and control. Against the three German armies stood the British Third (Byng) and Fifth (Gough) armies, on the right of the British front, comprising eight corps<sup>11</sup>. All in all, from the Channel to Verdun the Germans deployed nine armies.

<sup>6</sup> Gudmunsson, B.L. *Stormtroop Tactics*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995

<sup>7</sup> Zabecki, D.T. *The German 1918 Offensives*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> From north to south these planned offensives, of which "Michael" was to be the first, were: St. George (actually divided in St. George 1 and 2), Valkyrie, Mars, St. Michael (divided in St. Michael 1, 2 and 3 respectively for each of the three armies employed), Archangel, Achilles, Roland, Hector, Castor, Pollux and Strasbourg.

<sup>9</sup> Middlebrook M. *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1919: The First Day of the German Spring Offensive*, London: Allen Lane, 1978, p.19-20.

<sup>10</sup> From north to south: I Bav, III Bav, IX Res, XVIII, VI Res., XIV Res, XI, XXXIX Res, XIII, XXIII Res, XIV, IL, III, IX, XVII, IV Res. The army detachment "Group Gayl" was deployed at the extreme left of the offensive front.

<sup>11</sup> From north to south: XVII, VI, IV, V, VII, XIX, XVIII, and III.

Figure 2. German Armies on the Western Front – spring 1918 <sup>12</sup>

**Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht:** Fourth, Sixth, Seventeenth, Second

**Army Group Crown Prince:** Eighteenth, Seventh, First, Third

**Army Group Gallwitz:** Fifth, Armee-Abteilung C

**Army Group Duke Albrecht:** Nineteenth, Armee-Abteilung A and Armee-Abteilung B

Surprise was all-important. Concentrations of men and weapons were carefully concealed, a five-hour bombardment by 6,473 guns and 3,532 mortars (planned in minute detail by the artillery expert, Colonel Georg Bruchmüller) was organized for the opening day<sup>13</sup>

The “Michael” offensive had the rather vague aim to separate the British armies from the French and push it towards the sea (the aims and objectives of the offensives will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters). Depending on the development and success of “Michael”, follow-on offensives would be implemented.

### The “Michael” offensive

Aided by mist, the German shock troops assaulted the 50-mile British sector in the morning on March 21. Gough's Fifth Army, thinly spread after taking some of the French left, collapsed, leaving the Third Army right flank exposed and forcing it to withdraw. Well organized in depth, Third Army managed to prevent the German Second Army and especially the Seventeen Army to achieve significant progress, but Hutier Eighteenth Army, pressing Gough hard, forced its way across the Somme river. All British reserves, and some French units, were dispatched to plug the gap.

On March 23 German long-range artillery started bombing Paris from the huge distance of 75 miles. On March 26 the Supreme War Council appointed General Foch Allied coordinator, and on April 3<sup>rd</sup> he

assumed the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in France.

Meanwhile the German assault was losing some momentum after cutting a salient some 40 miles deep into the Allied lines. On March 28 an attempt to extend the offensive to the north in the Arras sector (“Mars” operation) was cancelled on the same day.

Only the Eighteenth Army was still making steady gains. Foch's well placed reserves halted their thrust at Montdidier, while everywhere the German armies were outrunning their supplies, which were brought forward with great difficulty over ground ravaged by years of trench warfare. Finally on April 5 “Michael” was halted. It had cost the Germans between 230,000 and 250,000 casualties. Even if the Allied losses were slightly higher, the loss of a high proportion of elite storm troopers without any real strategic or operational gain left the German Army in a weakened position.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas N., *The German Army in World War I* (3), Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 52. Zabecki gives a slightly higher total: 6,608 guns and 3,534 trench mortars in *The German 1918 Offensives*, p. 136.

