

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 121

“England’s Best Sword Knocked from Her Hand”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On December 20, 1915, the German Chief of Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn, met with the Kaiser at the Potsdam City Palace, the Imperial Residence, to discuss German strategy for the coming year, 1916.

Falkenhayn told the Kaiser that Russia had been sufficiently beaten so as to pose no further threat in the short term, and that Russia’s growing political instability might well force her to sue for peace before she could revive her army. Falkenhayn now regarded Britain as the principal threat, but conceded that Germany lacked the means to force a British capitulation.

France was another matter. Falkenhayn told the Kaiser, “The strain on France has reached breaking point—though it is certainly borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeed in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for, that turning point would be reached and England’s best sword knocked from her hand.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 121. England’s Best Sword Knocked From Her Hand.

The dawn of the year 1916 saw the usual winter lull in the fighting in Europe. The Great War has been going on for about a year and a half now, and the end is not yet in sight.

How is it possible that the nations of Europe can keep on savaging each other like this? After they have already paid so dearly in blood and treasure, where do they find the will and the resources to keep going?

It is becoming increasingly apparent by the beginning of 1916 that the two warring coalitions manage to keep going through the industrial and economic might of Britain and Germany. On the Central Powers side, it is clear that Germany’s strength is the only thing that keeps her allies

fighting. On the Allied side, it is the British naval blockade, British industry, and British money that keeps the fight going. The United Kingdom is the richest country in the world, and she is now spending down her wealth to finance the war, not only to pay her own bills but to provide loans to France, Russia, and Italy, so that her entente partners can continue to fight. By 1916, British and American loans are funding two-thirds of the war expenses of France and Russia, and virtually all of Italy's war costs.

And so, 1916 sees another shift in thinking about the war. Most observers now see Britain and Germany as the two principal adversaries and the rivalry between these two nations, the homes of Europe's two most advanced and industrialized economies, as the driving force behind the war. In Germany, we have seen a great deal of animosity toward Britain from the very beginning, which came from a sense that this was not Britain's fight, that Germany had no quarrel with her, but only with Russia, and with France to the extent that France supported Russia. The British, in the German view, had intervened in a war in which there was no vital British interest at stake, which invited speculation that the British had acted out of spite and selfishness and resentment against a German nation that sought only its place in the sun.

For the British, as we've seen, the war was increasingly framed as a fight against German imperialism and barbarism as a series of German actions provoked outrage in the Allied nations: the harsh occupation of Belgium, gas warfare, submarine warfare.

And so, commanders on both sides spent the winter lull planning their 1916 offensives with an eye toward how best to defeat Germany, how best to defeat Britain.

The senior French and British commanders met on December 6, 1915 at Chantilly, a rural French town about 25 miles northeast of Paris, best known until now as a venue for thoroughbred racing. In the old days, it had been a favorite holiday destination for wealthy French and English, particularly those with a taste for the turf. The Germans had occupied Chantilly briefly during their initial offensive, but had abandoned it when they withdrew to the Aisne River. The French commander, Marshal Joffre, now kept his headquarters here. The British were represented at this meeting by General Sir John French, who will shortly be sacked, but shh, don't tell him just yet.

French strategy was never about anything but the eviction of the German Army from French soil. In the aftermath of Gallipoli, the British were coming around to the same way of thinking. The key enemy is Germany, and the key to defeating Germany is the Western Front.

The Allied offensives of 1915 had seen some modest success and had helped the British and French armies perfect their tactics, but there was no getting around the fact that they had made no meaningful gains, despite the Allies holding a significant numerical advantage.

The autumn 1915 Allied offensive had been meant to press the Germans at multiple points across the front, in the hopes that they couldn't reinforce everywhere at the same time. But the Germans had managed to hold their ground. They had proved adept at moving units not only from place to

place along one front but also at taking advantage of their central position and their advanced railroad network to shuttle troops between fronts by rail. So, the Allied commanders decided that the key to defeating Germany was multiple offensives not only along the Western Front, but coordinated with offensives on the Eastern and Italian fronts as well. All four of the major Allied powers must press the attack at once, in the hope of overwhelming Germany.

On the Western Front, the French were still bearing most of the burden of combat and frustration and impatience with the British has almost reached the boiling point. The British Expeditionary Force, the BEF, was expanding as Britain shipped more and more soldiers to the front. Lord Kitchener had wanted to hold these new British Army units in reserve until they could deliver the final blow, but this was proving politically and strategically impossible. The French were now running low on recruits and were inducting older and older men, not to mention complaining vociferously about lack of support from Britain.

