

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 101

“Strike a Blow Somewhere”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On January 1, 1915, the German military chief of staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, met in Berlin with his Austrian counterpart, Franz Josef Conrad von Hötzendorf, and with the chief of staff of the German Eastern command, Erich Ludendorff. It was not a happy meeting.

Why do your soldiers keep retreating? Falkenhayn demanded of Conrad. “There just can’t be that many Russians facing you.”

Conrad told him, yes, there were, and wondered why, if the Germans were so opposed to retreats, they had withdrawn from the Meuse back in September? Falkenhayn said that had been a mistake, made by his predecessor. “A retreat is a retreat,” retorted Conrad.

The three did agree that their nations could not outlast a war of attrition against the Allies. “We cannot lie passively behind barbed wire,” declared Falkenhayn. “We have to strike a blow somewhere.” But where?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 101. Strike a Blow Somewhere.

The Schlieffen Plan had failed. The Central Powers were now hemmed into the two-front war they had tried so hard to avoid. And the generals were quite right. The Allied powers, with their larger populations, larger economies, and access to overseas trade, were better positioned to endure a war of attrition than Germany and Austria were. Therefore, the stalemate had to be broken. Germany was now recruiting and training three new army corps. These new formations might be the spearhead of the next offensive. But where should that be?

Before we get to that question though, we might want to pause for a moment and ask the larger question, why continue the war at all? In hindsight, it certainly looks as if Germany would have benefitted by considering peace negotiations at this point. But in January 1915, there was no one in German government circles willing to raise *that* subject. It just wasn’t in the spirit of the

times, when the prevailing view was that empires had to expand or else contract. There had to be a victory, or else it was a defeat. Germany and Austria had already shed too much blood to settle for a return to the status quo, and that's assuming a peace negotiation could have won them that much. There was a strong feeling at the time that whichever alliance offered peace talks first would implicitly be admitting that it was losing the war, which would invite onerous demands for reparations from the other side, since both sides had already sacrificed so much.

Nor was there an outcry among the German public for peace. To the contrary, the public was still firm in its commitment to victory and expressions of hostility toward the Allies, and Britain in particular, were common. English language signs were being pulled down across Germany. Even performances of Shakespeare were banned. Hostility toward the United States was also apparent by this time. Germans were quite aware that in America, the political debate was between entering the war on the British side and neutrality. There was virtually no constituency for supporting Germany, except perhaps in the Irish-American community, where the Great War was seen as potentially a means to achieve Irish independence. But Irish-Americans had little influence over US government policy.

The Americans complained constantly about German conduct of the war, in Belgium and on the high seas, where American ships were being targeted by U-boats, but had not a word to say about the British blockade, even though the British were preventing American ships from trading with Germany and Austria. It seemed to many Germans that, despite Woodrow Wilson's pious proclamations, the Americans had already taken sides.

Which brings us back to the question of where to strike the next blow. New German army corps were being formed, but how should they be used? Falkenhayn wanted to use them on the Western Front. The bloody Battle of Ypres, at the town of Iper, in western Belgium, had not led to the breakthrough Falkenhayn had been hoping for, but the British Expeditionary Force had been badly bloodied. British casualties since August 1914 now amounted to a third of her small army. Falkenhayn hoped that if the war got hard enough for her, Britain might withdraw from the continent.

Of course, that wasn't very realistic. The British were now sending elements of their Territorial Force to France, and Lord Kitchener was hard at work setting up his New Army, intending to bring the British presence in France up to seventy divisions by 1916. So not much chance of the British giving up yet. Austrian officials grumbled privately at the German obsession with Britain. They used words like *Britenhass*, that is, a term suggesting an irrational hatred of Britain, or *Tirpitzkrieg*, blaming it on Admiral Tirpitz's focus on defeating the Royal Navy.

Conrad, of course, was calling for German reinforcements to come to Austria's aid. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had agreed to send a few of their divisions to bolster the Austrian position in the Carpathians. It wasn't hard to see that the Austrians needed help to avoid the final breakthrough that would see Russian soldiers pouring onto the Hungarian plain, the breadbasket of Austria-

Hungary at a time when the Entente blockade is beginning to whittle at the Central Powers' food supplies.

