

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 92

“Home Before the Leaves Fall”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In August 1914, as German soldiers were mobilizing and heading out to the front in railroad cars chalked with morale-boosting sentiments like “excursion to Paris,” Kaiser Wilhelm II famously told one unit of departing soldiers that they would be “home before the leaves fall.”

This optimism was not unique to Germany or to the Kaiser. British soldiers embarking for the Continent were also told they could expect to be home for Christmas.

But after the Battle of the Marne, it became clear the war wouldn’t be ending anytime soon. All those plans that depended on rapid mobilization and quick offensives had come up short. Now what?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 92. Home Before the Leaves Fall.

Seven weeks in, and the war is not going as predicted. Not in the way *anyone* has predicted, actually, but the outcome so far was particularly disappointing to the Central Powers. The German leadership had bet the farm on crushing France in a rapid sweep before turning on Russia. But although the German Army came tantalizingly close to their goal of crushing the French Army in six weeks, they did not quite succeed.

One of the first German commanders to realize that the Schlieffen Plan was not living up to the hype was the chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke was notably less enthusiastic than the rest of the High Command throughout the offensive. He noted that the Germans were not encircling whole French formations and taking large numbers of French soldiers prisoner, as one would expect if the German offensive was the devastating tide it was supposed to be. This meant that although the French were giving up ground, they were retreating intact, meaning they were biding their time and choosing their moment to take their stand.

And that is to the credit of Marshal Joffre, who had been foolish in his offensive strategy, but once he had gotten it into his head that offense wasn't going to win the war, he had organized a masterful retreat. Retreating brilliantly doesn't get you as many pages in the history books as attacking brilliantly will, but it's a skill that's just as important, and it has won just as many wars.

Should we credit Joffre with defeating the Germans at the Battle of the Marne? I could argue it was his subordinate commanders who deserve the credit, and Joffre held back the Germans despite himself. But on the other hand, as Joffre himself would say later, "I don't know who won the Battle of the Marne, but if it had been lost, I know who would have lost it."

It's widely reported that after he ordered the withdrawal from the Battle of the Marne, Moltke told Kaiser Wilhelm, "*Majestät, wir haben den Krieg verloren.*" "Your Majesty, we have lost the war." Whether this dramatic conversation actually took place is in dispute, but it seems clear that Moltke was at least privately aware of how difficult the Central Powers' situation now was, whether or not he ever said it aloud and so bluntly.

Moltke was relieved of command after the German defeat at the Marne and he would pass away less than two years later, in 1916. His death before the end of the war made him a convenient scapegoat afterward for German bitter-enders who wanted to argue that the war was winnable, or should have been won. Victory, of course, can justify any number of questionable decisions, while defeat can make any of them look like fatal errors.

Moltke was replaced as chief of staff by the 53-year old Erich von Falkenhayn, the minister of war. And the big question facing him now is, what do we do next? If the Schlieffen Plan had succeeded, right now hundreds of thousands of victorious German soldiers should be riding aboard trains carrying them to the Eastern front, where, having already defeated France, they would shortly be defeating the Russians in their turn.

But now that the Schlieffen Plan has melted into a puddle of fail, Germany is locked into the two-front war her military planners had labored so hard to avoid.

Everyone understood that if it came down to a war of attrition, Germany cannot win. France and Russia combined have considerably more manpower. Add in Britain, and the combined economies of the three allied powers total considerably more than the Central Powers'. Germany's best hope to win the war therefore remains what it was in July: forcing the allied powers to capitulate one at a time.

Britain's navy isn't going to be beaten anytime soon. So it comes down to two choices: Russia or France.

The situation in the East is a mixed bag. On the one hand, Germany's greatest victories so far have been against the Russian Army, which has so far been performing considerably below expectations. General Hindenburg has become Germany's most celebrated hero for his textbook

defeats of Russian formations substantially larger than his own. You can imagine what Hindenburg is saying by this time. Roughly, “Let me at ’em!”

On the other hand, if the Russian Army has been “not up to expectations,” the Austrian Army has been “train wreck in slow motion.” The Austrians haven’t even been able to subdue Serbia, which is supposedly what this war is all about, right? If the Austrians *had* managed to take down Serbia in a few weeks, it might have been possible to present the allies with a done deal and suggest an armistice, which would have amounted to a “win” for the Central Powers, and if the Allies refused the armistice, well, then it would be on *them* to explain to their own citizens why undoing the conquest of Serbia was worth all the sacrifices they were being asked to make, or, for that matter, to explain to the world what fighting battles at Verdun or Warsaw or Heligoland Bight had to do with the liberation of Serbia anyway.

