



America and Armageddon

"THEY WILL NOT EVEN COME," Admiral Capelle, the Secretary of State for the Navy, had assured the budgetary committee of the German parliament on 31 January 1917, "because our submarines will sink them. Thus America from a military point of view means nothing, and again nothing and for a third time nothing."¹ At the beginning of 1917, four months before the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies, its army—as opposed to its large and modern navy—might indeed have meant nothing. It ranked in size—107,641 men—seventeenth in the world.² It had no experience of large-scale operations since the armistice at Appomattox fifty-one years earlier, and possessed no modern equipment heavier than its medium machine guns. Its reserve, the National Guard, though larger, with 132,000 men, was the part-time militia of the individual forty-eight states, poorly trained even in the richer states and subject to the sketchiest Federal supervision. The only first-class American force, the United States Marine Corps, 15,500 strong, was scattered in America's overseas possessions and areas of intervention, including several Central American republics which the United States had decided to police in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Yet, by June 1917, the commander of an American Expeditionary Force, General John J. Pershing, had arrived in France and on 4 July, American Independence Day, elements of his 1st Division paraded in Paris. Throughout the following months, fresh units of an army planned to reach a strength of eighty divisions—nearly three million men, for American divisions were twice the size of French, British or German—continued to arrive. By March 1918, 318,000 men had reached France, the vanguard of 1,300,000 to be deployed by August,

and not one had been lost to the action or transport.³

Rare are the times in a great war when the fortunes of one side or the other are transformed by the sudden accretion of a disequilibrating reinforcement. Those of Napoleon's enemies were so transformed in 1813, when the failure of his Moscow campaign brought the Russian army to the side of Britain and Austria. Those of the United States against the Confederacy were transformed in 1863 when the adoption of conscription brought the North's millions into play against the South's hundreds of thousands. Those of an isolated Britain and an almost defeated Soviet Union would be transformed in 1941, when Hitler's intemperate declaration of war against America brought the power of the world's leading state to stand against that of Nazi Germany as well as Imperial Japan. By 1918, President Wilson's decision to declare war on Germany and its allies had brought such an accretion to the Allied side. Capelle's "they will never come" had been trumped in six months by America's melodramatic "Lafayette, I am here."

The United States had not wanted to enter the war. America, its President Woodrow Wilson had said, was "too proud to fight" and it had sustained a succession of diplomatic affronts, from the sinking of the *Lusitania* and its American passengers to the German attempt to foment a diversionary war in Mexico, without responding to provocation by material means. Once committed to hostilities, America's extraordinary capacity for industrial production and human organisation took possession of the nation's energies. It was decided at the outset to raise the army to be sent to France by conscription, overseen by local civilian registration boards. Over 24 million men were registered in 1917-18 and those deemed most eligible—young and unmarried males without dependants—formed the first contingent of 2,810,000 draftees. Together with those already enrolled in the regular army, the National Guard and the Marines, they raised the enlisted strength of the United States ground forces to nearly four million men by the war's end.

Many Americans were already fighting. Some, as individuals, had joined the British or Canadian armies. Others had enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. A large group of American pilots was already serving in the French air force, where they formed the Lafayette Escadrille, one of the leading air-fighting units on the Western Front. Its veterans would bring invaluable experience to the American Expeditionary Force's Air Corps once it crossed the Atlantic. Though forced

supply tanks, artillery or aircraft to the expeditionary force, which depended for supplies of those items largely on the French (3,100 field guns, 1,200 howitzers, 4,800 aircraft)—American pilots rapidly established a reputation for skill and dash. Eddie Rickenbacker, America's leading ace, was as much a hero in France as in his home country.

A blind spot in America's mobilisation lay over its response to its black population's willingness to serve. W. E. B. DuBois, one of the most important champions of black America in the early twentieth century, argued that, "if this is our country, then this is our war." White America, particularly the white military establishment, continued to believe that blacks lacked military spirit and were suitable for use only as labour or service troops. That despite the fact that the "buffalo soldiers," the four regular regiments of black infantry and cavalry, had always performed well in the wars on the Indian frontier and that black regiments had fought with tenacity in the Civil War. Reluctantly a black division, the 92nd, was raised, with some black officers, none holding higher rank than captain, commanding sub-units. It did not do well in action. Its failure—"Poor Negroes—They are hopelessly inferior," wrote the commander of the corps in which the 92nd Division served—was ascribed throughout the army to racial incapacities. No professional American officer seems to have taken note of the reliance the French were already placing on the black contingents of *Tirailleurs sénégalais*, who showed a readiness to fight in the second half of 1917 that native white Frenchmen had, at least temporarily, lost. The racially supercilious American officers of the AEF may be forgiven for failing to anticipate the outstanding performance of black combat troops in America's wars of the later twentieth century. The poor record of black American troops on the Western Front in 1918 bears the classic signs nevertheless of self-fulfilling prophecy; little being expected of them, little was given.

The ordinary soldier of the Allied armies, British or French, remained unaware of a racial problem that proved a solely domestic concern. To the battered armies that had attacked and defended throughout 1914 to 1917, the appearance of the doughboys, as the American conscripts of the last year of the war were universally known, brought nothing but renewed hope. Their personal popularity was everywhere noted. The Americans were light-hearted, cheerful, enthusiastic, dismissive of difficulties. "We'll soon settle this," was the dough-boy attitude. The French and British military professionals, alarmed by

the AEF's deficiency in technical military skills, particularly in artillery method and inter-arm cooperation, propagated the message that the Americans were suitable only as replacements or subordinate units. Pershing was to have none of it, insisting that a united American army, under American command, was the only force that would do justice to his country's involvement. The point of principle on which he stood was to be justified by the American Expeditionary Force's contribution to victory.

The arrival of Lafayette's expeditionary force to the aid of the colonists in 1781 at the crisis of the American War of Independence had confronted their British enemies with an alteration of force they could not match. The arrival of the Americans created no such unalterable imbalance in 1917. By the end of the year, the Germans, too, overstretched as they had been throughout 1915–16 by the need to prop up their Austrian allies, by the losses incurred at Verdun and on the Somme, and by the unanticipated recovery of the Russians in 1916, had turned a corner. The political collapse of Russia had released from the Eastern Front fifty divisions of infantry which could be brought to the west to attempt a final, war-winning offensive. Not indifferent divisions either; the total collapse of Russia's military power at the end of 1917 allowed the German high command to leave in the east no more force than was needed to maintain order and collect produce inside the German-occupied area. It consisted chiefly of overage *Landwehr* and skeleton cavalry formations. The shock troops that had sealed the Kerensky army's fate—Guard and Guard Reserve Divisions, Prussian and north German divisions of the pre-war active army—had been successively disengaged during the winter and brought westward by rail to form, with others already on the Western Front, an attacking mass of sixty divisions.⁴

The German high command, which had for so long been compelled to sustain defensive strategy in the west, had given great thought and preparation to perfecting the offensive methods to be employed by the attack force, the last reserve it could hope to assemble.⁵ It was a grave deficiency that the German army had no tanks. A clumsy prototype was under development, and British tanks captured during 1917 were being pressed into service, but no concentration of tanks such as was already available to the British and French stood to hand. Hindenburg and Ludendorff counted, in its absence, on a refinement of artillery and infantry tactics, practised in the last stages of the Russian campaign, to compensate for German weakness at the technical level. The

infantry had been re-equipped with large numbers of stripped-down machine guns (the 08/15), rough if not wholly adequate equivalents of the British and French light machine guns, the Lewis and Chauchat, and had been trained to "infiltrate" enemy positions, by-passing centres of resistance, rather than stopping to fight when held up directly to their front. These tactics anticipated blitzkrieg, which the German army would apply so successfully in mechanised operations in a later war. Each attacking division, in addition, had been ordered to form specialised "storm" battalions of lightly equipped infantry which, with grenade and carbine, were to drive deep but narrow cavities through the crust of the enemy positions, breaking it into isolated sections to be overcome by the following waves of conventional infantry at a slower pace.

The emphasis of the German attack plan, however, was on speed. Nivelle had hoped, unrealistically, to overcome the German position on the Chemin des Dames the previous year in a few hours. He had lacked the trained troops and weight of artillery to bring his hope to realisation. Ludendorff now had the necessary troops and guns and a realistic plan. The enemy was to be attacked both on a broad front—fifty miles—and in depth, the depth of the attack to be achieved by concentrating an enormous weight of artillery firing the heaviest possible bombardment at short, medium and long range in a brief but crushing deluge of shells, lasting five hours. Ludendorff's bombardment force amounted to 6,473 field, medium and heavy guns and 3,532 mortars of varying calibre, for which over a million rounds of ammunition were assembled.⁶ All the guns, many of which had been brought from the east, were "registered" beforehand at a specially constructed firing range, producing data of each gun's variance from a theoretical norm which, when combined with detailed meteorological allowance for barometric pressure and wind speed and direction, would ensure, as far as was humanly possible, that all would hit their designated targets, whether enemy trenches or battery positions. Explosive shell was also to be intermixed with varieties of gas projectiles, lachrymatory and asphyxiating phosgene, in a combination calculated to outwit the protection offered by enemy gas masks. Lachrymatory or tear gas was designed to make the enemy infantry take off their gas masks, in a relief reflex, when phosgene would disable them.

Some combination of all these measures had been tried in the last offensive against the Russians at Riga in September 1917, when the German artillery had fired without preliminary registration on the

Russian positions and created the conditions for a breakthrough. Bruchmüller, Ludendorff's artillery supremo, there proved to his satisfaction that the firing of guns previously registered behind the front, and so not needing to betray their positions by ranging on enemy targets until the moment of attack, could create the circumstances in which an infantry assault would lead to victory.⁸

It was with Bruchmüller's verified experiment in mind that Hindenburg had, at Mons on 11 November 1917, come to the decision to launch an all-or-nothing offensive in the west in the coming year.⁹ The expectations pinned to its outcome were far-reaching. As Ludendorff expressed the mind of the high command in a letter to Hindenburg on 7 January 1918, "the proposed new offensive, should . . . lead to the decisive success for which we hope . . . We shall [then] be in a position to lay down such conditions for peace with the Western Powers as are required by the security of our frontiers, our economic interests and our international position after the war."¹⁰ Eventual victory might bring rewards in the west, notably control of Belgium's industrial economy and the incorporation of the French coal and iron basin of Longwy-Briey within the wider German Ruhr industrial area.¹¹ Belgium's Flemish-speaking region, traditionally hostile to French-speaking Wallonia, was not immune to German seductions. In February 1917, a Council of Flanders had been set up in Brussels, under the patronage of the German military government, and in the following months had bargained autonomy for itself under German patronage. Flemish expectations of what autonomy would bring were, however, not what Germany intended to concede. Flanders wanted democracy and true independence; Germany required subordination. Its external policy, in the Belgian direction, thus foundered during 1918 on the stubborn liberalism of a people whose pan-Teutonic feelings did not extend to the surrender of their national rights.¹²

THE WAR IN THE EAST CONTINUES

Despite the weight of Germany's military preoccupation with preparation for the coming offensive in the west, its political concerns for the future remained concentrated in the east, where national sentiment was less self-assured and independent identities weaker. Germany correctly calculated that its opportunity to impose subordinate relationships on the peoples who had only just escaped from domination by the old Russian empire was altogether more promising. The Baltic

peoples—Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian—had retained their sense of association with the German-speaking lands for centuries; much of the land-owning class was German by origin. Finland, though it had enjoyed a degree of autonomy inside the Tsarist empire, was anxious to regain full independence and ready to accept German help to do so. Lenin's early policy was to allow the non-Russian peoples of the empire to secede if they chose, while encouraging the local left, with the support of any remaining Russian soldiers, to stage pro-Soviet revolutions. In the Baltic lands, already under German occupation as a result of the successful offensives of 1916–17, revolution was swiftly put down and semi-independent pro-German regimes were established, though not without protest in Lithuania, which sought but failed to achieve full sovereignty.¹³ In Finland, where power in parliament, an institution of the old Tsarist constitution, was fairly evenly divided between left and right, the issue of what relationship with Germany the country should establish provoked civil war. The right had been pro-German throughout the European conflict and an all-Finnish volunteer unit, the 27th Jäger Battalion, had fought with the German army on the Baltic front since 1916. The right's readiness to form a German alliance, after independence was declared in December 1917, provoked the left into forming a worker militia of its own; in January 1918 fighting broke out, the left seizing Helsinki, the capital, the right retiring into the northern provinces. The Germans sent arms, 70,000 rifles, 150 machine guns and twelve field guns, all of Russian origin; also from Russia came the commander who was to lead the right-wing forces, Gustav Mannerheim, a Baltic nobleman and ex-Tsarist officer, of formidable personal and military capacities.

Mannerheim had been commissioned into the Chevalier Guards, grandest of the Tsar's cavalry regiments, and had served under Brusilov in the Model Cavalry Squadron; his career testified to his outstanding qualities. The war had brought him command of the VI Cavalry Corps, which he succeeded in keeping intact while the rest of the imperial army disintegrated after the failure of the Kerensky offensive.¹⁴ After the October Revolution, he decided, however, that he must transfer his loyalty to his homeland; he made his way to Finland and secured appointment as the Commander-in-Chief of the anti-Bolshevik army. The Petrograd Bolsheviks had, under German pressure, recognised the independence of Finland on 31 December 1918; but four days later, Stalin had persuaded the Petrograd Soviet to alter the terms on which independence was granted and then offered the Finnish socialists Rus-

sian help to establish socialist power on Finnish soil in the form of Russian units not yet repatriated, and in the Finnish Red Guards. While Mannerheim consolidated his base in the western region of Ostrobothnia, the left took possession of the industrial towns.

During January and February 1918, both sides prepared for the offensive. The Reds had about 90,000 men at their disposal, Mannerheim only 40,000.¹⁵ His troops, however, were under the command of professional officers and stiffened by cadres of the 27th Jägers. The Red forces lacked trained leadership. Moreover, while Germany was preparing to send an experienced expeditionary force, largely comprising General von der Goltz's Baltic Division, to the Finns' assistance, Lenin was increasingly nervous of taking any action that would provoke a German landing in an area adjacent to the revolution's centre at Petrograd, where the military force at his disposal was scarcely adequate to protect the Bolshevik leadership from its enemies, let alone repel an organised foreign expeditionary force. After the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which formally ended war between Russia and Germany, the Soviet actually began withdrawing what troops it had left in Finland, though it continued surreptitiously to support and supply the native Red forces.

