

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 117

“What Are the French Doing?”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“The Russian Army has now been retreating for three months, during which the daily battle losses have been stupendous. All the officers returning from the front state that it is impossible to picture the horrors of this continual struggle, in which the artillery is without ammunition and the infantry without rifles. I am assured that the same question is being asked everywhere: what are the French doing?”

A letter dated August 14, 1915 to French Commander-in-Chief Joseph Joffre from the French War Minister, Alexandre Millerand.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 117. What Are the French Doing?

A common misconception about the Great War is that the military commanders of the conflict, especially on the Western Front, resorted to the same old methods over and over again, at the cost of many lives for no gain, all the while resisting the obvious: that modern warfare requires a wholesale rethinking of military tactics.

There is a kernel of truth in this picture, but only a kernel. Certainly the war began in 1914 with commanders on all sides relying on the tactics they had learned in their youths even though it was becoming increasingly obvious that those tactics were obsolete and were wasting the lives of hundreds of thousands of good soldiers.

But by 1915, the Western Front commanders at last had absorbed the lesson and had begun devising and testing new tactics. Recall the battle of Neuve Chapelle in episode 102, for example. By autumn of that year, some guiding principles of offense in this new kind of warfare were developing in the minds of French and British commanders. The first principle was that

reconnaissance is your friend. An offensive has to be planned with great precision and care. As much information as possible must be collected regarding the German positions. Pinpoint every trench, every machine gun nest, every artillery position, even every road, house, and tree.

Second, because the Germans had invested so much effort in building elaborate trenches and concrete bunkers, intensive artillery bombardment was a must. We're talking about bombardments of several days' duration, necessary to chew up the barbed wire in no-man's land and pulverize the German defensive positions, a prerequisite to any subsequent infantry assault. Remember that shrapnel won't do against hardened German fortifications. You'll be wanting high explosive shells, and the bigger the better.

The French have been working on improving their artillery ever since the Franco-Prussian War of 45 years ago now. If you've been with us since the beginning of the podcast, you may recall I've mentioned this a couple of times back in the early years of the century. The crime Alfred Dreyfus was accused of was handing over French artillery secrets to the Germans, a very serious accusation since these were among the most important secrets the French military had.

The British, in contrast, find their Army underequipped both with heavy artillery guns and high explosive shells to fire from them. But by the second half of 1915, the British are scrambling to make up this shortfall.

The third lesson, learned at Neuve Chapelle and elsewhere was that small breaches of the enemy line weren't accomplishing anything. The idea behind penetrating an enemy line is that once your soldiers get through, they can turn to the left or right and attack the enemy soldiers fighting at the edges of the breach from the side and from behind, directions from which the enemy are poorly prepared to defend themselves. But experience had shown that the only thing the enemy needed to counter those follow-up attacks was a few machine gun positions at the edges of the breach. These could not only stop an attack, even from the side or rear, but could also be used to lay down fire into the breach against the advancing soldiers, making it dangerous and costly even to enter.

Fourth, experience showed that even if advancing soldiers captured an enemy trench, they seldom could hold it against the inevitable enemy counterattack. We've already seen this. The front-line trenches have communication trenches leading to them from the rear, allowing the enemy to quickly push reinforcements into the front-line trench. Therefore, if the capture of the enemy trench is going to mean anything, the attacker is going to have to pour in large numbers of reinforcements as well, and press on, deeper into the enemy rear. It became doctrine that any assault toward an entrenched position would need to be backed up by a large force of reinforcements as a second wave.

These reinforcements would need to be kept close to the front line and ready to go on the local commander's word, because communication during an offensive has also proved difficult. In the Great War, armies routinely strung telephone lines to their trenches so that commanders in the

rear could communicate directly and instantly with the front line. These telephone lines could be run safely through the communication trenches, or even buried underground. But when soldiers went over the top and assaulted the enemy, they quickly lost the ability to send reports or receive orders. Telephone lines could be strung across no-man's land, but artillery barrages generally severed these in pretty short order.