Figure 3. The "Michael" offensive



Source: The "Michael" offensive (adapted from: [http://www.ourfamilystories.gen.nz/HTML\\_files/Documents/Doc\\_Spring\\_Offensive\\_Map.html](http://www.ourfamilystories.gen.nz/HTML_files/Documents/Doc_Spring_Offensive_Map.html))

### The offensive in the Flanders

Ludendorff's second thrust (originally code-named "St. George", but renamed "Georgette" after its reduction in size) was launched on April 9 on a narrow front against the British line south of Arm tieres within striking distance of the Channel ports. After a violent bombardment, the German Sixth Army (Quast) struck the British First (Horne) north of Givenchy on April 9, concentrating its attack on the sector manned by an understrength Portuguese corps, which immediately gave way. Only a determined stand by vastly outnumbered units of XI Corps held the line of the rivers Lawe and Lys until reinforcements could be brought up.

The next day, as units from Second Army under Plumer (recalled from Italy at Horne's request) reinforced Horne's position, Rupprecht launched Arnim's Fourth Army both

north and south of the Ypres salient. Within three days, Second Army had been forced to give up almost all the gains achieved during the battle of Passchendaele the previous year. South of the Douvre, German successes against IX and XV Corps had brought them almost within sight of Azebrouck.

Despite Foch's initial unwillingness to commit French reserves, by April 21 a whole army under general de Mitry had been assembled, and Plumer was at last able to rest his exhausted divisions. A final German attempt to cut off Second Army and the Belgians led to vicious fighting around Mt Kemmel from 24 to 29 April, in which German assault troops again made significant advances, but de Mitry and Plumer were able to organize counterattacks to stabilize

the position. Ludendorff finally halted operations at 22 hrs on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

Once again, the offensive had been indecisive. The British Army had been badly mauled and even the presence of fresh recruits from the United Kingdom and reinforcements from Italy, Salonika and Palestine would not enable it to reassume the initiative for months. But the Allies' rail communications with the northern front were not interrupted. Losses were heavy – more than 100,000 men on each side – but for the Germans the exhaustion of the offensive capacity of the Fourth and Sixth armies without reaching a decision was a particularly heavy blow.

### The Second Battle of the Marne

Withdrawal of further troops from the East allowed German strength to increase to 208 divisions, of which 80 were now in reserve, but a dozen American divisions had meanwhile arrived in France, and more were assembling or were en route<sup>14</sup>. The third German offensive opened on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May. Ludendorff struck along the Chemin des Dames in a diversionary move prior to a planned decisive blow against the British in Flanders. The German First (von Mudra) and Seventh (von Böhn) armies mounted an assault, code-named "Blücher" against the French Sixth Army (Duchene) on the Aisne. The artillery preparation was Bruchmüller masterpiece, only two hours and forty minutes long but extremely effective<sup>15</sup>. Duchene's outnumbered divisions were caught massed in shallow defenses along a line of 25 miles. They collapsed, allowing the Germans to get across the Aisne and reach the Marne on May 30, forming a salient some 20 miles deep and 30 wide. There the German impetus faded.

<sup>14</sup> Asprey R.B. *The German High Command at War*, New York: Morrow & C., 1991, p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> Artillery strength was slightly less than for "Michael": 5,263 guns and 1,233 trench mortars. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, p. 216-218.

Operation "Blücher" proved successful, in fact too successful for, designed as a diversion, its initial success had drawn too many reserves to the scene, yet not enough to exploit it. Blocked to their front by the River Marne, the Germans attempted to push west but were held by stubborn Allied resistance, notably by American divisions at Château-Thierry.

The Eighteenth Army striking south-westerly and the Seventh Army westerly between the Montdidier and Noyon buldge delivered Ludendorff's next attack, his fourth. But deserters and aerial reconnaissance had forewarned Foch and Pétain and defenses had been organized in depth. The German attack opened on June 9 but, although some gains were made, a Franco-American counter-attack (11 June) brought Eighteenth Army's advance to an end. Seventh Army's attack was likewise halted by June 12. Ludendorff then resolved on making one last diversionary attack prior to his intended blow in the Flanders. This was designed to pinch out the powerfully defended Reims.