Mannerheim seized the opportunity to push forward. The leader of the Finnish nationalists, Svinhufvud, was too pro-German for his taste, prepared to acquiesce in the German plan to make his country an economic and political dependency of the German empire for the sake of comfort, while he, as he would shortly proclaim, wanted no "part of another empire but . . . a great, free, independent Finland."¹⁶ In early March the Red advance into Mannerheim's area of control in Ostrobothnia petered out and he went over to the offensive. His enemy, though controlling the capital, was menaced by another nationalist force to the rear, operating on the isthmus of Karelia between the Baltic and Lake Ladoga, through which the Red lines of communication led to Petrograd. Mannerheim's plan was to organise a concentric advance which would simultaneously cut those lines of communication and squeeze the Reds between two convergent attacks.

Before he could consummate his plan, von der Goltz's Baltic Division, which had been detained on the southern Baltic coast by ice, appeared at the port of Hangö, formerly the Tsarist navy's forward base, and advanced on Helsinki, which it entered on 13 April. On 6 April, however, Mannerheim had taken Tampere, the Reds' main

south-eastward towards Karelia. At his approach, the remaining Red forces beat a hasty retreat across the border into Russia and on 2 May all resistance to Mannerheim's armies came to an end. Finland was free, both of a foreign imperialism and of the foreign ideology which had succeeded it. It was not, however, yet independent. The Germans had extracted a high price for their support and for their intervention. The treaty signed between the two countries on 2 March gave Germany rights of free trade with Finland but not Finland with Germany, and bound Finland not to make any foreign alliance without German consent.¹⁷ The Svinhufvud government was content to accept diplomatic and economic client status, even a German prince as regent of a restored Grand Duchy, if that would guarantee German protection against the threat of renewed social revolution or Russian aggression.¹⁸ Mannerheim was not. His fervent nationalism and justified pride in his army's victory stiffened his resolve to submit to no foreign authority; moreover, his firm belief that Germany could not win the world war caused him to reject any policy identifying Finland with its strategic interests. On 30 May he resigned his command and retired to Sweden, from which he would return at the war's end to negotiate an honourable settlement of his country's differences with the victors.

Finland, though compromised by the German alliance, had had a swift and comparatively painless exit from the chaos of Russian collapse. Total casualties in the war numbered 30,000 and, though that was a large figure in a population of three million, it would pale into insignificance, relatively as well as absolutely, beside the terrible toll of the civil war which was beginning to spread throughout Russia proper.¹⁹ That war would last until 1921 and take the lives, directly or indirectly, of at least seven million and perhaps ten million people, five times as many as had been killed in the fighting of 1914-17.²⁰

There need have been no civil war in Russia had the Bolsheviks not thrown away the advantages they had gained in the first months of revolution, advantages lost by mismanagement of their diplomacy and through a hopelessly unrealistic confidence placed in the power of the revolutionary impulse to undermine the "capitalist" states from below. Between November 1917 and March 1918 the Bolsheviks had won a great internal victory in most of the seventy-five provinces and regions into which the old Tsarist empire had been divided. During the so-called "railway" (*eshelonaia*) war, picked bands of armed revolutionaries had fanned out from Petrograd down the empire's railway system to

make contact with the 900 Soviets that had replaced the official organs of administration in Russia's cities and towns and to put down the resistance of groups opposed to the October Revolution. The Russian railways, during this brief but brilliant revolutionary episode, worked for Lenin as the German railways had not for Moltke in 1914. Decisive force had been delivered to key points in the nick of time, and a succession of crucial local successes had been achieved that, in sum, brought revolutionary triumph.

Then, with Russia in their hands, the Bolsheviks had prevaricated with the Germans over the terms of the peace settlement that would have confirmed their victory. Brest-Litovsk was a harsh peace. It required the Bolsheviks to accept that Russian Poland and most of the Baltic lands should cease to be part of Russia proper, that Russian troops should be withdrawn from Finland and Transcaucasia and that peace should be made with the nationalists of the Ukraine, who had declared their independence.²¹ Since Poland and the Baltic lands had already been lost to Russia, Finland was about to fall to Mannerheim's nationalists, and Bolshevik power in the Ukraine and Transcaucasia was everywhere fragile and in places non-existent, the harshness of the Brest-Litovsk terms lay in the letter of the treaty rather than in fact. The Bolsheviks might well have signed without damage to their objective circumstances, making the mental reservation that the seceding territories could be reintegrated when Germany's fortunes worsened and theirs improved. The Bolsheviks were, however, possessed by the illusion that the menace of world revolution, which they had made a reality in their homeland, threatened all "imperialist" powers and that, by defying the Germans to do their worst, they would provoke Germany's workers to rise against their masters in solidarity with the Bolshevik cause.

Their illusions were fed by a wave of strikes that broke out in Germany on 28 January 1918, involving a million industrial workers, whose leaders called for "peace without annexations," the core policy of the Bolsheviks, and in some towns set up workers' councils.²² The strikes, however, were rapidly put down; moreover, as with similar strikes in France during 1917, the impetus came not from revolutionary enthusiasm but from weariness with the war and its hardships, psychological as well as material. Their effect on the Bolshevik leadership was nevertheless calamitous. While Lenin, with his usual hardheadedness, urged caution, in effect arguing that the time offered by accepting Germany's terms must be used to strengthen the revolution's hand against enemies

within and without, Trotsky, now Commissar for Foreign Affairs, succumbed to a romantic ideological urge and carried with him the majority in the Bolshevik Central Committee. To challenge the Germans to do their worst, a worst which would bring down the wrath of world revolution on the imperialists' heads, first in Germany itself, then elsewhere in the capitalist lands, there was to be "neither peace nor war."²³ Russia would not sign; neither would it fight. In earnest of this extraordinary decision, an abdication of material power in expectation of a spiritual engulfment of the revolution's enemies, the total demobilisation of the Russian army was announced on 29 January.²⁴ At Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky continued to fence with the Germans for another ten days. Then, on 9 February, the Germans made a separate peace with the Ukraine, simultaneously issuing to the Bolsheviks an ultimatum requiring them to sign the treaty by the following day or else acquiesce in the termination of the armistice of the previous December and the occupation by the German army, together with Austrian and Turkish contingents, of the territories scheduled at Brest-Litovsk for separation from old Russia.

In the next eleven days, the Germans swept forward to what the ultimatum had called "the designated line."²⁵ Operation *Faustschlag* overwhelmed the Bolshevik forces in White Russia (Belarus), in the western Ukraine, in the Crimea, in the industrial Donetz basin and eventually, on 8 May, on the Don. In less than two months, 130,000 square miles of territory, an area the size of France, containing Russia's best agricultural land, many of its raw materials and much of its industry, had been appropriated by the enemy. "It is the most comical war I have ever known," wrote General Max Hoffmann, who had served Hindenburg as Chief of Staff at Tannenberg. "We put a handful of infantrymen with machine guns and one gun on to a train and rush them off to the next station; they take it, make prisoners of the Bolsheviks, pick up a few more troops and so on. This proceeding has, at any rate, the charm of novelty." It was the novelty of lightning victory, dreamed of by Schlieffen, not achieved by any German army since the beginning of the war.

Lightning victories, experience tells, store up evil consequences, usually for the victors. Operation Thunderbolt had consequences but, to add to the many inequities produced by the Russian revolution, the evil was suffered not by the Germans but by the defeated Bolsheviks. The results of their defeat were threefold. First, a number of Russia's minorities seized the opportunity offered to throw off control by Petro-

grad and establish their own governments. Second, the failure of the Bolsheviks to resist the German irruption, followed by their precipitate agreement to sign a dictated peace, confirmed the Western Allies—France and Britain, but also the United States and Japan—in their tentative resolve to establish a military presence on Russian soil, with the purpose of subjecting the German forces of occupation to a continued military threat. Finally, the collapse of Bolshevik armed force, such as it was, provided the opponents of revolution inside Russia with the circumstances in which they could stage a counter-revolution that swiftly became a civil war.

Finland had been the first of the "nationalities" to strike for its freedom. The ethnic Romanians of the provinces of Bessarabia and Moldavia were next; with the remnant of the Romanian army close at hand, they declared a Moldavian People's Republic in January 1918, which in April became part of Romania proper. Despite the presence of a sizeable Russian minority, it would remain Romanian until 1940. In Transcaucasia, which had fallen under Tsarist rule only during the nineteenth century, ethnic Russians were altogether fewer, being for the most part town-dwellers, railway workers, government officials or soldiers.²⁶ The dominant nationalities, Christian Georgians and Armenians, Muslim and Turkic-speaking Azeris, were granted the right to make their own arrangements for self-government by the Petrograd Bolsheviks in November 1917 and in April 1918 declared a Federative Democratic Republic.²⁷

Federation lasted only a month, brought to an end by the revival of historic hostilities between the three ethnicities. The independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan would last, however, until 1920, when the Bolsheviks decided to go back on their concession of political freedoms, that of Georgia until 1921. In the interim, all three independent states had been drawn into the culminating stage of the Great War by the intervention, direct or indirect, of the major combatants.

Transcaucasia and Transcaspia, to its south-east, might have remained backwaters had not both contained resources of the greatest strategic value—Caucasian oil, refined at the port of Baku on the Caspian Sea, the cotton crop of Turkestan in Transcaspia—and been served by railways that allowed their extraction. Under the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Bolshevik Russia was obliged to supply a proportion of both to Germany. The Bolsheviks naturally wanted some for themselves. So did the Turks, who also cherished ambitions of incorporating the Turkic-speaking Transcaspians into the Ottoman empire.

In the spring of 1918, the German forces positioned in the eastern Ukraine and Donetz basin by Operation Thunderbolt began to push columns eastward towards Baku; so did the Turks across their Caucasian border. At the same time, the British, from their imperial base in India and from the sphere of influence established in southern Persia by great-power agreement with Tsarist Russia in 1907, advanced their own troops into the region.²⁸

In the early stages of the Great War, British-Indian forces had fortified their presence in the region by creating the so-called East Persian Cordon with the object of interdicting efforts by German, Austrian and Turkish agents to foment trouble on the Indian empire's North-West Frontier through Afghanistan. The Indian 28th Cavalry had been transferred for extended duty to the East Persian Cordon,²⁹ while a local force, the South Persian Rifles, had been raised to patrol the border of Indian Baluchistan with the Persian empire.³⁰ At word of the German-Turkish advance towards Transcaucasia and Transcaspia in the spring of 1918, the British presence had been reinforced. A column of British armoured cars under General Dunsterville ("Dunsterforce") had been started forward from Mesopotamia to the Caspian, with Baku as its objective, in January. It was followed in June by a force of Indian troops, commanded by General Malleon, which crossed the North-West Frontier to establish a base in the Persian city of Meshed, south of the Caspian, with the object of preventing German or Turkish penetration of Russian Central Asia.

These were tiny forces in a vast area, but the "Great Game" played by the British and Russians for influence over Central Asia since the early nineteenth century had never involved more than a handful of men on either side. With the incorporation during the 1880s of the Central Asian khanates and emirates into the Russian empire, Britain's opportunity to play tribal politics had been curtailed. It was extinguished altogether, as was Russia's in the opposite direction, by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 "defining their respective interests in relation to Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet."³¹ Revolution revived the Great Game all over again, and multiplied the number of players. To the local tribal leaders who, at Lenin's subsequently regretted encouragement, had established agencies of self-government and organised a Central Caspian Directorate, were added bodies of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners-of-war, 35,000 in number, whose services as soldiers were eagerly solicited by all parties, though those still ready to fight inclined towards the Bolsheviks. The others included the Bol-

sheviks themselves, based on Astrakhan at the head of the Caspian Sea and at Tashkent on the Central Asian Railway, and the German and Turkish armies which, from their respective bases in the eastern Ukraine and the Caucasus, pushed forward soldiers and diplomatic missions, towards Baku and beyond. Finally there were British, with Dunsterville—schoolmate of Rudyard Kipling and the subject of his Stalky stories—who was principally concerned to deny Baku's oil to both the Germans and the Turks and to assist Malleon in interdicting Turkey's access to the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia, its use of the Central Asian Railway and its desire to incite trouble inside Afghanistan on India's North-West Frontier.

The drama of the Great War in Central Asia, sensational though it potentially was, had an anti-climactic conclusion. Dunsterville was driven from Baku in September by a Turkish advance, which resulted in a massacre of Baku's Armenians by their Azeri enemies. Malleon's penetration of Central Asia was swiftly reversed, but not before the murder of twenty-six Bolshevik commissars, abducted from Baku, also in September, by his Turkic confederates, had provided the Soviet government with the raw material to damn the British as "imperialists" to Central Asians for as long as Russian Communism would last.³² Neither the German nor Turkish interventions in the Caspian region would endure; Germany's would be ended by its defeat on the Western Front, Turkey's by the collapse of its imperial system after the armistice of 31 October 1918.

In the long run, victory in Central Asia went to the Bolsheviks, though their war of second thoughts against the peoples of the Caucasus would last until 1921, and the struggle against the Turkic "Basmachi" insurrectionists in Central Asia, among whom the Young Turk Enver Pasha made a brief but tragic firebrand appearance after the Ottoman defeat, would persist for years after that.³³ The Central Asian episode, nevertheless, has its significance, for the British tentatives were elements in a wider scheme of foreign interference in Russian affairs that, besides poisoning relations between the West and the Soviet government for decades to come, also illuminate the diplomacy of the closing stages of the Great War in arresting focus.