But the Eastern commanders cannily leveraged the loss of a few divisions to the Austrians by lobbying Kaiser Wilhelm for those three new army corps to make up for it. Falkenhayn's failure to win the breakthrough everyone was looking for in France meant he was losing clout in Berlin. Kaiser Wilhelm, who was formally the commander-in-chief of the German military had difficulty making up his mind. He trusted Falkenhayn more, but he feared Hindenburg more, because of his popularity.

And so, Hindenburg and Ludendorff got their way and the Eastern Front got not only those three new corps but also a fourth corps that was transferred from the Western Front because its soldiers had been conscripted in Alsace and Lorraine, and weren't trusted to be 100% loyal against the French.

Paul von Hindenburg, the general who had been given overall command of the Eastern Front was still riding high in public opinion in Germany, because he was the only German commander who had won the sort of smashing victory the Germans were looking for, and would need more of to break the developing stalemate. But he and Ludendorff had an idea for another big victory. A winter offensive against Russia that promised to knock her out of the war.

Now, a winter offensive may seem like a really bad idea on the face of it, but here's the thing. Russia is under a blockade, too. The Germans are blockading her Baltic ports, and the Ottoman Empire is blockading her Black Sea ports. There are exactly two ports in the entire Russian Empire that are not under blockade: Vladivostok in the Far East, and Archangel, on the White Sea in the far north. And both of these ports freeze up and become useless in the wintertime. So right now, Russia cannot receive foreign aid. That's going to change in the spring, so the time to strike is right now.

As for the Russians, supply was becoming a critical problem. Her allies couldn't ship supplies to her, and her domestic industries were sadly inadequate to the huge demands the Eastern Front fighting was putting on them. This is a critical reason why the Russian offensive into Austrian Galicia, so promising at first, had petered out. Everyone had thought this was going to be a quick war. Back in August, Russian armament factories had actually been shut down so that their workers could be sent to the front. By winter, Russian artillery guns had fallen silent for lack of shells to keep them going. And in modern warfare, you have no hope of going on the offensive without artillery.

A British military attaché in Petrograd reported to London in early 1915 his incredible estimate that the five million soldiers of the Russian Army had fewer than a million rifles among them. The Russian military would conscript 1.4 million new soldiers in 1915, but Russian industry would only produce 70,000 new rifles: one for every twenty new soldiers. Russian soldiers were sent to the front unarmed, and told to just hang around in the back and wait for someone else to

be killed or wounded, then grab his rifle and take his place. Russian commanders were told to equip their unarmed infantry with axes and designate them “halberdiers.”

In early 1915, the chief of the Russian War Ministry’s Artillery Department, in a meeting with the War Minister Sukhomlinov, broke down and wept as he described the shortage of munitions. He begged Sukhomlinov to urge the Council of Ministers to open peace talks with Germany and Austria. Sukhomlinov would be dismissed as war minister in June, then tried for embezzlement and treason; apparently before the war he had siphoned off millions of rubles intended to purchase military equipment for the Russian Army and had squirreled it away for himself in secret bank accounts in Germany.

By this point, even Russia was beginning to feel a manpower squeeze. The generous draft deferments the Russian military gave out started to get...less generous. Men who thought they were safe because of their jobs or their family circumstances were now getting draft notices. The exemption for Muslims was revoked, and sullen, unenthusiastic Muslim subjects were now being recruited into the Emperor’s army. The Russian military began ignoring its own minimum age requirement and started drafting boys before they were legally eligible to serve.

Austria’s manpower situation was even worse. Every male subject between the ages of 18 and 50 was now being conscripted, even men who had previously been judged too small or too old or too sick back in the bygone days of 1914. The only remaining exemptions were for workers in war industries or government, priests, and those with the most severe of disabilities. New recruits got rudimentary lessons in marching, shooting, digging trenches, making suicidal frontal assaults into entrenched enemy positions—you know, the usual stuff—and then were shipped off to the front. One silver lining was that the Austrian arms industry was finding it easier to keep up with the demand for arms and ammunition now that Austria’s army had gotten quite a bit smaller. Even so, artillery shells were only coming in at about 10% of what was needed, and fewer than 300 new guns had been built to replace the more than one thousand that had been captured by the Russians during their offensive last fall.