Seventh Army (von Böhn), was to advance up the Marne to meet the First Army (Mudra) and the Third (von Einem) attacking south in the direction of Chalons-sur-Marne. Foch, already planning a counter-offensive and again forewarned by the usual sources – deserters, prisoners and aerial reconnaissance – pre-empted the attack (July 15) by bombarding German front line positions during the night of 14-15 July.

East of Reims the French Fourth Army (Gourard) quickly halted the attack. West of Reims, where defences were weaker and lacked depth, the German Seventh Army's thrust took it to the Marne, an estimated 14 divisions getting across the River, but was held by the US 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's stubborn defense. Then the entire attack was halted when Allied aircraft and artillery destroyed

the German bridges, thus disrupting their supply routes.

Faced with this situation, Ludendorff, admitting failure, now prepared for a general withdrawal from the Soisson-Château Thierry-Reims salient to shorten the line held by his reduces forces. In about four months he had suffered about half a million casualties.

Though Allied losses had been comparable, they were now being replenished by American troops, while the German divisions released from the East had been used up. The German Army had missed its chance.

### Aftermath

Yet Ludendorff had not definitively abandoned the idea of a last, decisive offensive in the Flanders. He had just postponed it. But now the time was running short for

Germany: the initiative passed to the Allies. Foch was determined to attack the enemy with two armies, the British Fourth (Rawlinson) and the French First (Debeney). What ensued on 8 August was one of the most successful surprise attacks of the war, with the sudden advance of 456 tanks, replacing a forewarning artillery barrage. Now it was the turn of the Allies to exploit surprise and tactical innovation. Between the 8th and 12th of August the Fourth Army took 21,000 prisoners at the cost of 20,000 casualties. German units, worn down by attrition, were demoralized and some surrendering with little - or at most token - resistance. The decline of German fighting power was beyond doubt and irreversible. From then on, the initiative remained in the hands of the Allies, until the final armistice on 11 November, finally closing the long conflict.

Figure 4. The German 1918 offensives and the Allied response



Source: The German 1918 offensives and the Allies' response (adapted from History of the Great War: <https://www.historyofthegreatwar.com/episode-165-kaiserschlacht-pt-9/>)



## Assessment of the German Army and its leadership – Liddell Hart's influence

In his preface to Holger H. Herwig's *The First World War* Hew Strachan makes a very important observation: great part of the historical research on this conflict – especially that written by Anglo-Saxon scholars - has been influenced by Basil Liddell Hart<sup>16</sup>. Liddell Hart published the first edition of his history of WWI in 1930, under the title "*The Real War*". His definitive, post-1945 edition, *History of the First World War* has been a great success, both among the general public and the academic world. This success has probably been deserved: Liddell Hart is almost unanimously considered one of the greatest, perhaps even the greatest, military historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Liddell Hart Center at the King's College in London provides even today, 33 years after his death, a precious source of documents for the scholars interested in military topics.

However great are Liddell Hart's contributions to military history, his influence on WWI research have had two unfortunate effects. The first one is quite understandable. Being a Briton himself – and a former British officer for the matter – his research concentrated on the British role during the war. So the many publications on the war influenced by Liddell Hart have been rather Anglo-centric. The publications have been more focused on the British than on the German "side of the hill". This issue is in part due to the paucity of German sources. In fact by 1945 the majority of the German Army records had been destroyed by the allied bombings. The source gaps however are not as great as one could imagine.

## Alternative sources

First, there is the German official history of the war, the *Reichsarchiv Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918*. It is a very rich source, almost all of it published too late to be used by Liddell Hart. Then there are the other books written by the Reichsarchiv's historians. Even if their works are somewhat flawed by patriotic concern, these historians have had access to the documents successively destroyed. And third, one should not forget the unpublished material that lies outside the lost archives. Moreover, not all the Army records have been destroyed. Some have been carried to Russia, and some even survived in their original home.