The Western Allies—the French and British but also the Americans and Japanese—all sent troops to Russia during 1918. None, however, despite the version of events later constructed by Soviet historians, did so, initially, with the purpose of reversing the October Revolution. Indeed, the first troops to set foot ashore, a party of 170 British marines,

who landed at the north Russian part of Murmansk on 4 March 1917, the day after the Bolsheviks at last signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, arrived with the encouragement of Trotsky, who two days earlier had telegraphed the Murmansk Soviet with instructions to accept "all assistance" from the Allies.³⁴ Trotsky and the British had a common interest. Murmansk, which had been developed as a major port of entry for British war supplies to the Russian army between 1914 and 1917, was crammed with weapons and munitions. Following the victory of the anti-Bolshevik Finns in their civil war, both Trotsky and Britain had reason to fear that the Finns and their German allies would advance to seize the material. The White Finns, who also had territorial ambitions in the region, were keen to do so; it was Mannerheim's disapproval of such a blatant and ill-judged anti-Allied initiative that, among other reasons, had caused him to give up command and retire to Sweden. Trotsky's particular anxiety was that the Finns, once rearmed, would, with German assistance, march on Petrograd, while the British were alarmed by the prospect of the Germans turning Murmansk into a naval base, north of their mine barriers, from which U-boats could roam the North Atlantic.³⁵

Trotsky also wanted the store of British weapons for his own Red Army which, following the precipitate dissolution of the old Russian army on 29 January 1918, had effectively been brought into being by a decree creating a Red Army high command on 3 February; a conscription decree would shortly follow.³⁶ The function of the Red Army would be to defend the revolution against its real enemies, whom Trotsky identified, in a speech to the Central Committee in April 1918, not as "our *internal* class enemies, who are pitiful," but as "the all-powerful *external* enemies, who utilise a huge centralised machine for their mass murder and extermination."³⁷ By "external" enemies he meant those of the British, French and Americans: that is to say the Germans, Austrians and Turks, who were not only established on Russian soil but were actually extending their area of control over Russia's richest agricultural and resource-yielding regions in the Ukraine, Donetz and Caucasus. Thus, even as late as April 1918, despite the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty which had made a theoretical peace between the Bolsheviks and Russia's enemies, despite the ideological hostility of the Bolsheviks to the capitalist system that Britain, France and the United States represented, they and the Bolsheviks still retained a common interest, the defeat of the Central Powers.

Pursuit of the common interest had faltered in November 1917,

after the Bolsheviks had proclaimed an armistice and called on the Allies to initiate peace negotiations with the Germans, Austrians and Turks.³⁸ It had been seriously set back in December, when France and Britain had been encouraged by the appearance of anti-Bolshevik resistance within Russia to send representatives to the counter-revolutionaries, in the hope that they would sustain the Russian war effort that Lenin and Trotsky seemed bent on terminating.³⁹ It had been revived in January, to such effect that in February the Bolsheviks were using the Allies' offer of assistance as an instrument to win better terms from the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. After the German imposition of the treaty, and its ratification won with difficulty by Lenin from the Fourth Soviet Congress on 15 March, it seemed fated for extinction.⁴⁰ Yet, thanks to the heavy-handedness of German occupation policy in the Ukraine and beyond, it might still have survived, had not haphazard and unforeseen events supervened to set the Bolsheviks and the West irredeemably at odds.

In the summer of 1918, the Western Allies became inextricably entangled with the Bolsheviks' Russian enemies. That had not been the Allies' intention. Calamitous though the October Revolution had been to their cause and repugnant though the Bolshevik programme was to their governments, sufficient realism prevailed in their policy-making to deter them from opening an irreparable breach with the regime that controlled Russia's capital city and what survived, even in an unfamiliar form, of its administrative system. The Bolsheviks' domestic enemies, though patriotic, anti-German and supporters of the traditional order, were disorganised, disunited and dispersed around the margins of Russia's heartland. The most important grouping, known as the Volunteer Army, had actually come into being through the flight in November 1917 of two of the Tsar's leading generals, Alexeyev, his Chief of Staff, and Kornilov, who had led the August attempt to restore his authority, from their badly guarded prison at Bykhov, near the former supreme headquarters at Mogilev, to the distant Don region in South Russia.⁴¹ The Don had been chosen as their destination because it was the homeland of the largest of the Cossack hosts, whose fierce personal loyalty to the Tsar made them seem the most promising confederates in raising the standard of counter-revolution against the Petrograd Bolsheviks. Neither the Don Cossacks, nor those of the more remote Kuban steppe, were, however, sufficiently numerous or well-organised to prove a real threat to Soviet power, as the leaders of the Volunteer Army swiftly found. Don Cossack resistance collapsed in February

1918, under the weight of a Soviet counter-attack, and when Kornilov withdrew the tiny Volunteer Army across the steppe towards the Kuban, disaster ensued. Kornilov was killed by a chance shell and, although he was replaced by the energetic Denikin, the new leader could not find a secure base for his refugee force.⁴² Only 4,000 strong, it seemed fated in April to disintegrate under Bolshevik pressure and the pitilessness of Russia's vast space.

What changed everything—for the Bolsheviks, for their Russian enemies and for the Western Allies—in the unfolding of the struggle for power within Russia was the emergence to importance of a force none of them had taken into account, the body of Czechoslovak prisoners of war released by the November armistice from captivity in the Ukraine. In April they began to make their way out of Russia to join the armies of the Allies in the Western Front. The Ukraine in 1918 was full of prisoners of war, German as well as Austro-Hungarian, but, while the Germans awaited liberation at the hands of the advancing German army, the two largest Austro-Hungarian contingents, Poles and Czechs, were determined not to be repatriated. Their hopes were that, by changing sides, they might advance the liberation of their homelands from imperial rule. The Poles made the mistake of throwing in their lot with the separatist Ukrainians and were overwhelmed in February by the Germans when the Rada, the Ukrainian nationalist committee, signed its own peace at Brest-Litovsk. The cannier Czechs put no trust in the Rada, insisted on being allowed to leave Russia for France via the Trans-Siberian Railway, secured Bolshevik agreement to their demand in March and by May were on their way.⁴³ Their journey pleased neither the British, who had hoped the Czechs would go north to assist in the defence of Murmansk, nor the French, who wanted the Czechs to remain in the Ukraine and fight the Germans. The Czechs, who were in direct contact with the foreign-based leaders of their provisional government, Masaryk and Benes, were adamant. Their objective was the Pacific terminal of the Trans-Siberian at Vladivostok, from which they expected to take ship to France. They intended that nothing should interrupt their transit.

It was nevertheless interrupted on 14 May 1918 when, at Cheliabinsk in western Siberia, an altercation broke out between the eastward-bound Czechs and some Hungarian prisoners being returned westward to the Habsburg army.⁴⁴ Two patriotisms were involved: that of the Czechs for an independent Czechoslovakia, that of the Hungarians for their privileged place in the Habsburg system. A Czech was wounded,

his Hungarian assailant was lynched and, when the local Bolsheviks intervened to restore order, the Czechs rose in arms to put them down and assert their right to use the Trans-Siberian Railway for their exclusive purposes. As they numbered 40,000, strung out in organised units along the whole length of the railway from the Volga to Vladivostok, suspected correctly that the Bolsheviks desired to disarm them and dismember their organisation, and were under the influence of an aggressively anti-Bolshevik officer, Rudolph Gajda, they were both in a position and soon in a mood to deny the use of the railway to anyone else.⁴⁵ The loss of the Trans-Siberian was a serious setback to the Bolsheviks, since their seizure and retention of power was railway-based. Worse was to follow. The Czechs, originally neutral between the Bolsheviks and their Russian enemies, embarked on a series of sharp local operations eastward along the railway which had the indirect effect of overturning Soviet power in Siberia; "by midsummer 1918, both Siberia and the Urals [territorially the greater area of Russia] had been lost to the Bolsheviks."⁴⁶

Meanwhile the Western Allies, committed as they were to the extraction of the Czech Corps for service on the Western Front, began to channel direct aid, in the form of money and weapons as well as encouragement, to the Czechs, who found a sudden enthusiasm not to leave Russia before they had dealt the Bolsheviks a death blow. At the same time, the Russian anti-Bolsheviks, including both the forces of a self-proclaimed Supreme Ruler, Admiral Kolchak, in Siberia and the original standard-bearers of revolt in South Russia, the Volunteer Army of Denikin, as well as the Don and Kuban Cossack Hosts, were heartened by the Czech success to return to the fray with renewed confidence. The apparent commonality of cause between them and the Czechs thus came to qualify them for Allied support also. It had not at the outset been the Allies' intention to make the Bolsheviks their enemies and there were good reasons for their not doing so, the Bolsheviks' genuine hostility to the Germans, Austrians and Turks, all established as conquerors and predators on historic Russian territory foremost among them. By the late summer of 1918, nevertheless, the Allies found themselves effectively at war with the Bolshevik government in Moscow, supporting counter-revolution in the south and in Siberia, and sustaining intervention forces of their own, British in North Russia, French in the Ukraine, Japanese and American on the Pacific Coast.

A war entirely subsidiary to the Great War ensued. In North Russia a mixed French-British-American force, under the command of the

formidable and physically gigantic British General Ironside—a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff and alleged model for the fictional Richard Hannay of John Buchan's enormously popular adventure stories—made common cause with the local anti-Bolshevik Social Revolutionaries and pushed out a defensive perimeter 200 miles to the south of the White Sea; at Tulgas on the River Dvina, it sat out the winter of 1918–19, while the Bolsheviks organised forces against it.⁴⁷ Ironside meanwhile raised a local force of British-officered Russian troops, the Slavo-British Legion, received an Italian reinforcement, accepted the assistance of a Finnish contingent principally interested in annexing Russian territory, an aim from which it had to be deflected, and co-operated generally with the commanders of the British intervention forces in the Baltic. These included military missions to the Baltic-German militias in Latvia and Estonia—the most soldierly men he ever commanded, the future Field Marshal Alexander would say—and to the armies of the emergent states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, as well as Rear Admiral Sir Walter Cowan's Baltic naval force.⁴⁸ Cowan's torpedo boats would, in the summer of 1919, sink two Russian battleships in Kronstadt harbour, the most important units of what remained of the new Soviet state's navy.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, in December 1918, the French landed troops in the Black Sea ports of Odessa and Sevastopol, units which included Greek and Polish contingents, attempted to raise local legions of Russians under French officers, established quarrelsome relations with the White forces and fell to fighting, unsuccessfully, against the Reds.⁵⁰ In the Far East both Japanese and American troops were landed at Vladivostok in August 1918, to consolidate a bridgehead for the evacuation of the Czech corps. A French supreme commander, Janin, next arrived to oversee operations, while the British unshipped large quantities of military stores to supply Admiral Kolchak's anti-Bolshevik army. The Japanese advanced towards Lake Baikal, the Americans stayed put. Both contingents eventually left for home, while the Czechs, whom they had been sent to assist, finally struggled out of Russia in September 1920.⁵¹ Allied intervention in the Russian Far East achieved nothing but the confirmation in Soviet eyes of the West's fundamentally anti-Bolshevik policy.

The reality of its policy was entirely contrary. On 22 July 1918, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, told the War Cabinet that it was " 'none of Britain's business what sort of government the Russians set up: a republic, a Bolshevik state or a monarchy.' The indications are that President Wilson shared this view."⁵² It was a view that

the French for a time shared also; until April, the dominant party in the French General Staff opposed offering support to the anti-Bolsheviks, the "so-called patriotic groups," on the grounds that they favoured the German forces of occupation for class reasons, while the Bolsheviks, who had been "duped by the Central Powers and [were now] perhaps aware of past errors," at least promised to continue the struggle.⁵³ France would later repudiate that position, to become the most sternly anti-Bolshevik of all the Allied powers. During the spring of 1918, however, it shared British and American hopes that the Bolsheviks could be used to reconstitute an Eastern Front on which military action would relieve the pressure in the west that threatened Allied defeat. That they also looked to the Czechs to reopen an Eastern offensive, and allowed themselves to be drawn progressively and piecemeal into complicity with the Whites, confuses an issue which Lenin and Stalin were later to represent in terms of outright Allied hostility to the Revolution from the start. In truth, the Allies, desperate for any diversion of German effort from their climactic offensive in France, did not become committedly anti-Bolshevik until the mid-summer of 1918 and then because the signs indicated, correctly, that the Bolsheviks had strayed from their own initially anti-German policy towards one of accepting German indulgence of their survival.

Until mid-summer the Germans, just as much as the Allies, had been puzzled to know how best to choose between Russia's warring parties for their own advantage. The army, which feared Red infection at home and the front, wanted the Bolsheviks "liquidated."⁵⁴ The Foreign Office, by contrast, though sharing the army's desire to keep Russia weak, and eventually to dismember it, argued that it was the Bolsheviks who had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, that the "patriotic groups" rejected it and that it was in Germany's interest, therefore, to support the former at the expense of the latter. On 28 June the Kaiser, required to opt between pro- and anti-Bolshevik policies, accepted a Foreign Office recommendation that the Bolshevik government be assured that neither the German forces in the Baltic States nor their Finnish allies would move against Petrograd, which they were in a position to capture with ease, an assurance that permitted Lenin and Trotsky to transfer their only effective military formation, the Latvian Rifles, along the western stretch of the Trans-Siberian Railway to the Urals. There, at Kazan, at the end of July, they attacked the Czech Legion, and so began a counter-offensive that eventually unblocked the railway, pushed the Czechs eastward towards Vladivostok and brought supplies and

reinforcements to the Red Armies fighting Kolchaks and Denikin's Whites in South Russia and Siberia.⁵⁵ The counter-offensive was to result in a Bolshevik victory in the civil war, a victory brought about not despite the Allies' eventual commitment to the Bolsheviks' enemies but because of Germany's positive decision to let Bolshevism survive.