The major British engagements on the Western Front so far are well known names in British military history: Mons, Ypres, Neuve Chappelle, Loos. But if you've been following along in the podcast, you may have noticed that these British battles are perhaps better described as engagements, or even skirmishes, small parts within larger offensives where the French are doing most of the heavy lifting. By early 1916, the British had placed over a million soldiers in 38 divisions on the Western Front, and are now up to four armies. That's an improvement, but the French are fielding 96 divisions, so the British are still very much the junior partners in this alliance.

For the location of the 1916 Western Front offensive, Joffre favored Picardy, at the boundary between the British and French segments of the front. This would allow the two allied armies to march against the Germans shoulder to shoulder, metaphorically speaking. It would also give Joffre more control over British moves during the offensive, since the two armies would have to coordinate closely.

The British would have preferred to begin their offensive on the other flank of their line, in Flanders, which was closer to England and therefore an easier destination for supplies and reinforcements. On the other hand, the terrain there is low and wet. The new BEF commander, Douglas Haig, judged the ground at Picardy more suitable for offensive action, and that, plus the fact that the French have more soldiers and more guns, settled that. The boundary between the two armies lay along the River Somme, so this river would serve as the axis of the advance. And if that name, Somme, sounds familiar...yeah.

Another lesson learned in 1915 was that a successful offensive would need a gigantic stockpile of artillery shells. It took time to build up that kind of stockpile, and it would take time to coordinate with the Russians and the Italians, and so the start date of this grand offensive was set at July 1, 1916.

But the Germans were laying plans of their own. Falkenhayn was meeting with the Kaiser to discuss German strategy for 1916, as I described in the opening, even as the British and French commanders were conferring at Chantilly. You know that Falkenhayn has always believed that the Western Front was the highest priority. In 1915, circumstances had forced him into an Eastern strategy. Between the need to push the Russians back, get them out of East Prussia, out of Silesia, out of Galicia, and the political machinations of the Eastern Front commanders, Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Thus, Falkenhayn had been forced to strip the Western Front down to the bare minimum needed to hold the line *there* due to the demands of the East and in the Balkans.

But that was over now. Serbia had been subdued at last, and with the pressure off the Austrians there and in Galicia, enough Austrian forces were available to contain the threat from Italy. As for Russia, she had been pushed far enough back and her armies sufficiently bloodied that Falkenhayn concluded it would take a year or more before the Russians could threaten Germany again. On the other hand, Falkenhayn resisted the urging of Hindenburg and Ludendorff to push deeper into the Russian Empire. The German armies in the East needed time to consolidate their gains. German administration of what would later become Poland and Lithuania had to be organized and plans laid for the future of these territories after the war. The German government would eventually settle on a plan to set up Poland and perhaps other territories as buffer states between Germany and Russia. These buffer states would be nominally independent, but would in fact more closely resemble German protectorates, if not outright puppet states.

Falkenhayn was already talking by this time of the possibility of revolution in Russia, or perhaps I should say “revolution” in quotes. A full-blown overthrow of the Imperial government might be too much to hope for, he felt, but economic deprivation and unrest were definitely on the rise. Even staunch Russian monarchists were by now beginning to whisper that it might be best for all concerned if Nikolai abdicate and some other Romanov lead the Empire out of its current troubles. This was good news for the Germans. Emperor Nikolai was stubborn in his commitment to his Entente allies and had gone so far as to put his personal prestige on the line by taking personal command of the Russian Army. Nikolai had resisted German overtures toward a separate peace agreement, and it was beginning to look very much like the Emperor was Germany’s staunchest enemy in all Russia. Very well, then, getting a different Romanov on the throne, or indeed, overthrowing the imperial system altogether, looked like a very plausible path toward Russia quitting the war.

But that was not a military question. From a military standpoint, Falkenhayn was convinced that after the Eastern Front distractions of 1915, the time had come at long last to turn the German Army’s offensive focus back to where it belongs: the Western Front. Only, what to do on the Western Front? Falkenhayn had had in mind a broad offensive not unlike the Allied offensive of the autumn of 1915, but the failure of that offensive did not bode well for any German attempt to duplicate it.

Offensives, in this new kind of warfare, were costly. The experience so far has been that attackers often suffer greater casualties than the defenders, even when they are successful. If only there were some way to set up an offensive that would inflict greater casualties on the enemy than on one's own forces. Hey, if you could do that, considerations like gaining ground or maneuvering for the more advantageous position wouldn't even matter anymore. You could just keep at the enemy, at him and at him, grinding down his armies until no one was left to fight.