The discovery – or rediscovery – of these documents have allowed scholars like Herwig and Zabecki to retrace a history of WWI in a way rather different than that which most readers have been accustomed to, at least when certain issues are concerned. And among those issues there is the question of the proficiency of the German Army and of the German leadership during the war.

This is an important point, which transcends the period we are considering. In fact some historians see continuity between the Prussian tradition of Frederick der Grosse, Wilhelmine Germany and the Third Reich. Even if a number of German historians proudly evidence the tactical and operational effectiveness of the German Army, the analysis of many of these sources in reality gives us a different picture: namely that the German Army was not as good as it is usually considered, and that the German political/strategic leadership was faulty.

Since Liddell Hart has been so influential among WWI historians, it is opportune to spend a couple words about his ideas and concept regarding the conduct of the conflict by the belligerents. There are two points that are important if we want to understand his role in creating – or helping to

<sup>16</sup> Herwig H.H. *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918*, London: Arnold, 1997, p. xi.

create – the paradox we have just enunciated:

1. The already mentioned special concern on the role of the British Army in the war.
2. The doctrine of the Indirect Approach.

The first point had not only the effect that many scholars, following Liddell-Hart path, have focused more on London than on Berlin: another consequence was that both he and his followers saw the German Army, “the enemy”, as the background onto which the conduct of the British Army was projected. Since the judgment of the “Liddell Hart school” on the performance of the British Army on the Western Front has been very negative - at least when its leadership is concerned - the prowess of the German Army has resulted almost automatically overrated. Both the lack of a deep examination of the German sources and the wish to stress the failure of the British command concurred in giving a picture of the German Army as a formidable war machine, excellent and often superior to its enemies despite the numerical odds against it.

The second point adds another criticism to the Allied conduct of the war. Liddell Hart was one of the strongest supporters of the strategy of the indirect approach (which, in a nutshell, means to strike at the enemy where he is weakest, to indirectly cause the collapse of his strongest core). This means that the Allied attempts of breakthrough on the Western Front (the strongest sector of the Central Powers) were presented as costly and sterile efforts against an almost invincible opponent. Of course, it is true that most of these breakthrough efforts were sterile. The point is how much these failures depended on enemy prowess rather than on a factual impossibility by the armies and the technology of the epoch to cope with the problem of a breakthrough.

### The generalship of Erich Ludendorff

The German offensives in 1918 give the occasion to see how “the other side” coped with the same problem. It is interesting to see how Liddell Hart comments the failure of the first of these offensives, operation “Michael”: “It would seem, indeed, that the real fault was that Ludendorff failed to carry out in practice the new principle he had adopted in theory; that he either didn’t grasp, or shrank from, the full implications of this theory of strategy. For in fact he dissipated too large a part of his reserves in trying to redeem tactical failures and hesitated too long over the decision to exploit his tactical successes”<sup>17</sup>. In other words, Liddell Hart accuses Ludendorff to reinforce failure instead of success, the opposite of what the theory of infiltration tactics requires. But here Liddell Hart’s statement that Ludendorff failed to carry out his *strategic* theory during the execution of the offensive is inaccurate, because the theory of infantry infiltration is a *tactical* doctrine. Ludendorff’s overall strategic idea was to defeat the Allies on the Western Front before the arrival of the Americans and force them to sue for peace on terms favorable to Germany. The issue here is if he had more specific aims besides this generic concept, and in particular if he had a clear operational plan to guide him. Liddell Hart himself, in the same pages from which the previous quotation was taken, seems to cast some doubts about it: “In any case the campaign leaves the impression that Ludendorff had neither his former clearness as to the goal, nor the same grip of the changing situation.”<sup>18</sup> And, commenting the failure of the subsequent offensives, Liddell Hart adds: “The tactical success of his own blows had been Ludendorff’s undoing. Yielding too

<sup>17</sup> Liddell Hart B.H. History of the First World War, London: Cassell, 1970, p. 472.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

late to their influence, he had then pressed each too far and too long, so using up his own reserves and causing an undue interval between each blow. He had driven in three great wedges, but none had penetrated far enough to sever a vital artery, and this strategic failure left the Germans with an indented front which invited flanking counterstrokes.”