Of course, we knew all along that Austria wasn’t going to be able to take Serbia out of the war that quickly, not as long as Russia was in it, too. But the plucky Serbian resistance is inspiring the citizens of the Allied Powers to fight on, not to mention the unexpected additional morale boost of the plucky Belgian resistance. Also, Russia has just seized control of most of Galicia and is threatening German Silesia. No matter what Falkenhayn decides, substantial German reinforcements are going to have to be sent east to defend Silesia and to push the Russians out of Galicia.

So a decent argument could be made that if you have no choice but to ship some of your new recruits and resources eastward, you might as well ship all of them eastward. That’s certainly going to be Hindenburg’s view. But Falkenhayn is not convinced. Russia is still an enormous country with an enormous army and plenty of manpower and resources. She can trade space for time and drag out the fighting for a very long time. Even under the best of circumstances, it would likely take years to grind Russia down to the point where she was ready to talk terms.

France, on the other hand, already has large numbers of German soldiers on its territory, and some of them less than one hundred miles from Paris. Falkenhayn felt that the opportunity to deal the decisive blow in the West had not yet dissipated. The Schlieffen Plan was not quite dead yet.

Let’s take stock of the situation in the West. The German and French armies are facing each other over a continuous front line that runs roughly north from Switzerland along a line deviating not too much from the pre-war border between the two countries. But the line begins to veer to the northwest just south of Luxembourg, which is now German-occupied, at the French fortresses at Toul and Verdun. From there it proceeds almost westward to the Aisne River, northeast of Paris.

The Aisne is where the German First and Second Armies ended up after Moltke ordered them to withdraw from the Battle of the Marne, as we saw in episode 88. There’s a ridge on the north bank of the Aisne, which makes for a great fortified position for the Germans. The French and

their allies in the British Expeditionary Force didn't appreciate this at first. They saw the Germans retreating, thought they had them on the run, and launched an offensive known as the Battle of the Aisne. The allies crossed the river but were subjected to the usual withering fire from the German positions, and the effort ended the way so many Great War battles end, in a bloody stalemate.

And speaking of stalemate, the front to the east and south of the Aisne valley had already stabilized. With the deadlock on the Aisne, the Western front was now hundreds of miles of stalemate.

By now the lesson had begun to dawn in the minds of even the most stubborn commanders on both sides of the front. Mass infantry assaults just aren't the answer. They produce nothing but mass casualties among your own troops, and little or nothing else.

I've been going on about this since the beginning of *The History of the Twentieth Century*. There was ample evidence in the early wars of the century—in the Boxer Uprising, the Spanish-American War, the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War—that modern weapons are generating unprecedented numbers of casualties on the battlefield. Because of modern artillery, machine guns, and even rapid-fire infantry rifles with longer ranges than ever before, it has become humanly impossible for a unit of soldiers to approach an enemy position out in the open quickly enough to avoid mass slaughter.

But if you can't win the day with a frontal assault, there's always one other possibility: a flank attack. Except, modern weapons are making flank attacks more difficult, too. This is less obvious, but it's every bit as important. Since each soldier's weapon can fire over a longer range than ever before, an individual soldier can defend a larger piece of territory than ever before. That means a given number of soldiers can together hold a longer stretch of front line than was possible in the past.

In the early weeks of the Great War, the commanders hadn't realized this yet. Everyone was focused on offense, for one thing. But as frontal assaults failed again and again, it became clearer how deadly modern weapons were, and how powerful a single soldier can be. The corollary to this is that a carefully prepared defensive line, with entrenchments to keep the soldiers protected, and properly supported with modern military technology like heavy artillery and machine guns and barbed wire, can hold off an enemy that outnumbers the defenders by two to one or even more.

The corollary to the corollary is that the front lines in the West have more soldiers than they really need for a strictly defensive stance, though not enough to go on the offense. That means that large numbers of soldiers can safely be pulled off the existing front line and redeployed.

The Germans adapted to the new style of warfare faster than the Allies did. Partly this was a matter of luck. The Germans were better equipped with the weapons that proved to be most

valuable in trench warfare, things like machine guns and grenades. They had periscopes that make it possible to look over the top of your entrenchment without getting shot, and they had electric spotlights to frustrate the favorite trick of the British, sneaking up on an entrenched opponent in the dark of night.

