The World Gone Mad
A First World War Military History
Armies Collapse

Europe - 1917
Situation in January 1917

- Nobody is sure who is going to win
- Germany has stabilized the East
  - War cannot be won there however
- Serbia & Romania are out
  - Romanian food & oil helping sustain Germany
- Allies trapped at Salonika (still)
- Italians on the Isonzo River (still)
- Western Front stalemate (still)
- BUT, the blockade is starting to bite hard
  - “The Turnip Winter”
Allied Plan for 1917

- Chantilly Conference
- Strategy: Overwhelm the Central Powers ability to move reserves.
- Coordinated attacks on three fronts (four offensives)
GHQ had to bear in mind that the enemy’s great superiority in men and material would even be more painfully felt in 1917 than in 1916.

If the war lasted, our defeat seemed inevitable.

The future looked dark.

General Erich Ludendorff
Quartermaster General, GHQ
German Plan for 1917

- Germany must do something or lose the war

- The Plan
  - Force the Russians out of the war
  - Move 100+ divisions (≈ 1M men) to the western front
  - Unrestricted submarine warfare in the N. Atlantic
    - This will bring America into the war......but,
    - “Rolling the iron dice”
    - This will remove England from the war
  - Finish off the French; **WIN THE WAR!!**
  - ALL before America has an impact (1919/1920?)
  - Given what has happened to date, **this is ambitious!!**
Eastern Front

- Russian Revolution (March 1917)
  - Provisional Government (Lvov)
- Russian army is disintegrating
  - But the Russian gov’t doesn’t know it, but...
  - .....the Germans do.
- The “Kerensky Offensive” (July)
  - Complete failure
  - Riga (1st use of Hutier Tactics)
  - Russian army finished
    - “Voting with their feet”
  - Bolsheviks take over (Oct)
Stormtrooper Tactics

- General Hutier & Colonel Bruckmüller
- Hand picked, highly trained, and heavily armed men
  - Sub-machine guns
  - Flamethrowers
  - Massive #’s of grenades
  - Few traditional riflemen
- Lot’s of artillery
Key players in the East - 1917
Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

- The “Railway War”
  - March 1918
- Another German political blunder
  - 1 million sq. km of territory
  - 25% of Russia’s population (50 million)
  - 27% of farmland
  - 25% of Russia’s industry
  - 90% of Russia's coal production
  - $174 billion (in today's money)
- Germany needed 80+ divisions in the East
  - Only 55 could be moved west
**Italian Front**

- Two more battles on the Isonzo (10 & 11)
  - May & August
  - 280,000 Italian casualties
  - Austrians ask for German help
- Caporetto (12th Isonzo, Oct)
  - Hutier tactics (2d success)
  - Italians collapse
  - 700,000 casualties (40K dead)
  - Cadorna (finally!) fired
- Allies rush reinforcements to Mincio River
12th Isonzo (Caporetto)

The Italian Retreat from Caporetto to the River Piave Position 1917

KEY

- Main German-led ‘punch’ attack 24 October 1917.
- Other attacks by Central Powers October 1917.
- Abortive attempt to intercept Italians.
- Italian front line 23 October 1917.
- Italian retreat to the Piave 24 Oct.-10 Nov.1917.
- Line where Italians attempted to stand.
- Final Italian defence line 10 November 1917.

Caporetto causes Allies to create the Supreme War Council with Foch as Chief Military Advisor, BUT......