We will come back to this comment again later. But it is noteworthy that, even if his criticism of the British leadership is much harsher, Liddell Hart himself cannot spare words of reproach for the conduct of the German High Command. It is not, however, a detailed analysis, as we should expect by an author with a more neutral stance. Fortunately there are some authors that didn't follow Liddell Hart's Anglo-centric approach. Robert B. Asprey's *The German High Command at War* in particular focuses on the Hindenburg/ Ludendorff leadership. "What was Ludendorff after strategically?" asks Asprey in the chapter dedicated to the German preparation for the spring offensives.

"By his own admission" Asprey continues "he disdained firm strategic goals, holding to the German general-staff credo that "strategy is made by expedients," and that "strategic victory follows tactical success." (Here it seems that the term "strategy" is used in lieu of "operations". Ludendorff had a general strategic aim, but it did not seem to have a clear idea of how to pursue it). When Crown Prince Rupprecht wanted to know the operational goal, Ludendorff angrily replied, "We make a hole and the rest will take care of itself"<sup>19</sup>. This phrase seems indicative of a tendency of the German High Command to downplay the role of operations, at least in this phase of the

war. However, as we will discuss later, several German officers were uncomfortable with this attitude.

D.T. Zabecki makes an interesting comparison of the respective characteristics and qualities of the principal warlords on the Western Front in 1918. Ludendorff is characterized as a "micromanager" whose overriding military concept is the prominence of tactics over operation and strategy. He also defines his current judgment of his command as "very mixed", again reflecting his proficient and innovative approach in the field of tactics, and his flaws in the realm of operational art.<sup>20</sup>

### Limits of the German military thought

There is no clear-cut boundary between the three levels, tactical, operational and strategic. But moving up this theoretical ladder the conduct of war broadens in space, time and scope. The tradition of the German Army and its precursor, the Prussian Army, from the times of Moltke the Elder emphasized a swift victory, realized through a big decisive battle, whose purpose was the encirclement and destruction of the enemy army ("Vernichtungsschlacht" and "Kesselschlacht")<sup>21</sup>. This concept of war was indeed valid in the 19th century, when the size of the armies was still limited and general conscription was not thoroughly applied. In the war of 1870, for instance, the French had a relatively small professional army, whose rapid neutralization left France unable to continue an effective resistance. But by the time of the First World War general conscription had been fully adopted by Germany's continental enemies and the resources of the states could be and would be fully mobilized for

<sup>19</sup> Asprey, op. cit., p. 367. These remarks were made at the Aresens conference on 21 January 1918, where Ludendorff's main decisions concerning the Michael offensive were announced.

<sup>20</sup> Zabecki, D.T. *The Generals' War*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Citino, R.M. *The German Way of War*, Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 2005.

war, leading to a long war of attrition.<sup>22, 23</sup>

WWI was the first total war, at least on the European continent. When Germany failed to knock France out of the war with a single stroke, years of attritional warfare would follow. Was German doctrine adequate for this new kind of war? The analysis of Asprey and Holger H. Helwig on the German conduct of the war clearly suggest a negative answer to this question. Despite the tactical excellence often displayed on the battlefield, Germany lacked a coherent, effective and far-sighted operational, strategic and even political direction of the war (a flaw that was again evidenced during World War II). The offensives of the spring 1918 are perhaps the most extreme (but by no means the first) expression of these doctrinal flaws. They were intended to bring a victorious peace to Germany, but, beyond the application of new infantry tactics and the initial objective of separating the British from the French armies, there was no clear indication of how this ambitious goal should be reached.