When planning began for the next Allied offensive, in the fall of 1915, General Joffre would attempt to build on this experience. The need for the Allies to begin yet another offensive in the West became increasingly clear as the situation deteriorated on the other fronts. The Russians were falling back, giving up large swaths of territory in Galicia and Poland and now even Lithuania. These are the retreats that moved the French War Minister to send the letter I quoted at the top of the episode. The Gallipoli campaign had failed, the Italians were stymied, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the Central Powers were preparing a move into the Balkans.

One important reason for the Central Powers successes in the East was the willingness of the German Chief of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, however reluctantly, to divert forces there from the Western Front. The French and the British were aware that the numbers of Germans on the Western Front were declining, while the numbers of British and French soldiers on that front were growing. By autumn, Allied soldiers on the Western Front outnumbered the Germans by several hundred thousand, numbers that would have guaranteed a successful offensive in any war prior to this one.

But as you know, the Germans have been skillful in the construction of trenches and fortifications to offset their numerical disadvantage, and this construction was still going on. With the passage of every week and every month, the German positions became stronger, easier to defend with fewer soldiers, leading Allied commanders to conclude that now was the time to strike, because any further delay would only make the offensive costlier while reducing the chances of success.

Joffre himself had come to the conclusion that narrow breakthroughs here and there in the German front line would not be enough to throw the enemy back, so he conceived a plan of multiple broad offensives at different points on the front. This would also confuse the Germans, making it hard for them to determine where to send their reinforcements. The only way to push the Germans back would be to destroy their fortifications and force them to retreat simultaneously at multiple points along the front.

General Ferdinand Jean Marie Foch, the French strategist who had devised the ill-fated Plan XVII, and who now is serving as Assistant Commander-in-Chief for the Northern Zone of the front, had drawn a different set of conclusions. He thought the best way to push back the German line was through a sequence of phased offensives, each one pushing the Germans back a little bit, then pausing until the heavy artillery could be moved forward and repositioned for the next round of fighting. In British Army circles, this concept came to be known as "bite and hold."

Then there was the view of General Philippe Pétain, now in command of the French Second Army. He was a more junior commander, but had risen through the ranks rapidly in the past year, from brigade commander to division commander to corps commander and now commander of an entire army. Pétain held to the view that the Great War would not be a war of maneuver and offense, at least not on the Western Front, but rather a war of attrition. The winner would not be the side that took the most real estate, but the side that could still bring fresh troops to the front after the other side had been exhausted. Pétain therefore advocated a defensive posture. Hunker down, preserve your forces, and let the Germans do the bleeding. Go on the offensive only when the opportunity arises to inflict heavy losses at little cost to yourself.

Now, none of these views are wrong, exactly, but they are to some degree inconsistent. You can't adopt all of them at once. You have to make a choice. At the moment, it is Joffre who has the most braid on his cap, so it is Joffre who will have his way, even against the President of France himself, Raymond Poincaré, who expressed a view similar to Pétain's, suggesting that the French Army had been doing better on defense than offense, and asking whether it wouldn't make more sense to hold the line for now, and build up numbers and ammunition further, with an eye toward an offensive, say, next spring?

But French tradition gives the military a lot more leeway against oversight by the civilians in the Cabinet than it does in, say, Britain. Joffre's response was to denounce Poincaré's suggestion as "dangerous interference on the part of the government." In the face of this criticism, Poincaré backed down, and let Joffre have his way. For now.

[music: *Danse Macabre*]

All right, if General Joffre is going to have his way, and he is, then we're going with broad offensives on multiple fronts. So the next question is, where?

Well, Joffre had already made up his mind about that. These offensives will strike at the same points on the German line that the Allies struck at in the spring, unsuccessfully. Remember that there is a huge salient in the German line at the point of the deepest German advance into French territory. On the map, it is shaped like a huge arrowhead pointed toward Paris. At the tip of the arrow, the Germans occupy the high ground on the bank of the River Aisne, which is an exceptionally strong defensive position.

So we won't attack there, then. Where instead? How about on the flanks of the arrowhead? This gives two possible sites. One is in the French region of Artois, on the German right flank, the other is the Champagne, or Champagne, region, on the German left flank. These were the obvious points of attack; indeed, they were the same places Joffre had already tried in his spring offensive. The temptation to give them another try was too great to resist. Advances along these fronts would threaten the rail lines the Germans were using to supply their units in the salient, which could force the Germans to make a major withdrawal.

