

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 122

“They Shall Not Pass”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As the fighting at Verdun in France raged on, it was becoming clear that the German strategy of bleeding the French Army was not working. The French were managing their losses, they were giving as good as they got, and they clung fiercely to their positions around the citadel there.

When the new commander of the French Second Army, General Robert Nivelle issued his orders of the day on May 26, 1916, he ended them with a long-remembered and much-quoted declaration: *Ils ne passeront pas*. “They shall not pass.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 122. They Shall Not Pass.

This is the second of four episodes on the military developments in the Great War in 1916. As you recall from last week, the Verdun offensive was turning into an embarrassing failure for Erich von Falkenhayn, the Chief of Staff of the Imperial German Army. The French were clinging to Verdun and refusing to surrender the position, more out of pride than out of any real military necessity. He had predicted this. Indeed, he had counted upon it. But the French just weren't dying in the numbers he had hoped for, and they were inflicting comparable casualties on the Germans. The German Army now had to choose between surrendering their meager early gains, including Fort Douaumont, the capture of which had been a big morale victory just a few weeks ago, and withdraw back to the positions they had held before the offensive had begun, or hunker down and hold onto what little they had. This first choice was deemed too embarrassing, so they chose the second.

Unfortunately for the Germans, this forced them to defend unprepared and exposed positions against a ferocious French counterattack. This meant the casualty figures would be about even, not heavily French as had originally been the plan. It also meant that the “German offensive” at Verdun is increasingly looking like a *French* offensive.

The German offensive at Verdun had begun in late February. I didn't mention this last week, when I talked about the planning and the run-up to the offensive, but Falkenhayn's battle plan for 1916 also included restarting unrestricted submarine warfare. Our old friend Admiral Tirpitz was insisting that the German submarine fleet, which now numbered more than fifty, could effectively blockade the British Isles, if it were permitted to resume unrestricted warfare against merchant ships. Falkenhayn embraced this view and wanted to begin the blockade of the British at the same time as his offensive at Verdun.

But other naval strategists didn't agree with Tirpitz's rosy predictions of what a German U-boat offensive could accomplish. In their view, it would take many more U-boats before any such offensive would have any chance of success. The German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg, in particular hated this idea. He and the Foreign Office had spent months in painstaking negotiations with the United States after the sinking of *Lusitania* before reaching a fragile understanding that had kept the US neutral in exchange for limits on U-boat operations. To renege on this deal, Bethman-Hollweg believed, just months after it was agreed to, would irreparably damage relations with the United States and stood a very good chance of seeing America join the Allies.

The final decision on this crucial question belonged to the Kaiser, Wilhelm II. The German Chancellor was the equivalent of a prime minister, appointed by the Kaiser but answerable to the Reichstag, the German parliament. But the military reported directly to the Kaiser. He was commander-in-chief of all German armed forces, and answered to no one but God. But even Kaiser Wilhelm wondered aloud how God would judge the sinking of unarmed ships carrying innocent civilians.

The Kaiser dithered for a while, as was typical, but in the end, he sided with his Chancellor. He called it the most difficult decision of his life. The U-boat campaign would be postponed. In the meantime, Germany would build up its U-boat fleet until it reached the level where a blockade of Britain really would be feasible, and attempts would be made to find a compromise arrangement with the Americans under which they might be able to accept a German submarine blockade.

Kaiser Wilhelm traveled to Verdun a few days after the German offensive there began, fully expecting to be part of a triumphal procession into the town. As you know, he didn't get his procession, but while he was there, Falkenhayn used the opportunity to press him once again on the U-boat question, but the Kaiser refused to reconsider. Wilhelm returned to his palace, where he privately remarked, "One must never utter it, nor shall I admit it to Falkenhayn, but this war will not end with a great victory." Admiral Tirpitz protested the Kaiser's refusal to release the U-boats by offering his resignation on March 15. He had done that before, but this time, the Kaiser accepted it, noting in the margin, "He abandons the sinking ship."