Conrad was focused on taking back the Carpathian passes and relieving those 100,000 Austrians under siege at Przemysl. There were also concerns about Austria’s political position. Both Rumania and Italy were taking note of the fact that little Serbia had completely humiliated the Austrian forces sent against it and were beginning to bring up their own longstanding territorial claims against Rumanian and Italian speaking regions of Austria-Hungary.

Italy was a particular concern. From the get-go, the Italian Prime Minister, Antonio Salandra, and his foreign minister, had made it quite clear to Germany and Austria what it would cost for Italy to join the Central Powers: all of Italy’s territorial claims against Austria. That is, the South Tyrol in the Alps, the city of Trieste, which is Austria’s most important port, as well as territories along the Dalmatian coast down to and including bits of Albania. These demands were out of the question to the Austrians. So the Italians shopped their demands over to the Allies. The Allies,

for their part, were happy to embrace Italy as an alliance partner. Italy could potentially open up a new front against Austria, offering a way around the stalemate in the West. It was a potential game-changer, well worth the price of handing over Austrian territory.

By early 1915, the danger that Italy might enter the war on the Allied side was becoming clear in Vienna and Berlin. German and Austrian officials were close to panic. A two-front war was bad enough; the entry of Italy would mean a *third* front. It was not clear Austria could survive that, nor that Germany could spare the forces to help her out.

The former German Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow—remember him?—he had resigned the Chancellorship in 1909 after losing the Kaiser's confidence. Afterward, he had retired to Rome. Now, the German government contacted him and begged him to get involved in the negotiations to bring Italy into the war on the Central Powers side. Or at least keep her neutral.

[music: Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 2*]

Meanwhile, as the Italians were inviting the two coalitions into a bidding war, and as Hindenburg and Ludendorff were setting out to prove that Tannenberg was not a fluke, the Russians were still arguing among themselves over which of their two foes was should be the first priority. Austria, said some. Surely 1914 had proved that Austria was the weaker of Russia's two enemies. Weakening her further would encourage Italy and Rumania to come into the war, which would surely bring Austria down for good. And afterward, Germany would not be able to fight on alone. But others argued that Germany must come first, precisely because any offensive deeper into Austrian territory would become increasingly vulnerable to a flanking attack from East Prussia. The Grand Duke found this second argument more persuasive, and put into place units to attack East Prussia from the east and the south. This was exactly the plan that had been bungled last year, but we've learned our lesson. This time, we'll get it right. The offensive was planned to begin on February 23.

In fact, there wouldn't be time. On February 5, the Russians found documents on the body of a dead German officer revealing that the Germans had been reinforcing East Prussia and preparing an offensive of their own. That's where the four new army corps went: to create a new German Tenth Army and to rebuild the depleted Eighth Army in East Prussia, which would then move east to encircle the Russian Tenth Army facing them.

The warning came too late to the Russians to save them. The German offensive began just two days later, on February 7. The weather was dreadful. Freezes at night; thaw in the daytime, punctuated by snowstorms. Most definitely not the kind of weather that favors a quick offensive. But the Germans persisted, in the face of heavy casualties from the cold on both sides. The fact that the Germans were able to keep their heavy guns supplied with shells and firing while the Russian guns were mostly quiet made the difference. It would be dubbed the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes, and when it was over, 100,000 Russian soldiers were killed or wounded, and an equal number were POWs. Survivors wrote dispiriting letters home to their families,

describing the harsh weather and the lack of food and ammunition. The winter offensive did not knock Russia out of the war, but news of another German advance, and another Russian Army wiped out, took a heavy toll on Russian public opinion.

Meanwhile, on the Austrian part of the front, Conrad had ordered his own offensive on January 23, in tandem with the Germans, to increase the pressure on the enemy, push the Russians out of the Carpathian passes, and relieve the siege of Przemysyl, whose defenders were projected to run out of food and supplies by March.

At least, that's the best spin I can come up with. The decision to launch frontal assaults against prepared Russian positions in mountain passes at elevations of 3,000 feet and higher in January is a puzzling one, even coming from Conrad, and by now, that's saying something. The Austrian offensive went about as well as you can expect, which is to say, it was a disaster. Austrian soldiers would charge up thousand-foot slopes under enemy fire in knee-deep snow, take the position, be forced back a few days later, then repeat the attempt in waist-deep snow. Attempts to sneak up on Russian positions at night failed. Did you ever try to sneak across ice without making any noise?