And there lay the germ of a new strategy, which Falkenhayn would execute at another place with a famous name: Verdun.

[music: *Pictures at an Exhibition*]

Verdun sits on the Meuse River south of Belgium, and it has been a fortification for as far back as recorded history goes. The Gauls called this place "strong fort," in their language, which the Romans rendered as Verodunum in theirs, which is where we get "Verdun." After Julius Caesar conquered Gaul, the Romans used Verodunum as a military base. In the Late Roman era, Verdun was one of the many cities in Gaul sacked during Attila the Hun's rampage of 450. In the seventeenth century, a huge citadel was built adjacent to the town, and the defenses have been continually upgraded in the years since. During the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Verdun was the last French fortification to surrender. Since then, its defenses have been further enhanced. By the early twentieth century, Verdun was surrounded by a circle of fortifications making it one of Europe's most heavily defended points, right up there with Liège and Przemyśl. After the Germans annexed Alsace and Lorraine, the fortifications at Verdun and Toul suddenly became the front line of a French defense against any future German invasion.

You'll recall that during the July Crisis the Germans offered to refrain from invading France on the conditions that France pledge neutrality and permit German soldiers to occupy these two crucial fortifications as a guarantee. There was no way that was ever going to happen. Then, after the initial German offensive into France stalled out in September 1914, Verdun held a crucial position as the anchor of the French line. From Verdun south, all the way to Switzerland, the front line is very close to the Franco-German border. The German incursion into France has happened entirely north of Verdun, which now sits at the tip of a salient in the French line.

But Verdun held, though it now faces the German Fifth Army, which is commanded by Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Kaiser's eldest son, on three sides. The French hold a rail line into Verdun, which they are using to keep it in supply.

Falkenhayn's plan was an all-out assault on Verdun. If the Germans could take the town, great, but that wasn't necessarily the point of this operation. The offensive would be designed to maximize French casualties. German experience in the war so far has been that the German Army is capable of inflicting higher casualties on the enemy, even when it is the Germans on offense. This had happened against the French in 1914 and the Russians in 1915. Surely it could be made to happen again in 1916.

German military intelligence believed that the French Army morale was low and the French were struggling to enlist replacements. We've talked before on this podcast about how France has traditionally been the largest and most populous nation in Western Europe until Germany unified and France found itself in the unaccustomed position of no longer being the biggest fish in the pond. Also, for demographic reasons not fully understood even today, in the period between the Franco-Prussian War and the Great War, Germany experienced much faster population growth. If the Great War is going to come down to a grinding war of attrition, Falkenhayn reasoned, then it was France, not Germany, that was going to run out of soldiers first. And what's more, a properly crafted German offensive might bring that day sooner, rather than later.

Verdun made an ideal location to test out Falkenhayn's new strategy, for several reasons. It was a crucial fortification, in some sense the anchor of the French line. It was in a salient, meaning the Germans could attack it from three directions. And it held important symbolic value, meaning the French would likely fight fiercely to hold onto it, but because it was almost isolated, they would find it difficult to supply and reinforce it.

This new strategy, a strategy of attrition, would require new tactics to implement it. We saw the Allies developing new tactics for this new kind of warfare; the Germans were now doing the same. Since the goal here was to maximize the French casualties, this offensive would rely heavily on artillery. The infantry would move forward only after the artillery had pulverized the enemy position, while the artillery guns themselves would aim their fire farther into the enemy rear, in order to disrupt the arrival of reinforcements. In other words, the Germans were developing their own version of the "creeping barrage."

The Germans would also use poison gas at Verdun, and not chlorine, but phosgene. Phosgene was first used in combat by the French; it has some advantages over chlorine for military use in that its odor is less noticeable and it is more lethal at lower concentrations, making it much more insidious. By the time you have noticed the smell, which is something like the smell of cut grass, you have already been exposed to dangerous levels, although it can take hours before soldiers exposed to the gas get sick, and they can still fight in the meantime. Phosgene will be responsible for most of the fatalities from chemical weapons over the course of the Great War.

By this time, the Germans were also introducing another frightening new weapon: the flamethrower, a portable device that uses pressurized gas to shoot a stream of flaming oil over distances as long as twenty meters, or sixty feet. The effect can be ghastly and hard to defend against; only its relatively short range limits the flamethrower's effectiveness in combat.