.....still no combined command structure!!!
Key players in the West - 1917

Ludendorff

Haig

Foch

Nivelle

Petan
The Western Front

- The Nivelle Offensive (3 elements)
  - 2d Arras & Vimy Ridge
  - 2d Aisne
  - “Final victory”
The Western Front (2)

- Withdraw to the “Hindenburg Line” (Feb) - Operation Albrecht
- Battle of Arras (April 9 – 16 May)
  - Vimy Ridge – major Canadian success
    - Bing introduces “bite & hold”
  - 8 shells /sec for 4 days
  - Introduction of new tactics
    - Creeping Barrage, “Graze fuses”, counter-battery fire, and small units worked well.
2d Battle of Arras
(Apr – May 1917)

• Overall, some actual gains
• “Bite & Hold” and small unit tactics could work
• However, no breakthrough
The Nivelle Offensive
The Western Front (3)

- Second Aisne (4/16-5/9)
  - Complete lack of air reconnaissance
    - Bloody April
  - One week after Arras
  - Total strategic failure
  - Leads to the French army “mutinies”
  - French Army essentially done for the summer
  - Spectacular German/British intelligence failure
Casualties
British – 160K
German – 283K
French – 187K
118 of 128 tanks
49 divisions
43%
25K desertions
3500 trials
43 executions

“Carrot & Stick”
Western Front (4)

- British decide on a major attack
  - Relieve pressure on the French
  - Also capture Belgium U-boat bases
- Messines (June)
  - 25 mines (20 were fired)
  - 10000 German deaths instantaneously
  - Heard in London and Dublin!
- Two back-to-back British successes
Passchendaele

- British launch 3d Ypres (July - November)
- Series of 8 major battles over 5 months
  - Zero surprise (5 shells/sec for 10 days)
  - “Le Guerre de Boue”
    - Drainage system destroyed
    - Heaviest rain in 40 years
- Mustard Gas
- Fully implemented “defense in depth”
- Gough vs. Plumer
Passchendaele (2)

- Final battle at Passchendaele (10 Nov)
- ≈300,000 (?) casualties each
- One Allied death for each 2 inches of gain
Roulers: This was the actual British objective.
Passchendaele

Before

After
La Malmaison

- The French army “resurgence”.
- 23 to 27 October
- 1785 guns (967 heavy), 54,000 troops and 200 (?) tanks.
- The Germans had 72,000 men and 720 guns.
- Poor German tactics
- Chemin des Dames is evacuated
Cambrai

- First major “combined arms” battle (Byng)
  - 20 Nov – 7 Dec 1917
  - 2 Corps + 476 (Mk IV) tanks
  - Initially very successful (But why?)
    - Aircraft, artillery, tanks, and tactics

- Not able to exploit success
  - Surprised by success
  - Weather
  - Not enough troops (Lloyd George)
  - Tank breakdowns and losses
Cambrai (2)

- Germans recovered and regained the ground
  - Storm Troopers (3d use of Hutier Tactics)
- Both sides learned from this battle
  - Seriously over-hyped by the British but,
  - Trench Warfare had been defeated and
  - Cambrai showed both sides what warfare would look like in 1918
# 1917 Attrition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arras</th>
<th>2d Aisne (Nivelle Offensive)</th>
<th>3d Ypres</th>
<th>Cambrai</th>
<th>La Malmaison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allied</strong></td>
<td>150K</td>
<td>270K</td>
<td>300K(?)</td>
<td>45K</td>
<td>14K</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>German</strong></td>
<td>130K</td>
<td>165K</td>
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<td>50K</td>
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**Totals:**
- German – 700,000
- Allied – 783,000

(Essentially a 1:1 ratio)
America Joins the War

- Failure of the winter peace initiatives
- April 1917
- Associated Power against Germany only
- Reasons: Submarines & Zimmermann & German intransigence
- End Game: Control the peace process
- Immediate impact
  - Prevented Allied bankruptcy
  - Navy ready immediately
- The Army will take some time however the moral impact is immediate
Summary for End of 1917

- Italians rebuilding slowly
- Austrians finished
- Russians finished
- French rebuilding quickly
  - Combined arms and
  - “Bite & Hold”
- British army also rebuilding quickly.
- Germans moving 500k (not 1M) west
But

- Submarine campaign has failed
- Britain is still standing
- Americans are starting to arrive in numbers
  - 200K/month after February 1918
  - Albeit, not ready for prime time
Next week; somehow, we wrap this all up