Frozen weapons would have to be warmed up before they could be used. Officers would awake in the morning to discover that hundreds of their men had frozen to death overnight. Large numbers of soldiers defected, especially units raised among minorities. Austria was so short on officers that there weren't enough to make sure the soldiers were doing what they were supposed to be doing. Soldierly niceties like shaving or cutting your hair or saluting had been forgotten. Cold, exhausted, demoralized men were given orders and just stood and gaped.

The Austrian 28th infantry regiment was a regiment with a distinguished history. It was drawn from Prague, so most of the soldiers were ethnic Czechs. During this offensive, the 28th abandoned its position and slipped over to a Russian trench, intending to surrender. The "Russians" turned out to be Germans. Fifty of the regiment's officers were tried for treason and eight were executed. The rank and file soldiers were decimated, and I mean that literally; every tenth man was shot. The rest of them were reassigned to other units and this storied regiment was dissolved.

As if to underscore the awful futility of all this sacrifice, the Austrian offensive never reached Przemysyl, and the fortress surrendered on March 22. The Austrians had lost 800,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or captured in a failed effort to relieve the 100,000 or so under siege at Przemysyl. An American reporter present at the surrender recounted that the Austrian enlisted men were starving and miserable while their officers appeared well fed and cheerful, chatting among themselves as if the fall of the fortress was no big deal. During the siege, the food had run out and the soldiers reduced to eating stray dogs and cats and army horses. But the Austrian officers had taken care of their own horses, and apparently fed them well, too, slaughtering them only a few hours before the surrender, to prevent the Russians making use of them. A horrified

Russian officer reported finding starving Austrian soldiers with bloody faces and bloody knives, carving up the freshly-killed horses and eating the raw meat.

You might wonder what Conrad, the man who ordered this offensive, was up to while all of this misery unfolded. Well, he had moved his headquarters to Archduke Friedrich's palace at Teschen, where the accommodations were very nice, thank you. The tennis court was a nice touch. There was plenty of good wine and fine dining at the palace, too, thoughtfully provided by the Archduke, who thoughtfully saved his receipts and thoughtfully billed all of his expenses plus rent to the Austrian treasury. And while Conrad's soldiers were charging through the snow and scraping by on horsemeat, Gina came to visit him at the archducal palace for a few days, so that must have been nice.

So by April, here was the situation. The German command in the east, the team of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, had done it again, destroying a second Russian army. The Russians, though, had proved more resilient than Hindenburg had expected, and kept on fighting. Still, the eastern commanders had proved their mettle once again, demonstrating that Tannenberg wasn't just a fluke. Even Falkenhayn was impressed. His attitude toward the Eastern Front began to soften. Maybe Hindenburg was right. Maybe the key to breaking the stalemate was breaking the Russians.

The news from the Austrian part of the front was less hopeful. Conrad's over-the-mountains-in-the-dead-of-winter strategy had frozen to death in its sleep and then been buried under an avalanche, metaphorically speaking. Half of Austria's military had already been killed, wounded, or captured in the war. Her trained officer corps was gone. The Austrian Army was more of a ragtag militia now. By April, even Conrad was acknowledging that Austria's ability to wage war independently was gone. Only German support was keeping her in the war.

What seemed to bother Conrad the most about this was that the loss of Austria's ability to fight independently meant his own personal loss of the ability to *act* independently. With German assistance came German demands, and Conrad was determined to stand firm against any of that. And as Conrad went, so went the Dual Monarchy. Austria's strength may have failed her, but her pride lives on. Still, the fact is, the Austrian military will be doing little or nothing on its own for the rest of the war.

By this same time, the Italian government is close to a deal with Britain and France, although all of this is still very secret. It's even being kept secret from the Italian people. The Italian people, like sensible people in every neutral country, felt mostly a sense of relief that their own husbands and sons were not being thrown into the meat grinder of the Great War. But as Austria looked more and more helpless, the more nationalistic-minded Italians—and there were quite a lot of those, as we have seen—they began to talk up the prospect of attacking Austria now, while she clearly couldn't defend herself, and take back the final pieces of Austrian territory where Italian-speaking peoples lived, and completing the work of the Risorgimento.