And then there were the *Stoßtruppen*, or stormtroopers. This was a new infantry tactic the Germans had developed. Instead of assaulting the enemy position all up and down the line at once, these stormtroopers were trained to bypass the most heavily defended points and push on into the enemy rear, where they would sow confusion and disrupt enemy movement, while the

now isolated and weakened strong points that had been bypassed would be taken by the second wave of attacks.

The assault on Verdun was scheduled to begin on February 12, 1916, months before the Allies would be ready to begin their own attack. The German Fifth Army would be conducting the offensive; this is the army that was under the command of the Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Kaiser's eldest son. The Germans shipped in over 1200 artillery pieces, including those huge guns that had been so effective against the fortifications at Liège and Maubeuge. French intelligence picked up on this movement of artillery, but Joffre concluded that any attack on Verdun must be meant as a diversion, with the real attack to come somewhere else. I mean, who would be so crazy as to attack your line at its strongest point?

In the event, the attack had to be delayed due to a week's worth of snow and other bad weather. When it finally got going on February 21, it began with an early morning artillery bombardment that was nothing like any the world had ever seen before. In a matter of minutes, trees were flattened like blades of grass by the onslaught, while the clouds of dust stirred up by the bombardment reduced visibility to zero. Telephone lines were chewed up, isolating the French fortifications and adding to their confusion.

The artillery bombardment stopped at noontime. The French soldiers had seen all this before; they knew that the quieting of the guns meant an infantry assault was imminent. They climbed out of their bunkers, grabbed their rifles and took up their firing positions along the front trench. But it was a trick. The Germans began the shelling again, taking the soldiers by surprise.

Shelling continued until dusk. Then, only by the ruddy, dying sunlight did the Germans advance, cautiously, tentatively, to test the French defenses. The goal was to keep German casualties low, after all. The scouts were surprised by the effectiveness of their own artillery. The French trenches were empty. Hasty messages were sent to the rear, calling for a further advance. But it was already dark, too late.

As at the Second Battle of Ypres, the Germans underestimated the effectiveness of their own weapons and missed a crucial opportunity. But the battle went on. On February 25, German soldiers reached Fort Douaumont, the northernmost of the ring of fortifications around the town. They surprised the defenders and took the fort. Most of the garrison was gone; they had been ordered to reinforce a sector of the front and they were supposed to have been replaced by a reserve unit, but due to a clerical error, that order was never issued. The effect was stunning. Fort Douaumont was a modern structure, only completed two years ago. It should have been a mainstay of the defense, and it fell in a few days. Suddenly, it was feeling like Liège all over again. The outer forts were falling! It was a huge boost to the Germans and a blow to the French. Perhaps Verdun might actually fall. Kaiser Wilhelm immediately went to his son's headquarters so he could be part of that glorious moment when the German Army marched into the town of Verdun.

The French command considered abandoning Verdun, but quickly dismissed the idea. Arguably, Verdun wasn't worth the blood its defense was going to cost and in making this decision, Joffre and company are playing right into Falkenhayn's hands. The defense of Verdun was assigned to the French Second Army and General Philippe Pétain. Pétain, as you know, had a reputation as a skilled defender and a commander frugal in the expenditure of the lives of his soldiers, which understandably made him quite popular with the ranks. He had a healthier respect for artillery than most commanders of his day, which was all to the good. He was also very sick with pneumonia when he accepted the assignment. In 1916, before the discovery of antibiotics, a severe case of pneumonia in a 60-year old man could well have been fatal. Certainly Pétain could have declined the assignment and no one would have held it against him. But he accepted. He ordered that his illness be kept secret, and in the early days of the battle, he directed French forces from a bed in a closed room, with only a few staff officers permitted to come and go, bringing him news and delivering his orders.

From the beginning, Pétain faced two big problems. The first was that the initial German successes were allowing the enemy to place artillery on high ground overlooking Verdun. This was all part of Falkenhayn's plan of attrition. The Germans meant to bombard the main citadel and force the French to make the hard choice of standing their ground under horrific bombardment or withdrawing from the famous fortification. Pétain's answer to this was to place the most powerful French guns on a ridge across the river and fire back at the German artillery. The German attack, you see, had been limited to the right bank of the Meuse because the Germans lacked the guns and manpower to attack at this intensity on both sides of the river. Ironically, this ridge that Pétain put into play is named *Le Mort Homme*, "The Dead Man," because of its profile, I assume.