Joffre decided the main offensive would be in Champagne, with the attacks in Artois partly a ruse to divert German reinforcements. There are good reasons for this choice. Artois is more densely populated region, with more buildings, more industry, and generally more cover for the German defenders and therefore less suitable ground for offensive operations. Champagne, on the other hand—and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you this—is a rural, agricultural region renowned for its production of onions, not to mention barley, rapeseed, beets, alfalfa and peas. And I understand they even grow grapes there. This is much better terrain for offensive combat.

And so, the French Second and Fourth Armies would attack here. The other offensive, in the Artois, would be conducted by the French Tenth Army and by the British Expeditionary Force. Hm. Wait a minute, you may be thinking. Didn't Joffre decide that the terrain in Artois would make an offensive there more difficult? You might almost think that the French are sloughing off the hard and dirty part of their fighting onto their British allies.

Well, funny you should say that, because that was exactly the reaction of the commander of the BEF, Field Marshal Sir John French, when he first heard Joffre's plan. Even more unenthusiastic was French's subordinate, General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British First Army.

Now, I've mentioned Haig before, but I have a feeling now might be a good time to introduce him more formally. He was born in 1861 in Edinburgh, Scotland. His father, John Haig, was part of Haig & Haig, a whiskey distillery that was very profitable back then. The company has been bought multiple times since, but a Haig whiskey is still sold to this day.

Both of his parents, John and Rachel, passed away before Douglas reached his eighteenth birthday. He attended Oxford, but transferred to Sandhurst before he earned his degree. That would be the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, and he was commissioned a lieutenant in the British Army in 1885. Haig served in India for a few years, and eventually was assigned to serve under Kitchener in the Sudan Campaign of 1898.

He first met then-Colonel John French in 1891, and would serve at French's side in numerous appointments, in peacetime, in the Boer War, and culminating in the situation we now find them in, with Haig in command of the First Army, and French his superior as commander of the BEF. In 1899, French found himself in the embarrassing position of being unable to pay his debts following some speculative and very ill-advised investments in South African mines. French had chronic money problems, but at this moment he was at risk of being forced to resign his commission in the Army until the much wealthier Douglas Haig came through with a timely £2,500 loan. That would be equivalent of about £280,000, or US\$400,000, in today's money. Haig's loan offer saved French's military career, which is ironic, in view of what's about to happen.

I say this because by the summer of 1915, the upper levels of the British Army and government were carrying on whispered conversations behind French's back about whether he ought to be sacked. French's conduct of the war had been less than inspiring. You'll recall that in 1914 he

was ready to pull the British Army out of France altogether and basically concede Continental Europe to the Germans. Then a few months later, in 1915, he became “ridiculously optimistic” about the prospects of pushing the Germans out of France altogether. “Ridiculously optimistic.” Those aren’t my words, by the way; those are the words of General Henry Wilson, who is now serving on French’s staff and acting as liaison with Marshal Joffre, seeing as how a) French can’t speak French to save his life, and b) French and Joffre can barely stand each other, making a go-between highly advisable.

The War Minister, Lord Kitchener, was also unhappy with French and getting tired of always having to remind him to play nice with Joffre. The politicians in the Government were unhappy with French’s role in making them look bad in the press during the shell shortage controversy. This includes the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, who by late June was raising the possibility of removing French. In July, Haig was in London to receive honors from the King, ironically at French’s recommendation. Sir Douglas attended luncheon with the King and Lord Kitchener and there the King himself raised the subject of removing French from command and asked Haig’s view. Haig, who’d been unhappy with French’s leadership since the early days of the fighting, told the King that the time to sack French was right after the Battle of the Marne, ten months ago.

Sir John had some idea that his position as commander of the BEF was on the line, so when Joffre first approached the British with his plans for an autumn offensive, French gave the idea his grudging support. He’d been saying for months that now was the time to attack the Germans, on the other hand, the terrain was still a problem. Haig, who was closer to the front lines and who had studied the terrain in some detail, was adamant that this was no place for an offensive. French overruled him, though he cautioned that he wasn’t sure the BEF could manage on the shell allowance they’d been given, which sounds to me like a classic case of Sir John French hedging his bets.