THE CRISIS OF WAR IN THE WEST

While ignorant armies clashed at large over the vast spaces of the east, the garrisons of the narrow ground of the Western Front pressed closer for battle. The collapse of the Tsar's armies had re-created the strategic situation on which Schlieffen had predicated his plan for lightning victory over France: a strategic interval in which there would be no threat from Russia, leaving Germany free to bring a numerical superiority to bear on the axis of advance that led to Paris. The superiority was considerable. Having left forty second-rate infantry and three cavalry divisions in the east, to garrison the enormous territories conceded by the Bolsheviks at Brest-Litovsk, Ludendorff could deploy 192 divisions in the west, against 178 Allied.⁵⁶ They included most of the original élite of the army, the Guards, Jägers, Prussians, Swabians and the best of the Bavarians. The XIV Corps, for example, consisted of the 4th Guard Division, the 25th Division, composed of bodyguard regiments of small princely states, the 1st Division, from Prussia, and a wartime division, the 228th Reserve, formed of regiments from Brandenburg and the Prussian heartland.⁵⁷ All, by the fourth year of the war, contained a high proportion of replacements, and replacements of replacements, among their personnel; some infantry regiments had suffered over a hundred per cent casualties, with individuals alone representing the cadres which had marched to war in 1914. As formations, nevertheless, they retained their *esprit de corps*, reinforced by the long string of victories won in the east. Only in the west had the German armies not yet overthrown the enemies they had faced; and, in the spring of 1918, the Kaiser's soldiers had been promised that the coming offensives would complete the record of triumph.

What the German infantry could not know, though they might guess, was that they constituted their country's last reserve of manpower. Britain and France were in no better case, both having reduced their infantry divisions from a strength of twelve to nine battalions in the previous year, and both lacking any further human resource from which to fill gaps in the ranks. They, however, had superior stocks of

material—4,500 against 3,670 German aircraft, 18,500 against 14,000 German guns, 800 against 10 German tanks—and, above all, they could look to the gathering millions of Americans to make good their inability to replace losses. Germany, by contrast, having embodied all its untrained men of military age not employed in absolutely essential civilian callings, could by January 1918 look only to the conscript class of 1900; and those youths would not become eligible for enlistment until the autumn. A double imperative thus pressed upon Hindenburg, Ludendorff and their soldiers in March 1918: to win the war before the New World appeared to redress the balance of the Old, but also to win before German manhood was exhausted by the ordeal of a final attack.

The choice of front for the final attack was limited, as it had always been for both sides, since the theatre of operations in the west had been entrenched at the end of the war of movement in 1914. The French had tried for a breakthrough in Artois and Champagne twice, in 1915, and then again in Champagne in 1917. The British had tried on the Somme in 1916 and in Flanders in 1917. The Germans had tried, in 1916, only at Verdun and then with limited objectives. For them, the era of limited objectives was over. They now had to destroy an army, the French or British, if they were to prevail, and the choice of front resolved itself into another effort at Verdun or a strike against the British. The options had been reviewed at the fateful conference at Mons on 11 November 1917. Colonel von der Schulenberg, Chief of Staff of the German Crown Prince's Army Group, there advocated a reprise of the offensive on its front, which included Verdun, on the grounds that a defeat of the British armies, however severe, would not deter Britain from continuing the war. If France were broken, however—and the Verdun front offered the most promising locality for such an undertaking—the situation in the west would be transformed. Lieutenant Colonel Wetzell, Head of the Operations Section of the General Staff, concurred, and amplified Schulenberg's analysis: Verdun, he said, should be the place, for a victory there would shake French morale to its roots, prevent any chance of France mounting an offensive with American help and would expose the British to a subsequent German attack.

Ludendorff would have none of it. Having heard his subordinates out, he announced that German strength sufficed for only one great blow and laid down three conditions on which it must be based. Germany must strike as early as possible, "before America can throw strong

forces into the scale," which would mean the end of February or beginning of March. The object must be to "beat the British." He surveyed the sectors of the front on which such a blow might be launched and, discounting Flanders, announced that an attack "near St. Quentin appeared promising."⁵⁸ That was the sector from which the great strategic withdrawal to the newly constructed Hindenburg Line had been made the previous spring. In front of it lay what the British called "the old Somme battlefield" of 1916, a wasteland of shell holes and abandoned trenches. By attacking there, Ludendorff suggested, the assault divisions, in an operation to be code-named Michael, could drive up the line of the River Somme towards the sea and "roll up" the British front. There the matter was left. There were to be further conferences and more paper considerations of alternatives, including an attack in Flanders, code-named George, another at Arras, code-named Mars and a third nearer Paris, code-named Archangel, but on 21 January 1918, Ludendorff, after a final inspection of the armies, issued definite orders for Michael. The Kaiser was informed of the intention that day. Preliminary operational instructions were sent on 24 January and 8 February. On 10 March, the detailed plan was promulgated over Hindenburg's name: "The Michael attack will take place on 21 March. Break into the first enemy positions at 9:40 a.m."

Much tactical instruction accompanied the strategic directive. A Bavarian officer, Captain Hermann Geyer, had consolidated the army's thinking on the new concept of "infiltration"—though the word was not one the German army used—and the obvious difficulties in his manual *The Attack in Position Warfare* of January 1918, by which Operation Michael was to be fought. It stressed rapid advance and disregard for security of the flanks.⁵⁹ "The tactical breakthrough is not an objective in itself. Its purpose is to give the opportunity to apply the strongest form of attack, envelopment . . . infantry which looks to the right or the left soon comes to a stop . . . the fastest, not the slowest, must set the pace . . . the infantry must be warned against too great dependency on the creeping barrage."⁶⁰ The specialised storm troops of the leading waves were above all to "push on." Ludendorff summed up Michael's object with a disavowal of the concept of a fixed strategic aim. "We will punch a hole . . . For the rest, we shall see. We did it this way in Russia."⁶¹

There were enough attack divisions which had served in Russia to bring to France some of the confidence won in a succession of victories over the Tsar's, Kerensky's and Lenin's armies. The British, however,

were not Russians. Better equipped, better trained and so far undefeated on the Western Front, they were unlikely to collapse simply because a hole was punched in their front. Ludendorff had, however, chosen better than he might have known in selecting the Somme as his principal assault zone. It was garrisoned by the Fifth Army, numerically almost the weakest of Haig's four armies, and one that had suffered heavily in the Passchendaele fighting and had not fully recovered. It was also commanded by a general, Hubert Gough, whose reputation was not for thoroughness, while the sector it occupied was the most difficult of all in the British zone to defend.

Gough, a cavalryman and a favourite of Douglas Haig, a fellow cavalryman, had played a leading part in the Passchendaele offensive and his army had suffered a major share of the casualties. Officers who served under him formed the opinion that lives were lost in the battles he organised because he failed to co-ordinate artillery support with infantry assaults, failed to limit his objectives to attainable ends, failed to curtail operations that had patently failed and failed to meet the standards of administrative efficiency which the commander of the neighbouring Second Army, Plumer, so estimably did. Lloyd George, during the winter of 1917, had tried to have Gough removed, but Haig's protection had spared him from dismissal. He now had to cope with two problems which exceeded his capacity to handle.

Neither was of his own making. The first concerned a major reorganisation of the army. At the beginning of 1918, the British, accepting a necessity recognised by the Germans in 1915 and the French in 1917, began to reduce the strength of its divisions from twelve battalions to nine. The change could be justified as a fulfilment of the trend to increase the proportion of artillery to infantry in each division, as it partly did, a recognition of the growing importance of heavy fire support as the war became one of guns rather than men. The underlying reason, however, was simply a shortage of soldiers. The War Cabinet had calculated that the British Expeditionary Force would require 615,000 men in 1918, simply to make good losses, but that only 100,000 were available from recruits at home, despite conscription.⁶² The expedient accepted, besides that of dismounting some cavalry units, was to disband 145 battalions, and use their manpower as reinforcements for the remainder. Even so, nearly a quarter of the battalions had to leave the divisions in which they had served for years and find a new accommodation with unfamiliar commanders, supporting artillery batteries and engineer companies and neighbour battalions. It

was particularly unfortunate that a high proportion of the disbanded and displaced battalions belonged to Gough's Fifth Army which, as the most recently formed, contained the largest number of the more junior war-raised units on whom the order to change divisions fell. Though reorganisation began in January, it was not completed until early March, and Gough's administrative failings then still left much work of integration to be done.

Gough had also had to position his army not only on a difficult battlefield but, in parts, on an unfamiliar one. As a help to the French, after the breakdown of so many of their formations in 1917, Haig had agreed to take over a portion of their line precisely in the sector chosen by Ludendorff for his great spring offensive. Gough had therefore to extend his right across the Somme, into the notoriously ill-maintained French trench system, while at the same time attempting to deepen and strengthen the extemporised defences dug by the British in front of the old Somme battlefield after the advance to the Hindenburg Line a year earlier. The task was onerous. Not only were the trenches behind the front line sketchy; the labour to improve his sector was lacking. The war in France was, quite as much as a shooting war, a digging war, and while his weakened divisions lacked the necessary hands in their infantry battalions, the specialist pioneer labour enlisted to supplement the work of the infantry was deficient also. In February, Fifth Army's labour force numbered only 18,000; by ruthless drafting from elsewhere, and by recruiting Chinese and Italian workers, the total was raised in early March to 40,000; but the majority of diggers were employed on roadwork.⁶³ Only a fifth of the available hands were building defences, with the result that, while the first of the Fifth Army's three lines, the Forward, was complete, and the main, the Battle Zone, well provided with strongpoints and artillery positions, the third, or Brown Line, to which the defenders were to retire as an ultimate resort, was only "spit-locked." That meant that the surface had been excavated only to a foot's depth, that there were but occasional belts of wire and that machine-gun positions were indicated by notice boards.⁶⁴

It was against these sketchy defences that the storm broke on the morning of 21 March. A compact mass of seventy-six first class German divisions fell upon twenty-eight British divisions, of unequal quality, the Germans advancing behind a surprise artillery bombardment across a front of fifty miles, on a morning of mist thickened by the use of gas, chlorine and phosgene, and lachrymatory shell. The gas was



The German offensives, 1918

lethal, the lachrymatory an irritant designed to make the British infantry remove their respirators. "It was impossible to see beyond a few yards outside as the misty fog was now thick and the cascade of screaming shells, explosions and vivid flashes everywhere was something one just endured," wrote Private A. H. Flindt, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, "and waited for it to go—but it didn't."⁶⁵ The barrage, intermixed with blistering mustard gas, went on for five hours, from 4:40 a.m. until 9:40 when, as Hindenburg's operation order of 10 March had laid down, the German storm troopers emerged from their trenches, passed through the gaps in their own wire, crossed no man's land and began to penetrate the positions of the dazed defenders opposite.

"Artillery was the great leveller," wrote Private T. Jacobs, of the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment, one of the regular battalions that had been in France from the beginning. "Nobody could stand more than three hours of sustained shelling before they started feeling sleepy and numb. You're hammered after three hours and you're there for the picking when he comes over. It's a bit like being under an anaesthetic; you can't put a lot of resistance up . . . On the other fronts I had been on, there had been so much of our resistance that, whenever Gerry opened up, our artillery opened up and quietened him down but there was no retaliation this time. He had a free do at us."⁶⁶

Enough of the British defenders and their supporting artillery had survived the German bombardment, nevertheless, to offer scattered resistance as the Germans came forward. Firing largely blind by the "Pulkowski" method, which depended on meteorological observation, the German gunners had missed or overshot some key targets. As the Germans appeared out of no man's land, British guns and machine-gun nests sprang to life and surviving trench garrisons manned the parapet. "I took up my position and I could see the Germans quit easily," wrote Private J. Jolly, of the 9th Norfolks, a Kitchener battalion "coming over a bank in large numbers about 200 to 300 yards away. They had already taken our front line [in the 6th Division sector]. We opened fire and there appeared to be hundreds coming over that bank but they might just have been killed lying down. Their attack was certainly halted."⁶⁷ Some way to the north of the Norfolks' position, German NCO

went on further against only feeble resistance but then the fog lifted and we were fired on by a machine-gun post. I got several bullets

through my jacket but was not hit. We all took cover . . . A platoon from another company joined me and between us we killed the six or seven men—every one of them—in the machine-gun post. I lost five or six men . . . I looked across to the right and there were British prisoners going back . . . about 120—a company perhaps. They were stooping and hurrying back to avoid being hit. I think the English position had been covered by the nest that we had just wiped out and this much larger number of enemy decided they had better surrender.⁶⁸

British machine-gunners in another post were luckier. "I thought we had stopped them," remembered Private J. Parkinson,

when I felt a bump in the back. I turned round and there was a German officer with a revolver in my back. "Come along, Tommy. You've done enough." I turned round then and said "Thank you very much, Sir." I know what I would have done if I had been held up by a machine gunner and had that revolver in my hand, I'd have finished him off. He must have been a real gentleman. It was twenty past ten. I know to the minute because I looked at my watch.⁶⁹

By this time, only an hour after the German infantry had left their trenches for the assault, almost all the British positions in the Fifth Army's Forward Zone, twelve miles wide, had been overrun; only behind the obstacle of the ruined town of St. Quentin was a stretch of line still held. It would soon fall as the Germans pressed on to the main battle zone, or Red Line. Much more strongly manned, the Red Line, attacked about noon, though in places earlier, put up a stronger resistance. Though it had been hit by the German preparatory bombardment, and then come under fire from the creeping barrage, artillery support for the German infantry naturally fell away as they entered their own beaten zone. The British artillery, which steadfastly refused to surrender some gun positions though outflanked to left and right, also helped to sustain the opposition the attackers met. A German corporal reported such an encounter.

Suddenly, we were fired on by a battery with shrapnel at close range and had to throw ourselves to the ground. Closely packed, we found cover behind a low railway embankment . . . We had advanced seven to eight kilometres as the crow flies and now lay under a medium-

calibre battery, under direct fire. The report from the guns and the explosion of the shells were simultaneous. A frontal attack against this made no sense . . . As suddenly as it had started, it stopped; we could breathe again. We rose up and were able to advance to the abandoned battery. The barrels of the guns were still hot. We saw some of the gunners running away.⁷⁰

Much of the Red Line was lost to the British during the afternoon, either because the garrison ran away or was overwhelmed by the power of the attack. The worst loss of ground occurred south of St. Quentin, at the point of junction with the French Sixth Army, which held the confluence of the Oise and Aisne rivers. As the British divisions in Gough's southernmost sector, the 36th (Ulster), the 14th, 18th and 58th Divisions, gave ground, the French were obliged to fall back also, opening a re-entrant that pointed towards Paris itself. In Gough's northern sector, where the Flesquières salient left by the battle for Cambrai in the previous November bulged into the German line, the Germans achieved a dangerous envelopment menacing the security of the British Third Army and threatening to undercut the British hold on Flanders. Since the aim of Operation Michael was to "roll up" the British Expeditionary Force against the shore of the English Channel, it now promised to be achieving its object. In fact, the purpose of the German attack on each side of Flesquières was to cut off the salient, rather than capture it outright, thus adding to the bag of prisoners and opening a hole at the critical point of junction between Fifth and Third Armies through which a strong thrust north-westward could be pushed.