Pétain's second problem was the limited lines of communication in and out of Verdun. There was only one road and one narrow-gauge railroad line, both running south, to connect Verdun to the rest of unoccupied France. And the early German artillery bombardment had damaged the railroad track. They were down to a single two-lane dirt road as Verdun's lifeline.

Just a few years ago, horse-drawn wagons would have been the only alternative left. Fortunately for the French defenders, this is the twentieth century, and the French automotive industry, if no longer the world's largest, is still significant. Automobiles helped save the French Army at the Battle of the Marne, and now the humble truck, or lorry if you like, is going to save Verdun and mark the beginning of a revolution in military logistics.

The Second Army was only able to round up about 700 trucks at first, not nearly enough to keep Verdun supplied, but the call went out across the country and the fleet grew until it reached 3,500 trucks and 800 automobiles. Vehicles roared up and down the narrow road at the rate of four per minute. Foot traffic and horses were banned. Thousands of French soldiers were assigned the task of keeping the road cleared. Quarries were dug to supply crushed stone for the road surface and repair stations were set up along the way to deal with breakdowns. The rail line

was repaired and work begun on a new standard-gauge track to properly connect Verdun with the French rail network. The road to Verdun would eventually be dubbed *La Voie Sacrée*, the “Sacred Way,” for without it, Verdun surely would have fallen. Never before in history had such a large army been supplied through such a narrow supply line.

The Germans missed a golden opportunity here, since the Sacred Way was within range of their big guns, and all this might have turned out very differently. But the Germans had their own problems. On the same day that Fort Douaumont fell, a German ammunition dump exploded spectacularly. Nearly half a million artillery shells simultaneously detonated, just at the point in the battle when the demand for them was greatest. No one knows what happened, since every last bit of evidence, including all the eyewitnesses, was obliterated in the massive explosion.

On February 28, the weather turned sunny and warm, leading to a rapid thaw and muddy conditions. The French struggled to keep the Sacred Way open. The Germans struggled worse. French artillery turned the German supply lines into marshes and the German guns fell silent for a lack of shells. Now it was French spirits that were rising and German morale bogging down in the mud like everything else. Finally, a very disappointed Kaiser Wilhelm was forced to give up on his dream of a triumphal procession into Verdun on a white horse, and he returned to his palace.

By February 29, it was becoming clear that the German offensive wasn’t working out the way it had been planned. On that date, the Crown Prince and his chief of staff, General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, who was the *de facto* commander of the Fifth Army, met with Falkenhayn to discuss whether to continue the offensive. It might have been better just to declare victory and quit, but the Crown Prince wanted to keep going, imperial family pride likely having something to do with this. His chief of staff agreed, and they and Falkenhayn hammered out a three-part agreement expanding the offensive and defining its limits.

The first point was that the offensive had to be extended to the left bank of the Meuse. The French artillery on the ridge there was doing too much damage and counter fire from German guns had proved unable to suppress them. The second point was that Falkenhayn would have to release his reserves to supply the soldiers needed for this expanded offensive. Falkenhayn had resisted this idea, which was why the Verdun offensive wasn’t broader in the first place. Intelligence reports were telling him of a British buildup in preparation for an offensive up in their sector. Falkenhayn’s plan was for the Verdun offensive to neutralize the French, while these reserves would be held back to counter the expected British offensive. But now he agreed to use his reserves against the French rather than abandon the offensive altogether. And the third point was that the Verdun offensive would only continue so long as the French were suffering heavier casualties than the Germans.

And so the Germans began an artillery bombardment of the French positions on the left bank of the Meuse in early March. One French position, on a hill called Hill 304, because it was 304

meters high, was bombarded so thoroughly that by the end of the week, the hill was now only 300 meters high. German infantry advanced, but not far enough to still the French guns, and the situation settled into a stalemate. The Germans could advance whenever they concentrated their artillery fire, but the French could slow the advance to a crawl by doing the same.

As is often the case with these battles on the Western Front, the Germans had gained a few miles in the early days of their offensive, but the advance could not be maintained. The front lines of this battle were not static, but when they moved, they moved by small amounts, and as often in one direction as the other. The Germans fought on, still mindful of the goal of depleting the French Army.