Kitchener didn’t like Joffre’s offensive plans either. Let me remind you once again that Kitchener’s plan was to wait until 1917, maybe 1916 at the earliest, before committing large numbers of his New Army troops to France. Joffre pressed the British all summer, and once it became clear that the Russians were in serious trouble, and that the campaigns of the Italians and at Gallipoli were doing nothing to relieve the pressure, it became hard to dispute Joffre’s argument that an offensive in the West might be the only way to keep the Russians in the war. Privately, some British officials expressed concern that the French themselves might seek a separate peace with Germany if they felt both the Russians and the British were letting them down. And so, an offensive there would be.

[music: *Danse Macabre*]

The autumn offensive was delayed until late September. This was because the French needed to build new roads and railway lines into the sparsely populated region of Champagne in order to

supply the coming assault. The commanders of the German Third Army, the target of the attack, picked up on these preparations and had a pretty good idea that an offensive was on the way and they passed this observation on to Chief of Staff Falkenhayn.

Falkenhayn was skeptical, dismissing the reports from the Third Army as “alarmist.” As fate would have it, Falkenhayn would be on an inspection of the Third Army’s position along with none other than the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, on September 21, the very day the French began their artillery bombardment, the prelude to the attack. Falkenhayn had been telling the Kaiser that his subordinates were too pessimistic, that the French Army was all but exhausted and was far too weak to begin another offensive. Two hours later, the French bombardment began.

For four days, the shells rained down on the Germans. A German newspaper reporter described the bombardment like this: “...a mad drumming, beyond all powers of imagination...our strongly built trenches were filled in and ground to powder, their parapets and fire platforms were razed and turned into dust heaps, and the men in them were buried, crushed, and suffocated.”

After a final barrage of gas shells, the French infantry began their advance on the morning of September 25 in a pouring rain, to the sounds of military bands playing “La Marseillaise.” Nineteen French infantry divisions, with seven more in reserve, assaulted the six German divisions opposite them. Some of the French soldiers were specialists in rooting out and mopping up entrenched German infantry. Others were ordered to continue forward with the assault, with the reserves to be used against the secondary German positions.

The French broke through the German lines at multiple locations and a panicky staff officer in the German Third Army began to draw up orders for a general retreat until Falkenhayn found out and relieved him. The Third Army was ordered to hold its ground whatever the cost.

And hold it they did. The Germans had also learned from their Great War experience, and one of the most important lessons they had learned was what we today call defense in depth. Since experience had shown that attacking soldiers might seize a trench yet have difficulty holding it, the Germans built on this idea by constructing multiple trench lines. Where possible, the Germans built these second- and third-line trenches on the rear-facing slopes of ridges, where the French couldn’t see them. And if the French couldn’t see them, they also couldn’t destroy them with their artillery bombardments. This meant that the exhausted French soldiers who took a German trench after heavy fighting would find themselves merely facing another trench. A trench with its parapets and barbed wire still intact.

The French pressed their attack for four days, to no avail. Joffre was finally forced to call off the offensive for a lack of artillery shells. General Pétain, who saw the futility of continuing, had in fact halted his own Army’s attacks before getting formal permission from Joffre, an action that only boosted Pétain’s reputation.

How is it that the presence of deeper German defenses surprised the French? you may wonder. What about aerial reconnaissance? Well, the Germans have been working that problem, too. You'll recall that the Italians were the first to use airplanes in warfare during their conflict with the Ottomans in Libya. They used airplanes for reconnaissance and for bombing. Balloons and zeppelins could also be used for both purposes, and by the early days of the Great War, everyone was doing it.