And so Falkenhayn tried stripping the redundant forces from the existing static entrenched positions and redeploying them north. Because the front line only goes as far as the Aisne front, the site of that recent battle. France is still wide open from Paris north to the English Channel. If the Germans can get some units into that hole, they can still attack the French flank and collapse the northern end of the line. This could lead at the very least to the fall of Paris, and possibly the elusive victory on the Western Front.

But first, the Germans have to do something about the sieges of Maubeuge and Antwerp, two fortified positions that the German offensive initially bypassed. German units had had to be left behind to besiege them, and we already saw that this allowed the French and British to attain numerical superiority at the Battle of the Marne.

Not only do these sieges require soldiers who otherwise could be used on the front lines, but these enemy-controlled positions sit along the routes the Germans are using to supply and reinforce their armies in France. So those are two very good reasons to take control of those positions as soon as possible.

[music: *Coriolan Overture*]

The first to go was Maubeuge. After the fall of the Belgian fort at Namur, the Germans moved their powerful siege artillery guns, the guns that had won them Namur, and Liège before it, and began the assault on Maubeuge. Maubeuge finally fell on September 6, just a little too late for the victorious German troops there to join their compatriots at the Battle of the Marne.

Next, the heavy siege guns were moved north to confront the problem of Antwerp, where the Belgian Army, King, and government have been holed up for about a month now, since the evacuation of Brussels. They had since been reinforced with a small British force. Now, calling this a siege is a bit of a misnomer, because Antwerp is not fully surrounded. Antwerp sits close to the Dutch border, and there was a rail line that allowed communication and transportation west from Antwerp, right along the border, to the port of Ostend.

Just as at Liège and Namur, the Belgian fortifications were gradually reduced under the German artillery assault, which began in the final days of September. As the forts fell and the Germans advanced, the King and the Government and the Army withdrew west toward Ostend. Antwerp fell on October 10. About 30,000 Belgian garrison troops surrendered, and an equal number escaped into the Netherlands, where they were interned for the rest of the war.

By the time the Germans were attacking Antwerp in earnest, they were also moving troops north of their own right flank, hoping to attack that vulnerable French left flank. First, elements of the German Seventh Army were moved from their position at the southern end of the line all the way around to the northern end of the line. But there was still a hole between the First and Second Armies that made the First Army vulnerable, and so the Seventh Army ended up being deployed there, helping to hold the line. And so the Sixth Army was next, relocated to the north end of the line, in the hope that it could squeeze past the French left.

Falkenhayn also ordered increased offensive action by the Fourth and Fifth Armies, now holding the southern part of the line on their own, for the purpose of masking the fact that large numbers of Germans were being redeployed north and discouraging the French from doing the same.

Unfortunately for the Germans, the French had guessed this move. The Germans in the West were now running into the same problem the Russians had run into in the East: their telephone and telegraph lines hadn't been able to keep up with their advance, and they have been increasingly forced to rely on the wireless to communicate. The German codes weren't very good, the French cracked them, and began deploying their own troops to the same regions. And once again, the French had the advantage of better communication and railroad lines that haven't been through a war and were therefore able to operate faster and more efficiently.

The result of all this maneuvering is a period of the war history calls the Race to the Sea. German forces would try to outflank the French to the right, only to encounter new French forces, so more German forces would deploy even farther right, encountering still more French, and so on. These encounters became a string of battles like pearls on a necklace running just about straight north from the end of the line. There are names for each of these battles that I won't trouble you with, because none of them were very big or very important, but the bottom line is that the Germans ran into the North Sea before they were able to find their way around the French.

This last little bit of the front line actually crosses the Belgian border, and the new Allied left flank was anchored in the westernmost corner of Belgium, now the only sliver of the country not occupied by the German Army. The British Expeditionary Force redeployed here, as keeping close to the coast made it easier for them to receive supplies from Britain.

The largest town in this sliver of unoccupied Belgium is Ypres. It's pronounced Ypres in French, but Iper in Flemish, and that's what most folks in the town speak, so that's how I'm going to say it. Also, it's easier.

But as the gap between the French left flank and the North Sea grew smaller and smaller, Falkenhayn became more and more determined to push a German army through it before it disappeared altogether. The final effort was a desperate offensive by the German Fourth and Sixth Armies right along the coast. If the Germans could push across the French border, the ports of Dunkirk, then Calais, then Boulogne, would become vulnerable. And it is through these ports that British supplies and reinforcements arrive on the Continent.