As evening fell on 21 March, the BEF had suffered its first true defeat since trench warfare had begun three and a half years earlier. Along a front of nineteen miles, the whole forward position had been lost, except in two places held heroically by the South African Brigade and a brigade formed of three battalions of the Leicestershire Regiment, and much of the main position had been penetrated also. Guns had been lost in numbers, whole units had surrendered or fled to the rear and heavy casualties had been suffered by those that did stand and fight. In all, over 7,000 British infantrymen had been killed but 21,000 soldiers had been taken prisoner. The events of the day were the contrary of those of 1 July 1916, when 20,000 British soldiers had been killed but almost none had been taken prisoner and the high command and press alike had claimed a victory.

Day one of Operation Michael had undoubtedly been a German

victory, although the total of German dead, over 10,000, exceeded that of the British, and the number of wounded—nearly 29,000 German against 10,000 British—greatly so. Even though some British battalions had given their all, an example being the 7th Sherwood Foresters, which lost 171 killed, including the commanding officer, they were the exception. The loss of ten infantry lieutenant colonels killed testifies to the desperate fight put up by some units; but it is also evidence of the degree of disorganisation that it required commanding officers to place themselves in the front line and, by setting an example to their stricken soldiers, pay the supreme sacrifice. Well-prepared units do not lose senior officers in such numbers, even in the circumstances of a whirlwind enemy offensive, unless there has been a collapse of morale at the lower level or a failure to provide support by higher authority. Both conditions were present in Fifth Army on 21 March. Many of the units, worn down by the attrition battles of 1917, were not in a fit state to defend their fronts, which were in any case patchily fortified, while Fifth Army's headquarters had no proper plan prepared to deal with a collapse should it begin to develop. "I must confess," wrote an experienced infantryman in a retrospect of the aftermath, "that the German breakthrough of 21 March 1918 should never have occurred. There was no cohesion of command, no determination, no will to fight, and no unity of companies or battalions." The question must be whether the collapse, for collapse it was, belongs to the same psychological order of events as the collapse of the French army in the spring of 1917, the collapse of the Russian army after the Kerensky offensive and the collapse of the Italian army during Caporetto. All four armies, if the British are included, had by then suffered over a hundred per cent casualties in their infantry complement, measured against the numbers with which they had gone to war, and may simply have passed beyond the point of what was bearable by flesh and blood.

If there is a difference to be perceived, it is in the extent of the psychological trauma and in its containment. The French army exhibited signs of breakdown in over half its fighting formations and took a year to recover. The Italian army, though it was chiefly the divisions on the Isonzo front that gave way, suffered a general crisis, never really recovered and had to be reinforced by large numbers of British and French troops. The Russian army, under the strain of successive defeats, two revolutions and the disintegration of the state system, broke down altogether and eventually dissolved. The crisis of the British Fifth Army was of a different and lesser order. Its defeat was undoubtedly moral

rather than material in character, and in that sense resembled the defeat of Caporetto, but its malaise did not infect the three other British armies, Third, Second or First; indeed, it was quite swiftly contained within the Fifth Army itself which, only a week after the German offensive's opening, had begun to recover and was fighting back. It had lost much ground and had been heavily re-inforced, by other British, by French and by some American troops, yet it had never ceased to function as an organisation, while many of its units had sustained the will to resist, to hold ground and even to counter-attack.

The worst days of the German offensive for the British, but also for the Allies as a whole, were the third, fourth and fifth, 24–26 March, days in which the danger grew of a separation of the British from the French armies and of a progressive displacement of the whole British line north-westward towards the channel ports, precisely that “rolling up” which Ludendorff had laid down as Operation Michael's object. The spectre of a breaking of the front infected the French high command, just as it had done during the Marne campaign; but, while in 1914 Joffre had used every measure at his disposal to keep in touch with the BEF, now Pétain, commanding the French armies of the north, took counsel of his fears. At eleven in the morning of 24 March, he visited Haig at his headquarters to warn that he expected to be attacked himself north of Verdun, could offer no more reinforcements and now had as his principal concern the defence of Paris. When Haig asked if he understood and accepted that the likely outcome of his refusal to send further help was a separation of their two armies, Pétain merely nodded his head.⁷¹ Haig instantly realised that he had an inter-Allied crisis on his hands. Whereas, however, in similar circumstances in 1914, it was the British War Office which had taken steps to stiffen Sir John French's resolve, now Haig telephoned the War Office to ask for help in stiffening Pétain's. Two days later, at Doullens, near Amiens, directly in the line of the German axis of advance, an extempore Anglo-French conference was convened, chaired by the French President, Poincaré, and including Clemenceau, the Prime Minister, and Lord Milner, the British War Minister, as well as Pétain, Haig and Foch, as French Chief of Staff.

The meeting did not begin well. Haig outlined what had happened to the Fifth Army, explained that he had now put the portion of it south of the Somme under Pétain's control, as he had, but expressed his inability to do anything more in that sector. Pétain objected that the Fifth Army was “broken” and untactfully compared Gough's troops

the Italians at Caporetto. There was an altercation between him and Henry Wilson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, ended by Pétain protesting that he had sent all the help he could and that the aim must now be to defend Amiens. Amiens was twenty miles beyond the furthest point yet reached by the Germans. At its mention, Foch, fireating as ever, burst out, “we must fight in front of Amiens, we must fight where we are now . . . we must not now retire a single inch.” His intervention retrieved the situation. There were some hasty conversations in corners, after which it was suddenly agreed that Haig would serve under the command of Foch, who would be “charged . . . with the co-ordination of the action of the British and French armies.”⁷² The formula satisfied all parties, even Haig, who had resisted any dilution of his absolute independence of command ever since appointed to lead the BEF in December 1915. Foch's authority would be extended, on 3 April, to comprehend “the direction of strategic operations,” making him in effect Allied generalissimo.

His appointment came only just in time. The Germans by 5 April had advanced twenty miles on a front of fifty miles and stood within five miles of Amiens, which was defended by a screen of makeshift units, including engineers and railway troops, some American, fighting as infantry. The appointment of a single commander with absolute authority to allot reserves, French and British alike, wherever they were most needed, was essential in such a crisis. Nevertheless, the Germans were by this stage of their offensive in crisis also. Not only had the pace of their advance slowed, the advance itself had taken the wrong direction.

Yet sense of crisis was absent. The Kaiser was so delighted with the progress of the advance that on 23 March he had given German school-children a “victory” holiday and conferred on Hindenburg the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross with Golden Rays, last awarded to Blücher for the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The map, nevertheless, by then already showed evidence of a crisis in development, and it was to grow with every passing day. Because the greatest success had been won at the outset on the extreme right of the British line, where it joined the French south of the Somme, it was in that sector that the German high command now decided to make the decisive effort, with the Second and Eighteenth Armies. The object was to be the separation of the British and French armies, while the Seventeenth was to follow behind and on the two leading armies' flank and the Sixth to prepare an advance north-westward towards the sea.⁷³ The order marked an abandonment

of the strategy of a single, massive thrust, and the adoption of a three-pronged advance in which none of the prongs would be strong enough to achieve a breakthrough. As in 1914, during the advance on Paris, the German army was reacting to events, following the line of least resistance, rather than dominating and determining the outcome.

The accidents of military geography also began to work to the Germans' disadvantage. The nearer they approached Amiens, the more deeply did they become entangled in the obstacles of the old Somme battlefield, a wilderness of abandoned trenches, broken roads and shell-crater fields left behind by the movement of the front a year earlier. The Somme may not have won the war for the British in 1916 but the obstacle zone it left helped to ensure that in 1918 they did not lose it. Moreover, the British rear areas, stuffed with the luxuries enjoyed by the army of a nation which had escaped the years of blockade that in Germany had made the simplest necessities of life rare and expensive commodities, time and again tempted the advancing Germans to stop, plunder and satiate themselves. Colonel Albrecht von Thaer recorded that "entire divisions totally gorged themselves on food and liquor" and had failed "to press the vital attack forward."⁷⁴

Desolation and the temptation to loot may have been enemies as deadly to the Germans as the resistance of the enemy itself. On 4 April, however, the British added to their difficulties by launching a counter-attack, mounted by the Australian Corps, outside Amiens, and next day the German high command recognised that Operation Michael had run its course. "OHL was forced to take the extremely hard decision to abandon the attack on Amiens for good . . . The enemy resistance was beyond our powers." The Germans put their losses at a quarter of a million men, killed and wounded, about equal to those of the French and British combined, but the effect on the picked divisions assembled for the "war-winning" Kaiser Battle went far beyond any numerical calculation of cost. "More than ninety German divisions . . . were exhausted and demoralised . . . Many were down to 2,000 men."⁷⁵ While the Allied losses included men of all categories, from combat infantry to line-of-communication troops, the German casualties had been suffered among an irreplaceable élite. The cause of the failure, moreover, reflected Major Wilhelm von Leeb, who would command one of Hitler's army groups in the Second World War, was that "OHL has changed direction. It has made its decisions according to the size of territorial gain, rather than operational goals."

Ludendorff's young staff officers, of whom Leeb was one and Thaer

another, reproached him, as the fellowship of the Great General Staff allowed them to do, with Operation Michael's mismanagement. "What is the purpose of your croaking?" he riposted. "What do you want from me? Am I now to conclude peace at any price?"⁷⁶ That time of reckoning was not far distant, but, as Michael drew to its close, Ludendorff, refusing to admit a setback, immediately inaugurated the subordinate scheme, Operation George, against the British in Flanders. The objective, the channel coast behind Ypres, should have been easier to achieve than that of Operation Michael, for the sea lay only sixty miles beyond the point of assault; but the front before Ypres, on whose defences the BEF had laboured since October 1914, was perhaps stronger than any part of the Western Front, and the British were familiar with every nook and cranny of its trenches.

Mist again helped the Germans on 9 April by cloaking their preliminary moves and they also enjoyed a superiority in heavy artillery, the Bruchmüller battering train having been brought northward from the Somme for the preliminary bombardment. Weight of fire won an opening advantage. It frightened Haig enough for him to issue a message to Second and First Armies on 11 April which became famous as the "Backs to the Wall" order. "With our backs to the wall," it read, "and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end . . . Every position must be held to the last man. There must be no retirement." Retirement there was nonetheless, in part because Foch, now exerting to the full his power to allocate reserves, took the harsh but correct view that the British could survive without French help and must fight the battle out with their own reserves. The valiant little Belgian army took over a portion of the British line, the Royal Flying Corps operated energetically in close support, despite bad flying weather, and British machine gunners found plentiful targets as the German infantry pressed home their attacks almost in 1914 style. On 24 April, south of Ypres, the Germans succeeded in mounting one of their rare tank attacks of the war, but it was checked by the appearance of British tanks, superior both in number and in quality, and repulsed. On 25 April the Germans succeeded in capturing one of the Flemish high points, Mount Kemmel, and on 29 April, another, the Scherpenberg, but those achievements marked the limit of their advance. On 29 April, Ludendorff accepted that, as on the Somme the month before, he had shot his bolt and must stop. The German official history recorded, "The attack had not penetrated to the decisive heights of Cassel and the Mont des Cats, the possession of which would have

compelled the [British] evacuation of the Ypres salient and the Yser position. No great strategic movement had become possible, and the Channel ports had not been reached. The second great offensive had not brought about the hoped-for decision."⁷⁷

The most noted event of the second German offensive had been the death in action on 21 April of the "Red Baron," Manfred von Richthofen, leader of the Flying Circus and, with eighty victories in aerial combat, the highest ranking pilot ace in any of the war's air forces. Air operations were, however, marginal to the issue of defeat or victory even in 1918, when investment in air forces had begun to figure significantly among the allocation of national military resources. The true human significance of the "Kaiser Battles" was thus far better represented by the balance sheet struck by the German army's medical reports in April. They established that between 21 March and 10 April, the three main assaulting armies "had lost one-fifth of their original strength, or 303,450 men." Worse was to come. The April offensive against the British in Flanders was eventually computed to have cost 120,000 men, out of a total strength of 800,000 in Fourth and Sixth Armies. A report from Sixth Army warned in mid-April that "the troops will not attack, despite orders. The offensive has come to a halt."⁷⁸

Frustrated on the northern front, Ludendorff now decided to shift his effort against the French. From the nose of the salient created by the great advance of March, he might either have swung north-westward, as his original plan anticipated, or south-westward. Military logic was for the former option, which threatened the British rear area and the Channel ports. The second, however, was favoured by the grain of the country, which offered an axis of advance down the valley of the Oise, and by the temptation of Paris, only seventy miles distant. Between it and the German armies stood the Chemin des Dames ridge, on which Nivelle's offensive had broken the previous May; but Nivelle had attacked in the old style, with wave after wave of infantry following the opening bombardment. Ludendorff trusted to his new style of attack to crack the French defences. He hoped, moreover, that a success would create the opportunity to renew the offensive in the north should he manage to draw enough of his enemies' reserves to the front outside Paris, which he had now brought directly under attack by the deployment of a long-range gun, known to the Allies as "Big Bertha," which dropped shells into the city, psychologically if not objectively to considerable effect, from a range of seventy-five miles.