Of course, winning territory without a fight is preferable to fighting for it, so in April, the Italians sounded out the Germans and Austrians with their final offer: Austria cedes the Tyrol to Italy in return for Italy remaining neutral. The Germans pressed the Austrians to take the deal. The Austrians told the Germans that they regarded the Tyrol as far more integral to Austria than Galicia was, and given the choice, would rather cede Galicia to the Russians in exchange for a separate peace. Okay, Germany, your move. What would you have us do?

In light of this talk about pursuing a separate peace with the Russians, Falkenhayn began seeing Conrad's requests for German reinforcements in a whole new light. The Western Front was relatively quiet, with German intelligence suggesting the British and the French were in no condition to be launching any huge offensives anytime soon. And so, Falkenhayn decided to oblige Conrad, sending eight divisions over from the Western Front to form a new Eleventh Army that would give the Austrians some added weight for their next offensive.

These soldiers of the Eleventh Army were hardened veterans of the Western Front. And with them came those huge German and Austrian artillery guns that had been so effective at reducing Belgian and French defenses in the West. These soldiers and guns were deployed in northern Galicia alongside the Austrian Fourth Army, with a German general in overall command of the Army Group. That was one of Falkenhayn's conditions.

This new Austro-German army group was positioned at the far northern end of the arc that comprises the Carpathian Mountains—and the province of Galicia—with an eye toward punching a hole in the Russian line. If that could be achieved, this army group might advance around the mountains and threaten to circle south onto the Russian-occupied Galician lowlands, and that would cut off the Russians in the mountains. It would certainly end any threat that the Russians might make the breakthrough onto the Hungarian plain they've been dreaming about since last fall, and possibly even force the Russians to give up their hard-won positions up in those mountains.

The Austro-German forces began their offensive on May 1 with an all-day artillery barrage from those heavy guns. The Russian defenders had no more than shallow trenches, which had been adequate against the sporadic, smaller-caliber fire from Austrian artillery, but became death traps when the big guns fired. The attack began on May 2, and took the Russians entirely by surprise. The attack was directed between the Galician towns of Gorlice and Tarnow, about 20 miles apart. Whole Russian divisions broke and ran, unable to withstand the heavy fire. Two Russian divisions were sent into the gap to reinforce the Russian line; these were annihilated. Grand Duke Nikolai ordered three more divisions sent in, but they couldn't stop the Germans either. There's only so much that unarmed soldiers can do, you know?

The towns of Gorlice and Tarnow fell in the first few days. The Grand Duke ordered no further retreats, but there's only so much a grand duke's orders can do, you know? By May 10, the Russian units occupying the Carpathians to the south also began to withdraw to avoid

encirclement. Soldiers who just a few days ago were preparing to attack into Hungary were now pulling back into Russian territory.

Russian counterattacks did nothing other than add to the Russian casualty count, which was over 400,000 killed, wounded, or captured in the month of May. The Grand Duke put out a call for help to the British and French, begging them to attack in the West, or finally get Italy onside, or both or whatever, just get these Germans off my back already!

Italy was by this time already committed to joining the Entente Powers. The Italian prime minister, Antonio Salandra and his foreign minister, in consultation with the King, but with no one else, had signed a secret agreement with the British, French, and Russian negotiators on April 26, just before the Austro-German offensive began. This agreement is known to history as the London Pact.

Salandra judged that Austria was on the verge of collapse and would not last out the year. That meant Italy needed to jump in for a piece of the pie before it was too late. The general public in Italy was still mostly against the war, with Italy's socialists taking the lead in opposing intervention. As we've seen, in most European countries, the socialist parties abandoned their long-held pacifist views when the Great War loomed. Russian socialists were one exception; Italian socialists the other. The usual right-wing nationalist irredentist crowd were all in for the war; they saw it as the final step to full-on Italian unification. Italian industrialists were for the war, too. They saw it as good for business. Some of their money and more than a few British pounds were spent to trumpet the case for war.

Bernhard von Bülow, the former German chancellor, was also at work in Rome. He recruited the support of former prime minister Giovanni Giolitti, whom, you may recall from episode 66, had led the government during the Italo-Ottoman War. Salandra was Giolitti's hand-picked successor, but they did not see eye to eye on this particular issue. It all came to a head on May 13, when Salandra offered to resign the premiership, but by this time, the pro-war demonstrations had made their point. No neutralist—not Giolitti, nor anyone else—was willing to take on the pro-war movement. Parliament voted its support for Salandra, and Italy mobilized and declared war on May 23.