The separations of the Allied forces could be effectively accomplished only by forcing a wedge between them and reaching the Channel, or at least occupying the vital railway knots on the British rear. Once isolated and with the back to the sea, the British armies could be destroyed or forced to evacuate, as it would happen in 1940.

There are no indications that the High Command understood this operational necessity, except in a very vague form.. The German forces were to reach Albert and Bapaume and then swing north, "then St. Georges 1 and 2 would flatten the Ypres salient, tear the line away from its anchorage from the sea and roll it up from the north"<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Citino, R.M. *Quest for Decisive Victory*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Foley, R.T. *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Pitt, B. *1918 - The Last Act*, London: Cassell, 1962, p. 50.

Alternatively to this second push in the Flanders, the Seventh, Third and Third armies would tackle the French Army Group North. How exactly the decision would be obtained was not envisaged. Lacking an operational plan, the subsequent offensives were often improvised according to apparent tactical successes, leading ultimately to costly failures and to extended lines and untenable positions. That "Michael" was not intended as a clear-cut blow with a precise objective is stated clearly by Asprey: "Almost from the moment of inception Ludendorff strategy began falling victim to vagueness. Major Wetzell wrote that 'the whole offensive action must not consist of a single great attack in one sector. ... The whole action must rather be composed of several attacks, having the stronger reciprocal effect, in various sectors, with the object of shaking the whole English front...'. The task, in Hindenburg's later words, was to shake 'the hostile edifice by closely connected partial blows in such a way that sooner or later the whole business would collapse' (what Marshal Foch derisively called 'buffalo strategy')"<sup>25</sup>.

The separation of the Allied armies was an alluring possibility for Ludendorff. He commented about "Michael" that "the strategic result might indeed be enormous, as we should separate the bulk of the English army from the French and crowd it up with its back to the sea"<sup>26</sup>. But this concept was only presented in vague form and was not further elaborated and developed. Its success was considered doubtful and clearly Ludendorff did not expect that "Michael" would suffice to achieve victory on the Western Front; hence the planning for the "St. George" offensive that would follow "Michael" in case of the latter's failure (it became "Georgette" after its reduction in

<sup>25</sup> Asprey, op. cit., p. 365.

<sup>26</sup> Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, p. 109.

size)<sup>27</sup>.

The vagueness of the German objectives is evident from the March 10 order approved by the Kaiser and signed by Hindenburg:

CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF  
Great Headquarters 10.3, issued 12.3.  
His Majesty commands:

(1) That the Michael Attack take place on 21<sup>st</sup> March. First penetration of the hostile position 9.40 a.m.

(2) The first great tactical objective of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group of Armies will be to cut off the British in the Cambrai salient and, north of the river Omignon and as far as the junction of that river with the Somme, to capture the line Croisilles-Bapaume-Péronne... Should the progress of the attack by the right wing be very favourable it will push on beyond Croisilles. The subsequent task of the Group of Armies will be to push on towards Arras-Albert, left wing fixed on the Somme near Péronne, and with the main weight of the attack on the right flank to shake the English front opposite Sixth Army and to liberate further German forces from their stationary warfare for the advance. All divisions in rear of Fourth and Sixth Armies are to be brought forward forthwith in case of such an event.

(3) The German Crown Prince's Group of Armies is first of all to capture the Somme and Crozat Canal south of river Omignon. By advancing rapidly the Eighteenth Army must seize the crossings over the Somme and over the Canal. It must also be prepared to extend its right flank as far as Péronne. The

Group of Armies will study the question of reinforcing the left wing of the Army by divisions from Seventh, First and Third Armies.

(4) O.H.L. keeps control of 2<sup>nd</sup> Guard, 26<sup>th</sup> Württemberg and 12<sup>th</sup> Divisions.