And so the final phase of the Race to the Sea was the German offensive along the coast into that last little sliver of Belgium. Opposing them were Belgian and British and French forces. Fierce fighting degenerated into a bloody stalemate because that's how things go in the Great War. The Belgians opened the sluices along the left bank of the lower Yser River, flooding the land with seawater to block the German advance. By mid-November, the Race to the Sea was over, and the Western Front had stabilized. No one imaged this at the time, but it would be three and a half years before there would be any major changes in the status quo.

The Allies and the Germans both had had an education in the nature of war in 1914. The armies that faced each other in December were much wiser than they had been in August. As they dug in for the winter, they planned their strategy for the coming spring. Surely once the weather warmed again, one side or the other would take their hard-won insights into a new phase of the war, one that would break the deadlock and end the bloody thing, already.

Except that their hard-won insights were now telling them that the terrain over which their front lines ran was mostly unsuitable for an offensive. Since the Western front is going to look pretty much like this for the rest of the war, let's take a moment and go to the map to see exactly where we stand.

Oh. Right. You can't see the map. No worries. I posted a map of the Western Front along with episode 88, so you could go to the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and check it out there, or you can just listen to me and I'll talk you through it. The front line is roughly in the shape of a lazy letter "S," that is to say, an "S" leaning over backward. The southernmost sector of the line runs between Switzerland and France's two most important fortifications, Toul and Verdun. The front actually cuts through parts of German-controlled Alsace at the south end, then veers back to the west. Then it follows the border pretty closely to a point north of Toul, where it veers west again, definitely into French territory now, coming close to Verdun.

Remember how I said the Germans started some diversionary attacks in this region in a failed attempt to distract the French from the Race to the Sea farther north? Well, one of those attacks got lucky, in between Toul and Verdun. German forces advanced as far as the town of St. Mihiel, on the Meuse River. This "St. Mihiel salient" is going to be a problem for the next three years. It will interfere with transport and communication between Verdun and points south.

This stretch, about 160 miles long, will be the least active sector of the front. The terrain here is mountainous, and unsuited to offense. The French and Germans alike will post their second-tier units here.

The front line makes a sharp bend around Verdun, so sharp I'm tempted to say the Germans have Verdun surrounded on three sides, except that a) every grammarian in the world will tell me I'm not allowed to say "surrounded on three sides," and b) well, it's not a full 270 degrees. I make it more like 225. But you get the picture. This bend is the bottom curve of the lazy "S." Beyond Verdun, the front line runs almost due west as it passes through the forests of the Argonne and

on toward the ridge on the north bank of the Aisne River. You'll recall this is the position the German right flank withdrew to back in early September to avoid becoming encircled after the Battle of the Marne.

The combination of the river and the ridges made the German position right along the Aisne a poor choice for a location to mount an attack. Now, between the Aisne valley and the Argonne to the east, the line runs through the open country of the Champagne region of France, and just past the city of Rheims, or Reims, as most English-speakers say it. Here was a place where offensive action was a definite possibility.

The front follows the Aisne west almost to where it flows into the Oise, then bends sharply north. This is the upper curve of the lazy "S," and north from this bend runs the line that was created during the Race to the Sea; it passes through Picardy and into the westernmost part of Belgium, past Ypres and on to the sea. The coastal lands by the sea are wet and not suitable for offensive action, but the line from Ypres south has some potential.

And so, this is the Western front as we will come to know it. And most of the fighting will be either north of the Aisne Valley, in Picardy and Belgium, or east of the Aisne Valley, in Champagne.

It seems strange to think that there will be several other fronts, most of which will move quite a bit more than this one, but this one will be the decisive front of the war, and will be seen as the decisive front of the war by most observers from the beginning.

Most observers. Obviously, people in some other places, like Italy or Turkey, or the Balkans or Russia or Austria may think their own fronts are more important. We English- and French-speaking peoples tend to emphasize the Western Front, because that's where our own countries' soldiers did the fighting. But there are other, more objective reasons to focus on this front.

First of all, victory on the Western front will lead to the Treaty of Versailles, notwithstanding events on the other fronts, and, in particular, defeat in the West is destined even to undo German victory in the East. On the other hand, emphasizing Versailles too much is also an Anglo-French bias. And a German bias. The Treaty of Versailles ended the war for Britain, France, and Germany, but war and revolution raged on in Eastern Europe for years afterward. In fact, drawing a line under the Treaty of Versailles and saying, "Here is where the Great War ended," is itself a Western European bias.