Antonio Salandra and the King had wanted to get Italy into the war while there was still time to reap the spoils, but as it turned out, their timing was dreadful. The Gorlice-Tarnow offensive had succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the German and Austrian commands, and the Russians were in full retreat just as Italy began mobilizing. It would take a month for the Italian Army to mobilize and be ready for major operations. This was plenty of time for Conrad to pull units off the Russian front and redeploy them against Italy. And the Germans had no choice but to pick up the slack the Austrian redeployment was creating; they could hardly object to that.

[music: Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 2*]

The Italians, and their allies, were hoping for a quick offensive that would change the terms of the war. No way. That was romantic nationalism talking, not the cold, hard facts on the cold, hard, Alpine ground.

The Italo-Ottoman War had revealed shortcomings in the Italian Army and had left it understocked with weapons and ammunition, much in the same state that the Russo-Japanese War had left the Russian Army. Add to that the fact that Italy and Austria were facing off along some of the most rugged terrain in Europe and it won't take long to figure out that this is not a recipe for any quick Italian victory. The Italians had the Austrians seriously outnumbered, but these geographical disadvantages, plus the fact that the Italian armaments industry, like the Austrian and Russian armaments industries, couldn't produce ammunition in anything like the quantities required to support a vigorous offensive, meant that the Italian front would quickly settle into an entrenched stalemate, not unlike the Western Front, except for, you know, the Alps. Italy would suffer over 150,000 casualties in four offensives from May to December 1915, and have nothing to show for it at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, back on the Eastern Front, the Austro-German offensive stopped during the month of Italian mobilization, to regroup and resupply and allow the Austrians time to send some of their units to the Alps. But the Russian position remained fragile, and arms and ammunition still in short supply, so when the offensive got going again on June 12, the Russians retreated again. Even Grand Duke Nikolai had to acknowledge the situation was getting serious. As the Austrians retook Przemyśl, the Grand Duke gave his forces in Galicia permission to retreat, with the qualification that retreat was to be deferred for as long as possible. "As long as possible" meant about twenty seconds, as far as his field commanders were concerned. On June 22, with Austrians threatening to surround them, even the Russian Eighth Army, commanded by Alexei Brusilov, generally regarded as the most competent and certainly the most aggressive of the Russian army commanders on this front, was forced to withdraw from Lemberg, the provincial capital.

In six weeks, the Russians had been forced to abandon all of last year's gains and lost over a million casualties. Yes, I said one million. By now it was becoming apparent that manpower was not an inexhaustible resource after all. Even Imperial Russia could be bled dry.

The withdrawal from Galicia had the effect of stretching the Russian line, not a good thing when your army is losing soldiers faster than they can be replaced. If the line gets too thin, it might simply disintegrate.

The problem was the Russian position in Poland. The Russians had been pushed back in the north and the south, and so the Polish "tongue" was sticking farther and farther to the west, relative to the rest of the line. But the Germans were on the move here, as well. On August 5, Warsaw fell. There was nothing left for the Russians but to retreat here as well. Over the rest of August and September, the Russians continued to withdraw to the east, essentially surrendering

Russian Poland as well as all her major cities and fortifications. Not only Warsaw, but now Lublin, Brest-Litovsk, Kovno, Vilna, Riga. The front line stabilized at Pinsk and Baranovichi which, you may recall, was where the Grand Duke had set up his headquarters when the war began.

The Russian Army was ordered to conduct a scorched earth retreat. Buildings and crops were burned. Bridges and rail lines were destroyed. The army also waged war against minority ethnic groups in the course of its retreat, as the Russian command now decided that traitors in their midst were responsible for the reverses at the front. Ethnic Germans, Poles, and Jews were targeted.

Before the month was out the Russian Emperor dismissed Grand Duke Nikolai from his position. He was given the consolation prize of the viceroyalty of the Caucasus, which effectively put him in command of Russian units on that front. It was perhaps not surprising that the Grand Duke would get the hook. The army was in headlong retreat. The casualties had been appalling. Civilians back home were getting letters from their loved ones at the front describing vividly how German shells were pounding their positions while Russian artillery stood silent for want of shells. Unrest was building back in Russia, an unrest reminiscent of the Revolution of 1905.