This led to the introduction of ground-to-air and air-to-air weapons. This is a bigger topic than I have time to get into today; I hope to do a dedicated episode to aerial combat in the Great War, but that will have to wait for later. For now, suffice it to say that by the middle of 1915, the Germans had introduced the Fokker Eindecker. These machines were an early example of aircraft designed specifically for the mission of shooting down other aircraft. I'll get into their details later, but for now let's just say they were faster, more maneuverable, and more deadly than anything the French or British had at the time, and during this period, from the summer of 1915 through the spring of 1916, the Germans would enjoy what we today would call air superiority over the Western Front. In a nutshell, that means they control the air. German reconnaissance can fly in safety, with fighter support, while Allied aircraft generally get shot down. And so, the French and the British had to go into this offensive without the kind of reconnaissance information they had enjoyed in the spring.

As for the other piece of the offensive, the one on the German right flank, here again, the French and their British allies began with a four-day artillery barrage. The British commanders, French and Haig, were concerned that their forces lacked the artillery and shells necessary for a proper preliminary bombardment, but the British alleviated that concern by resorting to a gas attack. Yes, the very same weapon that had sparked such outrage when the Germans used it against them would now be turned back on their enemy. I suppose the most charitable gloss you can put on this is to note that the Germans used it first, so they have no right to complain.

On the morning of September 25, just minutes before the attack was to begin, the British troops opened over five thousand cylinders of chlorine gas, a quantity comparable to what the Germans had released back at the Second Battle of Ypres. The British attack was far less successful than the German attack had been. The Germans had been lucky with regard to the wind, which had moved the gas to exactly where the Germans had wanted it to go. The British were not so fortunate. The winds were calm that day, or indifferent, or in some cases blew the gas back into the British lines. British soldiers were supplied with gas masks, but, inexperienced as they were, tended to take them off because they couldn't see properly or because they didn't realize how dangerous the gas really was.

The British attack achieved an important initial success, liberating the French town of Loos, but once again, they were unable to hold their gains against the inevitable German counterattacks. As was the case in Champagne, the Allied offensive sputtered to a halt in a few days with only

minimal gains, most of which were recaptured by the Germans before the end of the year, including the town of Loos.

The statistics for this offensive are grim. The French lost just under 200,000 casualties and the British about 60,000. German casualties were around 120,000, or less than half the Allied number. The French and British Armies had fired over five million artillery shells, depleting their reserves and forcing them to wait months to rebuild the stockpiles before any new offensive action could be contemplated.

And before we examine the consequences of this offensive, I want to take a moment here to point out the confusing nomenclature of Great War battles. I have been referring to the offensive we're discussing today vaguely as "the Autumn 1915 Allied offensive on the Western Front," or words to that effect, because I think that's easy to understand. But history has other ideas. In most histories of the Great War, you'll find the Champagne piece of the offensive referred to as "the Second Battle of Champagne," the "First Battle of Champagne" being the Champagne portion of Joffre's offensive last spring. The offensive against the German right flank is usually called "the Third Battle of Artois," the "First Battle of Artois" being part of Joffre's winter offensive and the "Second Battle of Artois" Joffre's spring offensive. The British call their piece of this offensive "the Battle of Loos."

In this podcast, I've been trying to avoid throwing all these names and numbers at you because I think it gets pretty confusing. I prefer simply to think in terms of "Joffre's Autumn 1915 Offensive." But I will have to mention these names from time to time, since if any of you want to do further reading on a battle I discuss, you'll need to know its "official" name to look it up properly.

As far as the consequences of this failed offensive go, General Joffre got off pretty much unscathed, thanks to the French Republic's tradition of deference to the military and also to the internal disorder in the French Cabinet. Remember that the end of the Viviani premiership and a cabinet reshuffle took place in October 1915, after Bulgaria entered the war.

In Britain, it was another story. There, the failure of the offensive led to Sir John French being relieved of command of the British Expeditionary Force and Sir Douglas Haig appointed to succeed him. The question of how to interpret this change of command is still controversial, a century later. If you are an admirer of Douglas Haig, like many people, you would say that French's command of the BEF and his grasp of modern warfare have been disappointing at best, and the British Army's record, one year into the war, downright embarrassing. You could say he had it coming, after his quarrels with Joffre and his press leaks meant to embarrass Lord Kitchener and the War Cabinet. Or you might just say that, fair or not, after a year of setbacks, the British Government and public needed a scapegoat.