For this third offensive the largest concentration of artillery yet

assembled was brought to the front, 6,000 guns supplied from an ammunition stock of two million shells.⁷⁹ All were fired off in a little over four hours on the morning of 27 May, against sixteen Allied divisions; three were British, exhausted in the battles of March and April, and brought down to the Chemin des Dames to rest. Immediately after the bombardment ceased, fifteen divisions of the German Sixth Army, with twenty-five more following, crossed a succession of water lines to reach the summit of the ridge, roll over it and continue down the reverse slope to the level ground beyond. The plan required them to halt, when open country was reached, as a preliminary to renewing the attack in the north, but the opportunity created was too attractive to relinquish. Ludendorff decided to exploit the gains of the first two days and during the next five days pressed his divisions forward as far as Soissons and Château-Thierry, until his outposts stood only fifty-six miles from the French capital. The Allies committed their reserves as slowly as they could, seeking to deny the Germans the satisfaction of a battle to the death, but even so were forced to engage three divisions on 28 May, five on 29 May, eight on 30 May, four on 31 May, five on 1 June and two more by 3 June. They included the 3rd and 2nd American Divisions, the latter including a brigade of the U.S. Marine Corps, the most professional element of the doughboy army, and at Belleau Wood on 4 June and the days following the Marines added to their reputation for tenacity by steadfastly denying the Germans access to the road towards Rheims, the capture of which would have more than doubled the railway capacity on which they depended to feed their offensive. At an early stage of the battle in their sector it was suggested to a Marine officer by French troops retreating through their positions that he and his men should retreat also. "Retreat?" answered Captain Lloyd Williams, in words which were to enter the mythology of the Corps, "Hell, we just got here."⁸⁰

The Marine counter-attack at Belleau Wood was but one contribution, however, to a general response by French and British, as well as American troops, to the threat to Paris. Unknown to the Allies, the Germans had already decided to halt the third offensive on 3 June, in the face of mounting resistance, though also because once again the leading troops had overrun the supply columns which lagged far behind the advancing infantry and their supporting artillery. They had also lost another hundred thousand men and more, and, while French, British and American losses equalled theirs, the Allies retained the ability to replace casualties while they did not. The French, after a year

of effective inactivity, were able to draw on a new annual class of conscripts and, though the strength of the British infantry, worn down by continuous fighting, was in absolute decline (it fell from 754,000 in July 1917 to 543,000 in June 1918) the Americans were now receiving 250,000 men a month in France and had twenty-five organised divisions in or behind the battle zone.⁸¹ Fifty-five more were under organisation in the United States.

On 9 June Ludendorff renewed the offensive, in an attack on the River Matz, a tributary of the Oise, in an attempt to draw French reserves southward but also to widen the salient that now bulged westward between Paris and Flanders. He was still undecided whether to press his attack force against its upper edge, and strike against the British rear, his original intention, or against the lower and drive on the capital. The Matz, in any case a limited attack, was quickly broken off on 14 June when the French, with American assistance, counter-attacked and brought the initial advance to a halt. The German inability to sustain pressure was also hampered by the first outbreak of the so-called "Spanish" influenza, in fact a worldwide epidemic originating in South Africa, which was to recur in the autumn with devastating effects in Europe but in June laid low nearly half a million German soldiers whose resistance, depressed by poor diet, was far lower than that of the well-fed Allied troops in the trenches opposite.

With his troop strength declining to a point where he could no longer count upon massing a superiority of numbers for attack, Ludendorff now had to make a critical choice between what was important but more difficult of achievement—the attack against the British in Flanders—and what was easier but of secondary significance, a drive towards Paris. He took nearly a month to make up his mind, a month in which the German leadership also met at Spa to review the progress of the war and the country's war aims. Shortage at home was now extreme, but there was nonetheless a discussion of introducing a "full war economy." Despite the near-desperate situation at the front, the Kaiser, government and high command all agreed, on 3 July, that, to complement the acquisition of territories in the east, the annexation of Luxembourg and the French iron and coal fields in Lorraine were the necessary and minimum terms for concluding the war in the west. On 13 July, the Reichstag, to express its confidence in the direction and progress of strategy, voted war credits for the twelfth time.⁸² The Foreign Secretary, who had warned it that the war could not now be ended by "military decision alone," was forced out of office on 8 July.⁸³

Ludendorff remained wedded to military decision and on 15 July committed all the force he had left, fifty-two divisions, to an attack against the French. The temptation of Paris had proved irresistible. At first the offensive made excellent progress. The French, however, had had warning, from intelligence and observation experts, and on 18 July launched a heavy counter-stroke, mounted by the fiery Mangin with eighteen divisions in first line, at Villers-Cotterêts. It was the day Ludendorff travelled to Mons to discuss the transfer of troops to Flanders for his much-postponed offensive against the British. The French attack brought him hurrying back but there was little he could do to stem the flood. The French had five of the enormous American divisions, 28,000 strong, in their order of battle, and these fresh troops fought with a disregard for casualties scarcely seen on the Western Front since the beginning of the war. On the night of July 18/19 the German vanguards which had crossed the Marne three days earlier fell back across the river and the retreat continued in the days that followed. The fifth German offensive, and the battle called by the French the Second Marne, was over and could not be revived. Nor could the Flanders offensive against the British be undertaken. Merely to make good losses suffered in the attacks so far, the German high command calculated, required 200,000 replacements each month but, even by drawing on the next annual class of eighteen-year-olds, only 300,000 recruits stood available. The only other source was the hospitals, which returned 70,000 convalescents to the ranks each month, men whose fitness and will to fight was undependable. In six months, the strength of the army had fallen from 5.1 million to 4.2 million men and, even after every rear-echelon unit had been combed out, its fighting strength could not be increased. The number of divisions was, indeed, being reduced, as the weaker were broken up to feed the stronger.⁸⁴

The army's discontent with its leadership was beginning to find a voice. Though Hindenburg remained a figurehead above reproach, Ludendorff's uncreative and repetitive strategy of frontal attacks now attracted criticism from within the General Staff. Lossberg, the great tactical expert, responded to the failure of the Second Battle of the Marne by arguing that the army should withdraw to the Siegfried Line of 1917, while on 20 July Major Niemann circulated a paper calling for negotiations with the Allies to be initiated at once. Ludendorff theatrically offered to resign but then recovered his nerve when the Allies did not move to exploit their success on the Marne. There was, he said,

nothing to justify Lossberg's demands for a withdrawal and no sign that the Allies could break the German line.⁸⁵

Had the material circumstances of the war been those of any of the previous years, Ludendorff's analysis might have been proved correct; but they were not. A German army unable to make good its losses was now confronted by a new enemy, the U.S. Army, with four million fresh troops in action or training. More pertinently, its old enemies, the British and French, now had a new technical arm, their tank forces, with which to alter the terms of engagement. Germany's failure to match the Allies in tank development must be judged one of their worst military miscalculations of the war. Their own programme, undertaken too late and with little imagination, had resulted in the production of a monstrosity, the A7V, manned by a crew of twelve, in which soldiers of the pioneers ran the engine, infantrymen fired the machine guns and artillerymen operated the heavy gun. Moreover, industrial delays limited output to a few dozen, so that the German tank force chiefly depended on 170 tanks captured from the French and British.⁸⁶ They, by contrast, had by August 1918 several hundred each, the French fleet including a 13-ton Schneider-Creusot model mounting a 75mm gun, while the British, besides a number of light "whippet" tanks, possessed a solid mass of 500 medium Mark IV and Mark V machines, capable of moving at 5 mph over level ground and of concentrating intense cannon and machine-gun fire against targets of opportunity.

Ludendorff's belief during July that he retained the option of striking alternatively against the British or French was even more of a misconception than he might have imagined at worst. While his increasingly battle-worn infantry and horse-drawn artillery plodded forward over the worn battleground of the Marne, Foch and Haig were concentrating an enormous force of armour, 530 British tanks, 70 French, in front of Amiens, with the intention of breaking back into the old Somme battlefield through the extemporised defences constructed by the Germans after their advance in March and driving deep into their rear area. The blow was struck on 8 August, with the Canadian and the Australian Corps providing the infantry support for the tank assault. Haig had now come to depend increasingly on these two Dominion formations, which had been spared the blood-letting of 1916, to act as spearhead of his operations. Within four days most of the old Somme battlefield had been retaken and by the end of August

the Allies had advanced as far as the outworks of the Hindenburg Line, from which they had been pushed back by the German offensive in March. Some of their progress was facilitated by deliberate German withdrawals, the enemy lacking both the strength and the confidence to defend steadfastly outside the strong and prepared positions of 1917. On 6 September, indeed, Ludendorff was advised by Lossberg that the situation could only be retrieved by a retreat of nearly fifty miles to a line established on the Meuse. The advice was rejected, however, and during the rest of September the Germans consolidated their position in and forward of the Hindenburg Line.

Meanwhile the ever-stronger American army was taking an increasingly important part in operations. On 30 August, General John Pershing, who had reluctantly lent formations and even individual units piecemeal to the Allies, despite his determination to concentrate the American army as a single and potentially war-winning entity, achieved his purpose of bringing the First American Army into being. It was immediately deployed south of Verdun, opposite the tangled and waterlogged ground of the St. Mihiel salient, which had been in German hands since 1914, and on 12 September launched the first all-American offensive of the war. The Germans opposite were preparing to abandon the salient, in conformation with general orders to retire to the Hindenburg Line, but were nevertheless taken by surprise and subjected to a severe defeat. In a single day's fighting, the American I and IV Corps, attacking behind a barrage of 2,900 guns, drove the Germans from their positions, captured 466 guns and took 13,251 prisoners. The French, while paying tribute to the "superb morale" of the Americans, ungraciously attributed their success to the fact that they had caught the Germans in the process of retiring. It was true that many Germans were all too ready to surrender but Pershing's army had nevertheless won an undoubted victory.⁸⁷

Ludendorff paid a tribute the French would not. He attributed the growing malaise in his army and the sense of "looming defeat" that afflicted it to "the sheer number of Americans arriving daily at the front." It was indeed immaterial whether the doughboys fought well or not. Though the professional opinion of veteran French and British officers that they were enthusiastic rather than efficient was correct, the critical issue was the effect of their arrival on the enemy. It was deeply depressing. After four years of a war in which they had destroyed the Tsar's army, trounced the Italians and Romanians, demoralised the

French and, at the very least, denied the British clear-cut victory, they were now confronted with an army whose soldiers sprang, in uncountable numbers, as if from soil sown with dragons' teeth. Past hopes of victory had been predicated on calculable ratios of force to force. The intervention of the United States Army had robbed calculation of point. Nowhere among Germany's remaining resources could sufficient force be found to counter the millions America could bring across the Atlantic, and the consequent sense of the pointlessness of further effort rotted the resolution of the ordinary German soldier to do his duty.

It was in that mood that, during September, the German armies in the west fell back to their final line of resistance, the Hindenburg Line, most of which followed the line of the original Western Front marked out by the fighting of 1914, though enormously strengthened in subsequent years, particularly in the central sector fortified after the retirement for the Somme in the spring of 1917. On 26 September, in response to Foch's inspiring cry, "Everyone to battle," the British, French, Belgian and American armies attacked with 123 divisions, with 57 divisions in reserve, against 197 German; but of those only 51 were classed by Allied intelligence as fully battleworthy.

Ludendorff had called 8 August, when the British and French tank armada had overwhelmed the front at Amiens, the "black day of the German army." It was 28 September, however, that was his own black day. Behind his expressionless and heavily physical façade, Ludendorff was a man of liquid emotions. "You don't know Ludendorff," Bethmann Hollweg had told the chief of the Kaiser's naval cabinet earlier in the war. He was, the German Prime Minister said, "only great at a time of success. If things go badly, he loses his nerve."⁸⁸ The judgement was not wholly fair. Ludendorff had kept his nerve with decisive effect in the critical days of August 1914. Now, however, he lost it altogether, giving way to a paranoid rage "against the Kaiser, the Reichstag, the navy and the home front."⁸⁹ His staff shut the door of his office to stifle the noise of his rantings until he gradually regained an exhausted composure. At six o'clock he emerged to descend one floor of headquarters to Hindenburg's room. There he told the old field marshal that there was now no alternative but to seek an armistice. The position in the west was penetrated, the army would not fight, the civilian population had lost heart, the politicians wanted peace. Hindenburg silently took his right hand in both of his own and they parted "like men who have buried their dearest hopes."⁹⁰

The domestic consequences were swift to follow. On 29 September, a day when Germany's ally, Bulgaria, opened negotiations with the French and British for an armistice on the Salonika front, the high command received the Kaiser, the Chancellor, von Hertling, and the Foreign Secretary, von Hintze, at headquarters in Spa to advise them that Germany must now make terms of its own. On 8 January 1918, President Wilson of the United States had presented Congress with fourteen points on which a peace honourable to all combatants and guaranteeing future world harmony could be made. It was on the basis of the Fourteen Points that the German leadership now decided to approach the Allies. Hintze proposed that any successful conclusion of negotiations, given the turmoil between the parliamentary parties within Germany, would require the establishment either of dictatorship or full democracy. The conference decided that only democratisation would persuade the Allies to concede the conditions for which the leadership still hoped—they included the retention of parts of Alsace-Lorraine and a German Poland—and accordingly accepted the resignation of Chancellor Hertling. In his place the Kaiser appointed, on 3 October, the moderate Prince Max of Baden, already known as an advocate of a negotiated peace and a major figure in the German Red Cross. He was also an opponent of Ludendorff and, as a first act, secured from Hindenburg a written admission that "there was no further chance of forcing a peace on the enemy."⁹¹ That was prudent, for during early October Ludendorff began to recover his nerve. While Prince Max persuaded a wide range of parties to join his government, including the Majority Socialists, and while he secured for the Reichstag powers always denied it by the monarchy, including those of appointing the Minister of War and of making war and peace, Ludendorff began to talk of sustaining resistance and of rejecting President Wilson's conditions. Those were restated on 16 October, in terms which appeared to demand the abolition of the monarchy, as one of those "arbitrary powers" menacing "the peace of the world," to which the American President had declared himself an implacable enemy.