But it may have been more important that the Grand Duke had had a falling out with Rasputin. Rasputin began to prophesy that the Grand Duke was untrustworthy. He was deliberately trying to make the Emperor look bad, because he wanted to rule Russia himself. The only solution, according to Rasputin, was for the Emperor to take personal command of the army.

Rasputin convinced Alexandra, and Alexandra convinced the Emperor, who duly took command of the Russian military personally, and left St. Petersburg—excuse me, *Petrograd*—for the front. He appointed a new chief of staff, who was charged with sorting out the ammunition situation and getting the army properly equipped.

The rank and file soldiers liked the Grand Duke, and his sacking came as a blow. The Emperor was not especially popular. Emperor Nikolai's own military service had been limited to taking tea with Grand Duchesses, attending the opera, and running around naked in the snow, pretending to be a wolf, as we saw in episode 28. The officer corps figured it didn't matter. The Emperor was just a figurehead anyway; the General Staff would be calling the shots. In London and Paris, cabinet officials breathed a sigh of relief. In the west they had been wondering if this great Russian retreat presaged a Russian withdrawal from the war. The Emperor's taking personal command and putting his own prestige on the line for the war effort was taken as a welcome sign that Nikolai was committed.

But in St. Petersburg—excuse me, *Petrograd*—the Council of Ministers had a collective coronary. This was a move with a lot of downside and very little upside. The war was already unpopular, badly managed, and had degenerated into Russian soldiers taking out their frustrations on Russian civilians. By taking personal command, the Emperor was contributing

nothing to the war effort—it wasn't like he had any particular insights or leadership that would likely make any difference—but he was very much risking his personal reputation and maybe even the legitimacy of the Romanov dynasty, on a war that was going very, very badly. Not to mention leaving Petrograd and the civilian government on their own. And leaving Rasputin and Alexandra alone together. As the soldiers at the front are attacking ethnic Germans and stealing their property, Russians in Petrograd are already whispering to one another, “Hey, isn’t Empress Alexandra a German, too?”

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. I’d like to thank Daniel and Larry for their contributions, and thank you to Jim for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you’d like to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, visit the website, historyofthewentiethcentury.com, and click on the Patreon button to become a patron, or click on the PayPal button to make a one-time contribution.

Well, I survived the holidays and the winter weather—so far. My surgery went without incident, which is the best kind of surgery. Thank you to everyone who sent me your good wishes, and I hope all of my listeners are entering the new year full of enthusiasm and high hopes.

I just hope you’ll keep listening, and I hope you’ll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we turn to the Western Front at the beginning of 1915 and consider the stalemate and trench warfare there. “They Showed Us the Way,” next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. You might remember from episode 66 the Italian socialist writer Benito Mussolini, the man who had risen to prominence among Italian socialists for his staunch opposition to the war against the Ottoman Empire. Mussolini spent five months in jail for his principles.

When the Great War began, Mussolini wrote editorials in opposition to Italian intervention. But by autumn of 1914, his thinking had begun to change, and so had the tone of his articles. This war was different, he argued. Shedding Italian blood for Libya was a foolish decision, but shedding Italian blood for the sake of brother Italians, that was different. And anyway, weren’t Germany and Austria two of the most anti-democratic and anti-socialist regimes in Europe?

The Italian socialists were out of step. Socialists in the Entente nations understood the need to oppose German and Austrian imperial war aims. Why didn’t Italian socialists? For his heterodoxy, Mussolini was expelled from the Socialist Party. In October 1914, he started his own pro-intervention newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the People of Italy. Italian armaments companies provided the start-up capital.

In his new paper, Mussolini began to distinguish his new political movement from the socialists. Socialists argued that the nation was an anachronism. They were wrong, Mussolini declared. Nations still mattered. And there was no point in talking about a “class struggle” when the nation

was fractured. Uniting the nation was a necessary precondition to advancing the cause of the proletariat. And when Italy entered the war, Mussolini put his money where his mouth was by enlisting himself and going off to fight in the war at the age of 32.

It will be interesting to see what this Mussolini fellow gets up to next. Assuming he survives the war, of course.

[music: Closing Theme]

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