(5) O.H.L. reserves its decision as regards Mars and Archangel, and will be guided by the course of the event. Preparations for these are to be carried uninterruptedly.

(6) The remaining Armies are to act in accordance with C.G.S. Operation Order 6925, dated 4<sup>th</sup> March. Rupprecht's Group of Armies will protect the right wing of the Mars-Michael operation against an English counter-attack. The German Crown Prince's Group of Armies will withdraw before any big attack by the French against Seventh (exclusive of Archangel front), Third and First Armies. O.H.L. reserves its decision as regards the Groups of Armies of Gallwitz and Duke Albrecht concerning the strategic measures to be taken in the event of a big attack by the French or concerning the further withdrawal of divisions for the battle zone.

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The order is concerned about tactical objectives. It mentions that the main attack has the task to shake the British front but does not explain how the British army should be decisively defeated. If Ludendorff had a strategic vision, except for the general aim to defeat the Franco-British armies before the arrival of the Americans, it seems it was an attritional strategy, a series of blows intended to bleed the enemy and maybe cause its moral collapse. Such a vague, brute strategy is even more remarkable if we

<sup>27</sup> The planning and decisional process, centered on the three key OHL conferences of Mons (Nov. 1917), Krueznack (Dec. 1917), and Aresens (Jan. 2018) is described in detail in Chapter 5 of Zabecki's *The German 1918 Offensives*.

<sup>28</sup> Churchill W. *The World Crisis 1916-1918 part II*, London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1927, pp. 407-408.

think that Germany had limited human and material resources compared to the formidable coalition arrayed against it.

Ludendorff was not a fool however. Liddell Hart – who was indeed gentler in his judgement of his enemies than of the British commanders - praises Ludendorff strategic insight on the Eastern front. Maybe Ludendorff's failure in the West was not only the product of the limits of the German military thought. Perhaps, after almost four intense years of war, he suffered from an intense mental, psychological strain. This may be confirmed by his subsequent, sudden moral collapse after the "Black Day of the German Army" in August. Ludendorff was the virtual military dictator of Germany, and many high German officers, notably Hindenburg, the nominal Chief of Staff of the German Army, shared his views. Yet some officers criticized this lack of strategic and operational goals. In his remarkable history of the conflict, Holger H. Herwig collect the comments of several of them, whom he calls "the Young Turks": "The Young Turks in the General Staff quickly pointed to the root cause of failure: absence of a strategic plan. Major Wilhelm von Leeb with Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, a future field marshal of the Third Reich, on March 29<sup>th</sup> noted Ludendorff's lack of an overall concept: 'OHL has changed direction. It has made its decisions according to the size of territorial gain, rather than according to operational goals.' On 31 March Leeb recorded that Ludendorff had 'totally lost his nerves'. There existed no overarching concept of the campaign. 'According to Ludendorff we are to conduct operations wherever a tactical victory has been achieved; in other words, the OHL utterly lacks a definite plans of operations.' Two weeks later Leeb again lamented the lack of direction: 'We had absolutely no operational goal! That was the trouble!'"<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Herwig, p. 409.

The lack of clear operational objective is best summarized by T. Zabecki in *The German 1918 Offensive*:<sup>30</sup> "The initial MICHAEL plan did not call for a breakthrough of the British front on a large scale as far as the sea for the purpose of rolling up and destroying the enemy. Merely, it called for a breakthrough as far as the Somme and a drive on a wide front to the line of Bapaume-Péronne-Ham, with some vague form of exploitation to follow. The only clearly definite objective at the start was the first day objective, which was to eliminate the Cambrai salient." The initial force allotment seems to reflect the lack of a clarity of intent too: while Second and Seventeenth Army were apparently assigned the main role, Eighteenth Army at the beginning of the offensive was the strongest one, with twice as many guns per mile of front and 50% more men than Seventeenth Army<sup>31</sup>.