The army at the front, after its brief moral collapse in late September, when troops returning from the trenches had taunted those going up with cries of "strike breakers," had indeed recovered something of its old spirit and was contesting the advance of the Allies towards the German frontier. In Flanders, where water obstacles were plentiful, the French were held up, to Foch's irritation, for some time. It was in these circumstances that Ludendorff composed a proclamation to the army

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on 24 October, which effectively defied the authority of the Chancellor and rejected the Wilson peace proposals, which it characterised as "a demand for unconditional surrender. It is thus unacceptable to us soldiers. It proves that our enemy's desire for our destruction, which let loose the war in 1914, still exists undiminished. [It] can thus be nothing for us soldiers but a challenge to continue our resistance with all our strength."⁹²

An officer of the General Staff managed to suppress the proclamation before it was issued. One copy, by mistake, however, reached the headquarters in the east, *Ober Ost*, where the signal clerk, an Independent Socialist, conveyed it to the party in Berlin. By noon it had been published, setting the Reichstag in uproar. Prince Max, enraged by the insubordination—which, characteristically, Ludendorff had attempted to retract—confronted the Kaiser with the demand that he must now choose between Ludendorff and himself. When Ludendorff arrived in Berlin on 25 October, with Hindenburg—both had left headquarters against the Chancellor's specific instruction—he was told to report to Schloss Bellevue, where the Kaiser was in residence, and there forced, on 26 October, to offer his resignation. It was accepted with the briefest of words and without thanks. Hindenburg's, also offered, was declined. When the two soldiers left the palace, Ludendorff refused to enter Hindenburg's car and made his way alone to the hotel where his wife was staying. Throwing himself into a chair, he sat silent for some time, then roused himself to predict "In a fortnight we shall have no Empire and no Emperor left, you will see."⁹³

THE FALL OF EMPIRES

Ludendorff's forecast was exact to the day. By the time, however, that Wilhelm II abdicated, as he would on 9 November, two other empires, the Ottoman and the Habsburg, would have sued for peace also. The imminence of the Turkish collapse had been evident for some time. After the army's victories at Gallipoli and Kut, its vital energy had ebbed away. The continuing campaign in the Caucasus against the Russians had sapped its strength and chronic administrative inefficiency had deprived it of replacements. Though the number of divisions doubled during the war, from thirty-six to seventy, no more than forty existed at any one time and by 1918 all were weak, some scarcely as strong as a British brigade. The loyalty of the Arab divisions, moreover, was to be doubted after the Sherif of Mecca, Hussein, raised the stan-

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dard of revolt in 1916. His Arab Army, operating against the flanks of the Turks in Arabia and Palestine, under the direction of the later famous liaison officer, Colonel T. E. Lawrence, distracted sizeable forces from the main battlefronts. The principal fighting was carried on, however, by the largely Indian army in Mesopotamia and, in Palestine, by an Egyptian-based British army which came to include large numbers of Australian and New Zealand cavalry.

Mesopotamia, south of Baghdad, the Turkish administrative centre, had been conquered by the British during 1917, and late in 1918 they had advanced to the oil centre of Mosul. The real focus of their effort against the Turks, however, was in Palestine, where they established a foothold on the other side of the Sinai desert at Gaza in 1917. Several attempts to break the Turks' Gaza line resulted in a Turkish evacuation of the position and the fall of Jerusalem on 9 December. During 1918 the British commander, Allenby, re-organised his forces and pushed his lines forward into northern Palestine where, by September, they opposed those of the Turks at Megiddo, site of the first recorded battle in history. Allenby's breakthrough on 19–21 September brought about the collapse of Turkish resistance. On 30 October, five days after Ludendorff's dismissal, the Turkish government signed an armistice at Mudros, on the Aegean island of Lemnos, from which the Gallipoli expedition had been mounted forty-two months earlier.

Austria's nemesis came on the soil, if not wholly at the hands, of its despised enemy, Italy. After the triumph of Caporetto, which had driven the Italians down into the plains of the Po, so that at one moment even Venice seemed threatened, the Habsburg effort had petered out. The Italians reorganised and, rid of the pitiless dictatorship of Cadorna, gained heart. The real defence of their country, however, passed to the British and French, who had transferred sizeable contingents to the Italian front immediately after the Caporetto disaster and succeeded in sustaining a substantial force there, despite withdrawals to cope with the crisis in the Western Front, throughout 1918. On 24 June the Austrians, who had been able to build up their own numbers after the Russian collapse, attempted a double offensive out of the northern mountains and on the River Piave, the stop line of the Italian retreat from Caporetto. Both attacks were swiftly checked, that on the Piave by the assistance of an unseasonal flood which swept away the Austrian pontoon bridges. The intervention of nature was not an excuse accepted by the Habsburg high command for the failure. Conrad von Hötendorf was removed from command and the young Emperor,

Karl I, began to look for means to preserve his empire by political rather than military means. On 16 October, two weeks after he had already sent President Wilson word of his willingness to enter into an armistice, he issued a manifesto to his peoples that, in effect, transferred the state into a federation of nationalities.

The manifesto came too late. On 6 October his Serb, Croat and Slovene subjects had already formed a provisional government of the South Slavs or "Yugoslavia." On 7 October the Habsburg Poles joined with their former German- and Russian-ruled brothers to proclaim a free and independent Poland, on 28 October a Czecho-Slovak republic was proclaimed in Prague, while on 30 October the Emperor Karl's German subjects, the ultimate prop of his rule, claimed, in a constituent assembly, their freedom to determine foreign policy for a new German-Austrian state. Hungary, constitutionally an independent kingdom, declared itself so on 1 November. The other imperial nationalities, Ruthenes and Romanians, were making their own arrangements for their future. The uniformed representatives of all of them had already begun to abandon resistance and, in some cases, to cast away their arms and set off for home across the territories of the new states into which the empire had dissolved.⁹⁴ It was in these circumstances that Diaz, the Italian commander, launched an offensive, to be known as the battle of Vittorio Veneto, on 24 October. With extensive British and French help, the Italians succeeded in recrossing the River Piave, initiating an advance that culminated a week later on Austrian territory. The Austrians, with difficulty, opened armistice negotiations in the field on 1 November and instituted a ceasefire on 3 November. It was not recognised by the Italians until the following day. In the interval 300,000 prisoners fell into their hands.⁹⁵

By the first week of November, therefore, the German empire stood alone as a combatant among the war's Central Powers. Under pressure from the French, British, Americans and Belgians, the army's resistance stiffened as it fell back across the battlefields of 1914 towards Belgium and the German frontier. There was hard fighting at the rivers and canals, casualties rose—among the penultimate fatalities was the British poet, Wilfred Owen, killed at the crossing of the River Sambre on 4 November—and the war, to the Allied soldiers battling at the front, seemed to threaten to prolong. Behind the lines, in Germany, however, resistance was crumbling. On 30 October the crews of the High Seas Fleet, ordered to sea for a final sortie to save its honour, broke into mutiny and refused to raise steam. Efforts to put down indiscipline

resulted in the mutineers breaking into the armories, seizing weapons and taking to the streets.⁹⁶ By 3 November, the day on which Austria accepted the armistice, the seaport of Kiel was in the hands of mutineers calling for revolution and next day the port admiral, Prince Henry of Prussia, the Kaiser's brother, had to flee the city in disguise.

The Kaiser had already left Berlin, on 29 October, for headquarters at Spa, in Belgium, to be closer to the army, on whose loyalty he still believed himself able to count, and to avoid the mounting pressure to abdicate. There was an apparent wisdom in his departure, for, at the beginning of the second week of November, power in the capital shifted irrevocably from the old imperial apparatus to the forces of revolution. The last achievements of Prince Max, as Chancellor, were to secure the appointment of a moderate general, Wilhelm Groener, as Ludendorff's successor and to insist that the delegation assembled to negotiate the armistice with the enemy would include civilian as well as military representatives. He thus assured that the conclusion of the armistice would be a joint military and political act, from which the soldiers could not subsequently extricate themselves by objecting to its political terms. This was his last contribution to Germany's future. On 9 November, with Berlin in turmoil and the moderate politicians threatened by street crowds orchestrated by Germany's Bolshevik leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, he transferred the office of chancellor to the Majority Socialist, Friedrich Ebert.⁹⁷

On the same day the Kaiser, at Spa, confronted his own deposition from power. Unrealistic as ever, he had spent his ten days at headquarters fantasising about turning his army against his people, oblivious of the evidence that his soldiers now wanted only an end to the war and were, even at Spa itself, making common cause with the revolutionaries. Ebert, leader of the Majority Socialists, was anti-revolutionary, a patriot and even a monarchist. By 7 November, however, he knew that, unless he adopted the demands of the revolution growing in the streets, and they included abdication, his party would be discredited for good. That evening he warned Prince Max, "The Kaiser must abdicate, otherwise we shall have the revolution." Over the telephone to Spa, Max repeated the warning to the Kaiser, speaking to him, he said as if to soften the blow, as a relative as well as Chancellor: "Your abdication has become necessary to save Germany from Civil War."⁹⁸ The Kaiser refused to listen, once again threatened to use the army against the nation and ended by rejecting any thought of Prince Max resigning as Chancellor, a step Max himself knew was now inevitable. "You sent

out the armistice offer, Wilhelm II said, "you will also have to accept the conditions," and rang off.

The German armistice delegation had already crossed enemy lines to meet the French representatives at Rethondes, in the Forest of Compiègne, outside Paris. Until the issues of the abdication and the Chancellorship had been settled, however, the delegates could not proceed. The terms of the armistice had been presented to them by Foch, and stark they were. They required the evacuation of all occupied territory, including Alsace-Lorraine, German since 1871, the military evacuation of the western bank of the Rhine and of three bridgeheads on the eastern bank at Mainz, Coblenz and Cologne; the surrender of enormous quantities of military equipment, and the internment in Allied hands of all submarines and the capital units of the High Seas Fleet; the repudiation of the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest, under which the Germans occupied their conquered territories in the east; the payment of reparations for war damage; and, critically, acceptance of the continuation of the Allied blockade.⁹⁹ The continuation, as events would determine, eventually ensured Germany's compliance with peace terms even harsher than those of the Armistice to be imposed at the Versailles conference.

While the delegates at Rethondes waited to hear what power in Germany would permit them to put their signatures to the armistice document, two separate sets of events were unrolling in Berlin and at Spa. In Berlin on 9 November, Prince Max of Baden handed over the Chancellorship to Fritz Ebert. There was by then no alternative to the transfer of power. The streets were filled with revolutionary mobs, many of their members soldiers in uniform, while the leaders of the Majority Socialists' political enemies, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were already proclaiming a "free Socialist republic," by which they meant a Bolshevik State. The last meeting between Max and Ebert was brief. "Herr Ebert," the Kaiser's brother-in-law announced, "I commit the German Empire to your keeping." The new Chancellor replied, "I have lost two sons for this Empire."¹⁰⁰ Many German parents could have said the same.

In Spa, on 9 November, the Emperor met the leaders of his army, the institution through which the Hohenzollern dynasty had risen to power, and to which it had always looked to sustain its dignity and authority. Wilhelm II still believed that, whatever disloyalties were being transacted by civilian politicians in Berlin, whatever affronts to order disturbed the streets, his subjects in field-grey remained true to

their oath of military obedience. Even on 9 November he continued to delude himself that the army could be used against the people and the royal house preserved by turning German against German.¹⁰¹ His generals knew otherwise. Hindenburg, the wooden titan, heard him out in silence. Groener, the workaday railway transport officer, son of a sergeant, who had replaced Ludendorff, found the sense to speak. He knew, from soundings taken among fifty regimental commanders, that the soldiers now wanted "only one thing—an armistice at the earliest possible moment." The price of that, to the House of Hohenzollern, was the Kaiser's abdication. The Kaiser heard him with continuing incredulity. What about, he asked, the *Fahneneide*, the oath on the regimental colours which bound every German soldier to die rather than disobey? Groener uttered the unutterable. "Today," he said, "the *Fahneneide* is only a form of words."¹⁰²

The fall of the House of Hohenzollern was swiftly concluded. Rejecting a suggestion that he should seek death in the trenches, as incompatible with his position as head of the German Lutheran Church, Wilhelm II departed by train to Holland on 10 November. On his arrival at the castle of Doorn, where he would spend long years of exile, long enough for Hitler to provide a guard of honour at the gates during the German occupation of the Netherlands, he requested "a cup of good English tea." On 28 November he signed the act of abdication. As his six sons had each sworn not to succeed him, the Hohenzollern dynasty thereby severed its connection with the headship of the German state and even with the crown of Prussia.

Germany was by then, in any case, effectively a republic, proclaimed on 9 November, though it would not acquire a president, in the person of Friedrich Ebert, until February 1919. Yet it was a republic without substance, lacking the essential constituent of any political entity, or an armed force to defend itself against its enemies. The last disciplined act of the old imperial army was to march back across the German frontiers with France and Belgium. Once on home territory, it demobilised itself. The soldiers discarded their uniforms and weapons and went home. That did not empty the German republic of armed men. As elsewhere in the changed political geography of central and eastern Europe—in the new republics of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in the nominal monarchy of Hungary, in German-Austria—bodies of soldiers, loyal to orthodoxies old and new or to revolutionary ideologies, abounded. Nationalist orthodoxies would prevail in ethnically disparate Yugoslavia, in Czechoslovakia and in

Poland, though that infant republic would have to fight for its borders, against German irregulars in the west and desperately against the Bolsheviks in the east. In Finland, in the Baltic States, in Hungary and in Germany itself, armed men menaced Red Revolution. It was put down in the east at the cost of civil strife. In Germany it threatened for a while to win by default, since constitutional republicanism could at first find no armed force to oppose it. Out of the wreck of the old imperial army, however, enough extemporised units were got together from men with no trade but soldiering—they bore such names as the Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen Division, the Freiwillige Landesjägerkorps, the Landeschützenkorps, the Freikorps Hülsen—to prevail in the battle of the streets in Berlin, Gotha, Halle, Dresden, Munich and many other German cities, to repress German Bolshevism by brute force and to lay on the new republican government a permanent debt of gratitude to the improvised army's generals. Its regiments would form the nucleus of the "hundred-thousand man army" that was all that was to be allowed to Germany by the peace conference of Versailles in 1919.¹⁰³

While Germany's political future was being settled by civil war in the capital and the provinces, the armies of the Allies were advancing to take possession of the western Rhineland provinces and of the three bridgeheads across the river, at Mainz, Coblenz and Cologne, surrendered under the terms of the armistice. The soldiers of the armies of occupation, the French excepted, were quick to fraternise with the population. Enmity was swiftly overlaid by friendships, all the more readily as army rations made their way from cookhouses to family kitchens to feed people still subsisting on the skimpy wartime diet that the Allies' maintenance of blockade imposed. Hunger, even more than the threat of a full-scale invasion, was the measure that would eventually bring the German republic to sign the peace treaty on 23 June 1919. Two days earlier the High Seas Fleet, interned at the British anchorage at Scapa Flow, had been scuttled by its crews in final protest at the severity of the proffered terms.