On the other hand, if you are a partisan of Sir John, and yes, there are a few, you might argue that Haig had coveted French's command for some time now, and had used his opportunities to

schmooze with Kitchener and the King to blacken French's reputation. The immediate cause of French's ouster was Haig's insistence that he could have won the Battle of Loos except that French failed to give him timely reinforcements. Remember what I said earlier in the episode, that reinforcements ready to exploit a breach had now become regarded as an essential element of an offensive? Haig accused French of not releasing reinforcements and making them available to Haig so that he could exploit his advances on the battlefield. French disputed this claim, of course, and even released copies of his orders to the press to prove it, but it didn't help him.

In 1919, Sir John published his memoirs of his wartime experience. These were entitled simply *1914*. After the Great War ended, there was a whole cottage industry of retired soldiers and politicians writing memoirs. They mostly say the same thing: "It wasn't my fault; it was the fault of everyone around me." And they range in quality from Winston Churchill's at one end of the spectrum to, um, John French's at the other. Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, the army commander French had relieved, was particularly unhappy with the way he was depicted in the book, which he called "mostly a work of fiction, and a foolish one, too." The English military historian Sir John Fortescue famously described it as "one of the most unfortunate books ever written."

I think the most telling fact about the failure of the Allied offensive of autumn 1915 is that it didn't even force the Germans to postpone the coming Balkan offensive against Serbia, which went on as scheduled just as the Allied offensive was petering out. But it did have an impact on the thinking of the German Chief of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn. He had already been thinking ahead to 1916, when Germany would shift its offensive back to the Western Front. He had envisioned an offensive similar to Joffre's plan, and Joffre's failure would cause Falkenhayn to revise his own plans. What came out of those revisions was the Battle of Verdun.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening. I'd also like to thank Mariana for her donation, and Iñaki, for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon button. Or click on the PayPal button to make a one-time donation. And a couple of you have asked me about making a donation by check through the mail, and I fully understand why you might want to do that. I've now posted a mailing address on the website, if you'd like to donate that way. Visit historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and click on "Help the Podcast" for full information.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we take a break from the Great War to check out the booming motion picture business in the United States and in particular, how a young Englishman of humble origins is taking the industry by storm. The Lunatics Have Taken Charge of the Asylum, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. One of the British soldiers who died at the Battle of Loos was John Kipling, the 18-year old son of Rudyard Kipling, the British author, poet, and winner of the 1907

Nobel Prize in Literature. I've mentioned Rudyard Kipling in the podcast before, in places where I needed someone to be the voice of imperialism or jingoism. When the Great War began, Kipling became an ardent supporter of the war, which shouldn't surprise anyone. He became even more ardent after the Rape of Belgium and the sinking of *Lusitania*, remarking, "Today, there are only two divisions in the world...human beings, and Germans."

John Kipling had attempted to enlist in the Royal Navy at the beginning of the war, but was rejected because he was nearsighted. After two failed attempts to enlist in the Army, he finally made it after his father pulled some strings to get him in. John Kipling's unit was transferred to France in August, and he fell at the Battle of Loos on September 27. The elder Kipling was devastated by the loss of his only son, but he kept his grief private, and we can only speculate how it affected his thinking.

After the war, Kipling published "Epitaphs of the War," a collection of poetic epitaphs modeled on ancient Greek epitaphs. A famous example of these Greek epitaphs is the one for the 300 Spartans who fell at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. That one reads "Go tell the Spartans, you who read/We took their orders and are dead."

Kipling's epitaphs are structured similarly, with a similar sting in the tail. The one that attracts the most attention these days is the one that reads "If any question why we died/Tell them, because our fathers lied."

It seems probable that the "fathers" Kipling refers to here are meant to include the British government and military leadership of the time, and no doubt Kipling meant to condemn them for not doing enough to prepare Britain and her Army for the war. But the question must also be asked, is one of the lying fathers the poem chastises Kipling himself, who lied to get his son into the Army? No one can say for certain, but if it is, it is as close as Kipling ever came to a public admission of feelings of guilt.

[music: Closing War Theme]