But the French Army refused to deplete. General Pétain developed an innovative plan to spread the pain of the battle as evenly as possible. Remember all those trucks going up and down the *Voie Sacrée*? They weren't just carrying supplies. Pétain had developed a plan to rotate French soldiers in and out of the fighting at Verdun, with the goal that no unit would have to serve no more than two weeks in what the soldiers took to calling "the mill on the Meuse." The idea here is to spread out the physical and psychological damage the heavy fighting at Verdun would do to French units. It helped keep up morale, in part by encouraging the soldiers to think of Verdun as a shared sacrifice. By the time the fighting at Verdun ended, which it would only do when winter sets in, most of the French Army will have participated in some way.

But Joffre wasn't a fan of Pétain's approach. It was draining soldiers and supplies from the entire French Army. Pétain resisted going on the offensive, and his round robin approach pretty much ruled out a French offensive anywhere else. But Pétain was popular; too popular for Joffre to sack, so he did the next best thing. At the beginning of May, he kicked Pétain upstairs to command Army Group Center and replaced him at Second Army with Robert Nivelle, who had been one of Pétain's subordinates.

The German offensive at Verdun failed in its goal. It did not run up French casualties in the way Falkenhayn had hoped. Nor did it gain meaningful territory. Throughout the battle, the German military believed, or convinced itself, that French casualties were running much higher than German casualties, as much as 5:2 higher. They were wrong. In the end, casualties at Verdun were huge, but remarkably even. Something in the range of 350,000 on each side. But instead of acknowledging that the plan wasn't working, German commanders instead changed the goals in order to justify carrying on the fight, apparently because no one wanted to be the one to call it off.

Verdun has to be counted as a French victory, yet the cost of holding Verdun is that the French will not be able to go on the offensive anywhere else. They will, however, call out to their allies; the British, the Russians, and the Italians, to strike at the Central Powers in order to distract the Germans and relieve the pressure on Verdun. But that is a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Frode for being a patron of the podcast. I hope I'm pronouncing that right. If you have a few bucks to spare and you would like to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com. If you don't have a few bucks to spare, you can still help out. Visit iTunes and leave a rating or review. That's one more way you can help support the podcast. And if you have already done one or more or all of these things, well, you are awesome. Thank you.

I read a book I really like recently. It's a young adult science fiction novel about two teenage boys who live in a world just like ours, except that in this world there's a service called "Death-Cast" that calls you on the phone at midnight on the day you're going to die, to give you a heads-up and an opportunity get your life together before the end. The two protagonists both get the call; they meet up and band together to help each other make the most of their Last Day. It's called *They Both Die at the End*, and yes, that is a spoiler. It's sad, it's beautiful, and it made me tear up at the end, so that's a recommendation. I wrote a review of it at my other joint, markpainter.us, which you can go read if you'd like to know more. And if you do read the book, please let me know what you thought of it.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this story thread about the war in 1916. The fighting at Verdun grinds on, the Russians prepare to surprise the Germans with that offensive Falkenhayn said they weren't capable of mounting, and Germany finds itself in yet another U-boat crisis with the United States. All that and more, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. By the end of 1914, the British Army began to note a new kind of casualty. These soldiers exhibited strange behaviors, such as becoming mute or unresponsive, staring into the distance, developing tremors or partial paralysis. These symptoms appeared in spite of the fact that the soldiers involved showed no visible evidence of a physical injury.

By 1916, tens of thousands of soldiers in the British, French, and German armies had exhibited these symptoms. Little is known about the Russian or Austrian experience. To their old-school commanding officers, these soldiers were simply cowards and their symptoms evidence of a lack of character. Some were court-martialed for dereliction of duty or refusing orders. A few were executed.

Military physicians tended to agree with their commanders at first, but as time went on, the number of cases grew so large it could no longer be dismissed as character defects. Civilian physicians suspected some sort of unseen injury was to blame. Could it be that the repeated shock waves of an artillery bombardment passing through the human body did some subtle neurological damage? The name "shell shock" was coined to describe this hypothetical injury; the term first appeared in the British medical journal *The Lancet* in 1915.

Treatment for shell shock was primitive and often punitive, with the goal of getting the soldier back into combat as soon as possible, rather than to treat the condition. By the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of soldiers in all armies had become casualties of shell shock, but only a minority of them were treated as actual casualties, with sympathy, and with the kind of care and support that soldiers with physical wounds receive.

After the war, the term “shell shock” became discredited and fell out of use, although the psychological condition continued to recur in future conflicts. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the term “post-traumatic stress disorder,” or PTSD, would be coined to describe this condition. In our day it is recognized that exposure not only to combat but to a range of other stressful situations can trigger PTSD, and it is usually treated with psychotherapy.

[music: Closing War Theme]