There was historic irony in the Kaiser's naval officers choosing a watery grave for his magnificent battleships in a British harbour. Had he not embarked on a strategically unnecessary attempt to match Britain's maritime strength, fatal hostility between the two countries would have been avoided; so, too, in all possibility, might have been the neurotic climate of suspicion and insecurity from which the First World War was born. The unmarked graveyard of his squadrons inside

the remotest islands of the British archipelago, guarding the exit from the narrow seas his fleet would have had to penetrate to achieve true oceanic status, remains as a memorial to selfish and ultimately pointless military ambition.

It is one of the many graveyards which are the Great War's chief heritage. The chronicle of its battles provides the dreariest literature in military history; no brave trumpets sound in memory for the drab millions who plodded to death on the featureless plains of Picardy and Poland; no litanies are sung for the leaders who coaxed them to slaughter. The legacy of the war's political outcome scarcely bears contemplation: Europe ruined as a centre of world civilisation, Christian kingdoms transformed through defeat into godless tyrannies, Bolshevik or Nazi, the superficial difference between their ideologies counting not at all in their cruelty to common and decent folk. All that was worst in the century which the First World War had opened, the deliberate starvation of peasant enemies of the people by provinces, the extermination of racial outcasts, the persecution of ideology's intellectual and cultural hate-objects, the massacre of ethnic minorities, the extinction of small national sovereignties, the destruction of parliaments and the elevation of commissars, gauleiters and warlords to power over voiceless millions, had its origins in the chaos it left behind. Of that, at the end of the century, little thankfully is left. Europe is once again, as it was in 1900, prosperous, peaceful and a power for good in the world.

The graveyards remain. Many of those who died in battle could never be laid to rest. Their bodies had been blown to pieces by shellfire and the fragments scattered beyond recognition. Many other bodies could not be recovered during the fighting and were then lost to view, entombed in crumbled shell holes or collapsed trenches or decomposing into the broken soil battle left behind. Few Russian or Turkish soldiers were ever decently interred and many German and Austrian soldiers killed on the shifting battlefields of the Eastern Front simply returned to earth. On the fixed battlegrounds of the west, the combatants made a better effort to observe the decencies. War cemeteries were organised from the outset, graves registration officers marked the plots and, when time permitted, chaplains and the dead men's comrades observed the solemnities. Even so, at the war's end, the remains of nearly half of those lost remained lost in actuality. Of the British Empire's million dead, most killed in France and Belgium, the bodies

of over 500,000 were never to be found or, if found, not identified.¹⁰⁴ A similar proportion of the 1,700,000 French war dead had also disappeared. France buried or reburied the dead in a variety of ways, sometimes in individual graves, sometimes in collective ossuaries, as at Verdun. The Germans, working on foreign soil, and obliged to construct compact and inconspicuous cemeteries, often excavated enormous mass graves; that at Vladslo in Belgium, where the bodies of most of the volunteers killed in 1914 in the *Kindermord bei Ypern*, centres on a slab that covers the remains of over 20,000 young men.¹⁰⁵

The British chose an entirely different and absolutely standard method of honouring the fallen. Each body was given a separate grave, recording name, age, rank, regiment and date and place of death; if unidentifiable, the headstone bore the words, composed by Rudyard Kipling, himself a bereaved father, "A Soldier of the Great War Known Unto God." The names of those who had been lost altogether were inscribed on architectural monuments, the largest of which, at Thiepval, records the names of the 70,000 missing of the battle of the Somme. It was also decided that the cemeteries, large and small, should each be walled and planted as a classic English country garden, with mown grass between the headstones and roses and herbaceous plants at their feet. There was also to be a Cross of Sacrifice as a centrepiece of all but the smallest cemeteries and, in the larger, a symbolic altar, the Stone of Remembrance, bearing the inscription, also composed by Kipling, "Their Name Liveth For Evermore." Over six hundred cemeteries were eventually constructed and given into the care of the Imperial War Graves Commission which, working under a law of the French government deeding the ground as *sépultures perpétuelles*, recruited a body of over a thousand gardeners to care for them in perpetuity. All survive, still reverently tended by the Commission's gardeners, much visited by the British, sometimes by the great-grandchildren of those buried within, as poignant remembrance cards testify, but also by the curious of many nationalities. None fail to be moved by their extraordinary beauty. Eighty years of mowing and pruning have achieved the original intention of creating "the appearance of a small park or garden," while the passage of time itself has conferred an ageless maturity. In spring, when the flowers blossom, the cemeteries are places of renewal and almost of hope, in autumn, when the leaves fall, of reflection and remembrance.

The ribbon of British cemeteries running from the North Sea to the Somme and beyond stands as an idealised memorial to all those whose

extinction on the battlefields of the Great War is not commemorated. Their number is enormous. To the million dead of the British Empire and the 1,700,000 French dead, we must add 1,500,000 soldiers of the Habsburg Empire who did not return, two million Germans, 460,000 Italians, 1,700,000 Russians and many hundreds of thousands of Turks; their numbers were never counted.¹⁰⁶ As a proportion of those who volunteered or were conscripted, the death toll can be made to seem tolerable. It represents, for Germany, about 3.5 per cent of all who served. Calculated as a percentage of the youngest and fittest, the figures exceed by far what was emotionally bearable. Male mortality exceeded normal expectation, between 1914 and 1918, seven to eightfold in Britain, and tenfold in France, in which 17 per cent of those who served were killed. Similar proportions were lost from the youngest age groups in Germany. "Between 1870 and 1899, about 16 million boys were born; all but a few served in the army and some 13 per cent were killed."¹⁰⁷ As in France and Britain, the figures, if calculated for the contingents most immediately liable for duty by reason of age, display an even heavier burden of loss. "Year groups 1892-1895, men who were between 19 and 22 when war broke out, were reduced by 35-37 per cent."¹⁰⁸

One in three. Little wonder the post-war world spoke of a "lost generation," that its parents were united by shared grief and that the survivors proceeded into the life that followed with a sense of inexplicable escape, often tinged by guilt, sometimes by rage and desire for revenge. Such thoughts were far from the minds of British and French veterans, who hoped only that the horrors of the trenches would not be repeated in their lifetime or that of their sons. They festered in the minds of many Germans, foremost in the mentality of the "front fighter" Adolf Hitler, who in Munich in September 1922 threw down the threat of vengeance that would sow the seeds of a second World War.

The Second World War was the continuation of the First, and indeed it is inexplicable except in terms of the rancours and instabilities left by the earlier conflict. The Kaiser's Germany, despite its enormous economic success, and the intellectual prestige achieved by its scholars throughout the world, had seethed with discontent, particularly over the disparity between its industrial and military power and its political standing among kingdoms and republics, Britain and France foremost, which enjoyed the reality rather than the empty title of empire.

Its pre-war dissatisfactions paled beside those that overcame it in the aftermath of Versailles. Forced to disgorge the conquests of 1870-71 in Alsace and Lorraine and to surrender to an independent Poland the historic areas of German settlement in Silesia and West Prussia, humiliated by a compulsory disarmament that reduced its army to a tiny gendarmerie, dissolved its battlefleet altogether and abolished its air force, and blackmailed by the continuation of starvation through blockade into signing a humiliating peace treaty, republican Germany came to nurture grievances stronger by far than those that had distorted its international relations and domestic politics before 1914. The high-mindedness of the liberal democrat government of Weimar helped to palliate them not at all; its very political and diplomatic moderation, in the years when its economic mismanagement ruined the German middle class and its obeisance to French and British occupation and reparation policies narrowed national pride, fed the forces of extremism to which its principles stood in opposition. Throughout the 1920s, German liberal democracy floated above a turmoil of opposing currents, Marxist and National Socialist, that would eventually overwhelm it.

The liberation of the peoples of Eastern Europe from the imperial rule of German-speaking dynasties, Hohenzollern or Habsburg, brought equally little tranquillity to the successor states they founded. None of them—Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes or, as it became known in 1929, Yugoslavia—emerged into independence with sufficient homogeneity to undertake a settled political life. Poland's independence was almost fatally compromised from the outset by its efforts to stake out a border at the extreme eastern limit of what was historically justifiable. In the war with Soviet Russia that followed, its armies escaped defeat by the barest margin. Their eventual and unexpected success, though an apparent national triumph, was to burden the new country with a collection of minorities, largely Ukrainian, that reduced the Polish proportion of the population to only 60 per cent. Its incorporation, moreover, of historic German land in the west and its envelopment of East Prussia, cradle of the German warrior class, would provide Hitler in 1939 with the pretext for a reprise of the aggression of 1914. Czechoslovakia's inheritance from the Habsburgs of another German minority in the Sudetenland equally robbed the new state of ethnic equilibrium, with fatal consequences for its integrity in 1938. Yugoslavia's unequal racial composition might have been brought into balance with good will; as events turned out, the determination of the Orthodox Christian Serbs to

dominate, particularly over the Catholic Croats, undermined its confidence from an early date. Internal antipathies were to rob it of the power to resist Italian and German attack in 1941.

The two regional losers, Hungary and Bulgaria, were spared such disharmonies by loss of territory. Hungary's losses were so large, however, that it entered the post-war world with fierce grievances against the neighbours who had gained by the change of boundaries. Romania, the principal winner, over-generously compensated for its militarily disastrous intervention on the side of the Allies in 1916, inherited thereby a permanent source of discord with Hungary—though also potentially with the Soviet Union—by acquiring minorities who amounted to more than a quarter of the population.

Greece, too, gained population, but at the cost of a disastrously ill-judged imperial campaign against the apparently moribund Turks. Persuaded that the moment of the "Great Idea"—the reunion of the regions of historic Hellenic settlement, the guiding principle of Greek nationalism since the achievement of independence in 1832—had at last come, Greece invaded Asia Minor in June 1919. A successful advance carried its troops almost to Ankara, the future capital of the future Turkish republic, until Kemal, the victor of Gallipoli, succeeded in energising a counter-offensive that in September 1922 overwhelmed the overstretched Greek army. At the Treaty of Lausanne that concluded the war in 1923, beaten Greece and victorious Turkey agreed to exchange the minorities on each other's soil, a process that extinguished the Greek presence in the coastal cities of the eastern Aegean, where Greeks had lived since the time of Homer and before, and brought over a million dispossessed refugees to join the four million Greeks of the mainland; many, so long separated had they been from the wellsprings of Greek culture, were Turkish-speaking. The poverty into which they entered and the griefs they brought with them were to fuel the class hatreds that burst into civil war in 1944-47.

A Balkan problem that had made the First World War dissolved, therefore, into new Balkan problems in its aftermath, problems that continued to the outbreak of the Second, problems that persist, indeed, to this day. Any one of the characteristically world-weary officials of Habsburg imperialism, if reincarnated today, might well ask what had changed. Much, of course, has changed in Eastern Europe, which was the First World War's breeding ground, though chiefly as a result of the ruthless territorial and ethnic reorganisation of the region by Stalin in the wake of the Red Army's victories in 1945. The empires

have at last gone, the Soviet Russian empire last of all, many of the minorities have gone, particularly from Poland and what are now the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Yet many of the minorities remain, above all in the countries where Stalin did not do his work, Romania, Hungary, and former Yugoslavia. Foreign authority demands of the Serbs authority to punish its political criminals, as the Habsburgs demanded of the Serbs in 1914. Foreign troops operate in the valleys of the Sava and the Drina rivers, just as they did in 1915. It is all very mysterious.

But then the First World War is a mystery. Its origins are mysterious. So is its course. Why did a prosperous continent, at the height of its success as a source and agent of global wealth and power and at one of the peaks of its intellectual and cultural achievement, choose to risk all it had won for itself and all it offered to the world in the lottery of a vicious and local internecine conflict? Why, when the hope of bringing the conflict to a quick and decisive conclusion was everywhere dashed to the ground within months of its outbreak, did the combatants decide nevertheless to persist in their military effort, to mobilise for total war and eventually to commit the totality of their young manhood to mutual and existentially pointless slaughter? Principle perhaps was at stake; but the principle of the sanctity of international treaty, which brought Britain into the war, scarcely merited the price eventually paid for its protection. Defence of the national territory was at stake also, the principle for which France fought at almost unbearable damage to its national well-being. Defence of the principle of mutual security agreement, underlying the declarations of Germany and Russia, was pursued to a point where security lost all meaning in the dissolution of state structures. Simple state interest, Austria's impulse and the oldest of all reasons for war-making, proved, as the pillars of imperialism collapsed about the Habsburgs, no interest at all.

Consequences, of course, cannot be foreseen. Experience can, by contrast, all too easily be projected into the future. The experience of the early warriors of 1914-18—the probability of wounds or death, in circumstances of squalor and misery—swiftly acquired inevitability. There is mystery in that also. How did the anonymous millions, indistinguishably drab, undifferentially deprived of any scrap of the glories that by tradition made the life of the man-at-arms tolerable, find the resolution to sustain the struggle and to believe in its purpose? That they did is one of the undeniabilities of the Great War. Comradeship flourished in the earthwork cities of the Western and Eastern Fronts,

bound strangers into the closest brotherhood, elevated the loyalties created within the ethos of temporary regimentality to the status of life-and-death blood ties. Men whom the trenches cast into intimacy entered into bonds of mutual dependency and sacrifice of self stronger than any of the friendships made in peace and better times. That is the ultimate mystery of the First World War. If we could understand its loves, as well as its hates, we would be nearer understanding the mystery of human life.