### Criticism inside the German Army

Despite the tendency in Germany to create and defend the myth of the infallibility of the duo Hindenburg/ Ludendorff, the criticism to these war leaders was by no means restricted only to the "Young Turks", as Herwig explains: "Lossberg, staff chief of the Fourth Army, accused Ludendorff of pursuing 'operational breakthrough' wherever 'tactical breakthrough' had been achieved, and decried the rigid and arrogant staff system that dominated the OHL. Crown Prince Rupprecht noted with understatement: 'I get the impression as if the OHL is living from hand to mouth without acknowledging definite operational designs.' His colleague, General von Kuhl, staff chief to Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, was of similar mind. Ludendorff continued to chase 'another Tannenberg'; there existed 'no great operational goal behind all the attacks'. Tactics had become an end in them-

<sup>30</sup> Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, p. 167-168.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

selves. 'Such are the limits of Ludendorff's [military] abilities'<sup>32</sup>.

Herwig quotes also the German official history of the war, which, despite its non-judgmental language, criticizes the lack of a clear centre of gravity. "Ludendorff" writes Herwig, "had failed to concentrate against a single adversary (Britain), and instead had sent his reserves wherever a crack had appeared in the front." In the offensives following "Michael", Ludendorff, according to general von Kuhl, continued to lurch from one tactical success to another, without the slightest idea of how "to end the war or to bring about a decision"<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately this kind of insight was not very common in the High Command, where the focus on tactics was prominent. It is thereafter not incorrect to say that the proficiency of the German High Command has been over-rated by its adversaries, as well as by the layman after the war.

On the other side, when organization and thoroughness are concerned, the German Army in WWI was second to none. Ludendorff in particular was an excellent organizer. Here it is difficult to criticize the judgment of Liddell Hart: "...in the organization of the attacks his [Ludendorff's] powers were at the highest levels. Surprise was to be the key that should open the gate in the long-locked front. The most thorough arrangements were made for concealing and for exploiting the attacks, and the surprise effect of the short but intense bombardment was increased by lavish use of gas and smoke shells"<sup>34</sup>.

M. Middlebrook in *The Kaiser's Battle* gives one of the most exhaustive descriptions of the German preparations for "Michael". He evidences the hard training of the storm troops, the meticulous, scientific

planning for the artillery preparation<sup>35</sup> and the importance attributed by the High Command to the new infiltration tactics. Still, he evidences also that only a minority of the German troops were instructed to the use of these tactics: "The majority of the infantrymen had no part to play in these storm tactics, and when survivors were asked what special training they had for the attack, they seemed surprised at the question. They all knew that a war of movement was hoped for and it was this that was practiced, but the tactics were not new; it was what all good soldiers had been trained in before trench warfare had intervened and it was more a refresher course than a learning of anything new, although there was always the emphasis on speed, on keeping up with the creeping barrage"<sup>36</sup>.

The fittest soldiers were grouped in storm divisions and the best of these were in the Jäger battalions. These crack troops were to play a decisive role in the offensive, but this would result in disproportionately high losses, leaving the rest of the army as an unbalanced and spent force. Middlebrook mentions also the different proficiency of the various German regional ethnic groups. For instance, Bavarians made good troops, while Saxons were indifferent fighters. The troops from the East front had a lower standard, and their low morale was to prove a liability. There were also a few Austrian units, regarded by the Germans with a certain contempt and called ironically "Kameraden Schnürschuh", i.e. "laced-boot comrades" because of their distinctive footwear. All in all, the army that was to join its decisive challenge was a rather unbalanced force.

<sup>32</sup> Herwig, op. cit., p. 409.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>34</sup> Liddell Hart, op. cit., p. 473.

<sup>35</sup> The artillery preparation was organized by Oberst Georg Bruchmüller. He devised a plan for a short, hurricane bombardment, with little or no previous registration of the targets. This was intended to, and actually it did, ensure the maximal surprise. See: Zabecki D.T. *Steel Wind*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Middlebrook, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

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