Another reason why the Western Front is so important is that the bulk of the German Army will be committed to it, and will spend the next four years camping out on French territory. The occupation will be a tremendous burden to the French. You might not understand that if you glance at the map. In terms of land area, only about four percent of France is under German occupation. That might not seem so bad, but understand that a lot of French mining and industry is now behind German lines.

What do I mean by “a lot?” Consider these statistics. Forty percent of French coal production came from the territory now under German occupation. Sixty percent of French iron production was in the occupied territory. The French textile industry in and around Lille was now in the occupied territory. Overall, the French GDP shrank somewhere in the range of 25 to 50 percent as a result of the occupation. This, plus the demands the war put on the shrunken French economy meant a drastic plunge in the French standard of living. New factories and new production financed by British loans would fill some of the demand as the war went on, but the economic hardships to ordinary French civilians were very real and they were harsh.

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and *muchas gracias* to listener Francisco for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you’d like to become a patron of the podcast, head on over to historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon button. And while you’re there, check out the website. Take a look at that map. You know, I think I’ll post it again for this episode. It’ll help you to get a picture of the Western Front. There are also playlists of the music I use in every episode, so if you hear something you like, that’s the place to find out more about it.

I’m away for the week, but this episode should be released at the usual time, thanks to the technological marvel of scheduled posting. Assuming I do everything right, of course. If I mess up, then I apologize for your not being able to hear this.

I sold a short story to the magazine *Aliterate*, and I’m pretty excited about that. The story is tentatively scheduled to be published next spring, which, hey, we should be up to 1916 by then. They may post it online as well. I’m not sure, but I’ll let you know all the details when we get closer to the time.

There will be no new episode next week, ’cause I’ll be unpacking, but I hope you’ll join me in two weeks’ time on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to Japan and the Far East. I’m sure you remember that I mentioned back in episode 87 that Japan declared war on Germany in August, so we’ll take a look and see how that’s turning out. Japan and the Great War, in two weeks’ time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As we come to the end of the year 1914 on the Western Front, we have to pause for a moment to contemplate the Christmas truces of that year. In early December, Pope Benedict XV called upon the combatants to observe an official truce for Christmas, but the various governments ignored or rejected the proposal. Nevertheless, history records any number of spontaneous gatherings of German soldiers with their Allied counterparts—more often British soldiers, but sometimes French—for informal Christmas truces on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

There are many stories of truces breaking out all across the front. More often than not, it is the Germans who are said to have initiated the truce. These stories often begin with soldiers on one side singing Christmas carols or putting up Christmas decorations and troops on the other side

picking up on the spirit of the occasion. The soldiers meet in no-man's land between the trenches and exchange Christmas greetings and small gifts, sometimes showing one another pictures of their families back home.

There are even stories of football matches—that's "soccer games" if you are an American—between opposing soldiers, although how many of these were held and where they were held is in dispute. In some cases, it may have been that soldiers on one side played football among themselves while the other side's contribution was simply not to shoot at them during the game, and the stories became exaggerated later.

One of the reasons it is so difficult to document the facts of these truces is that there was a press blackout of these incidents. It was mostly voluntary on the part of German, French, and British newspapers, which feared the story might hurt war morale. It was the neutral American newspaper, the *New York Times*, that first broke the story a week later.

The official reaction to the truces was to condemn them. And as the war ground on and both sides became more embittered, there were only a few truces on Christmas 1915, and no record of any in 1916 or 1917, although there are stories of unsuccessful attempts by German soldiers to get truces going in those years.

In our time, the story of the Christmas truces has been popular, especially at Christmastime, as a sort of metaphorical triumph of good will and the common bond of humanity over the pointless tragedy of the Great War, although some more hard-headed historians like to point out that these soldiers who got together and shared pictures of their wives and traded chocolates for tobacco and so on went right back to shooting at each other on Boxing Day, so there's also that to consider.

In 1984, the American singer-songwriter John McCutcheon released a song titled "Christmas in the Trenches," which tells the story of one of these Christmas truces through the eyes of a fictional British soldier named Francis Tolliver. Although Tolliver himself is an invention, the incidents described in the song are typical of what actually happened.

[music: Closing War Theme]