Nine days after Tirpitz's resignation, the fragile understanding between Germany and the United States came under strain anyway when the German U-boat *U-29*, operating in the English

Channel, fired a torpedo at the French-owned passenger ferry *Sussex* as it was plying its regular route from Folkestone, England to Dieppe, France. The torpedo destroyed the ship's bow. Although *Sussex* did not sink, somewhere around 75 out of her 375 passengers and crew were killed. Among the passengers killed were the Irish tennis player Manliffe Goodbody and the acclaimed Spanish composer Enrique Granados and his wife, who were returning to their home in Spain from New York City following the premiere there of Enrique's latest work, the opera *Goyescas*.

Also killed in the attack was a Prince of Persia, the 40-year old Bahram Mirza Sardar Mass'oud, a cousin of the Shah of Iran, who was on his way back to his home country after years of voluntary exile in Europe. Prince Bahram was a constitutionalist, and Iran has been seeing ongoing political violence between those who want to see an elected parliament, the Majlis, and constitutional rule and those who support absolute power in the hands of the Shah. This conflict in Iran has been going on since 1906, by the way, in parallel with the very similar political conflict in Russia between the Duma and the Emperor. This is a topic I am remiss in not having mentioned sooner, but we're going to have to take notice of Iran sooner or later because, spoiler alert, Iran is going to become increasingly important as the twentieth century unfolds.

Not that we haven't been talking about Iran. It has come up in the podcast numerous times, as recently as a couple episodes ago, but I've talked about Iran mostly in the context of the British interest in petroleum and in the rivalry between Britain and Russia over spheres of influence in Iran. I don't want to get too far off topic here, but I'll point out that the central government in Iran at this time has little authority over its own country. The British and the Russians have found it easy to influence the shahs, but public resentment has grown, as has nationalism, which is rising in Iran as it is everywhere else in the twentieth century, and as in many places, rising nationalism and rising calls for liberal constitutionalism are going hand in hand. Public anger over the interference of foreign empires in Iranian affairs, not to mention public resentment over the pittance the British are paying to the Iranians in exchange for all the oil they're shipping out of Abadan, all this is finding its voice through the elected Majlis. As a result, the British and the Russians are putting their thumbs on the scales very firmly on the side of the Shah and against the elected government. Now add to that mix the Great War, the fighting between the British and the Russians against the Ottoman Empire next door, which occasionally spills across the border into Iranian territory, and the Ottoman call for jihad against the Allies, and you have all the ingredients for a very unstable situation indeed.

And it was in this context that the prince was on his way home. What exactly he intended to do or could have done to lead his homeland out of the political turmoil it is currently experiencing has to remain a matter of speculation, because now he will never arrive.

The attack on *Sussex* had been a mistake. The U-boat commander had incorrectly taken her for a minelayer. There were a number of American passengers aboard her at the time. None were killed, although some were injured. The most seriously injured American was a 21-year old

named Wilder Penfield, a medical student and Rhodes scholar studying at Oxford who was on his way to France to work in a French military hospital. Penfield's left leg was shattered and would require many months of treatment and rehabilitation. Penfield, by the way, would later move to Canada, take Canadian citizenship, and become a noted neurosurgeon and experimenter in the field of neural stimulation. He died in 1976.

Americans reacted with outrage to the attack on *Sussex*, which called into question Germany's earlier commitment to cease attacking passenger ships. In April, President Wilson demanded a public declaration that Germany would abandon attacks on civilian vessels, threatening to break diplomatic relations with Germany if the Germans did not comply. They did comply, on May 4, 1916, issuing what has come to be called the Sussex Pledge, promising that U-boats would not attack passenger ships at all, that they would only sink merchant ships if they were armed or carrying arms, and even then, only after provision was made to safely evacuate the crew.

This satisfied the Americans—indeed, it was seen as a huge diplomatic win for Woodrow Wilson, who is up for re-election this year—but it left Germany's naval planning in tatters. The limits publicly agreed to by the German government made Germany's goal of using her U-boats to set up a counterblockade of Britain all but impossible. So the German Navy turned its attention back to the prospect of using U-boats in the North Sea against the British Grand Fleet. The Navy was also finishing up the upgrades to the battleships of the High Seas Fleet. Germany's battleships now have something of a qualitative edge over the Royal Navy, if not a quantitative one. Perhaps it was time to try again to lure the British into a trap.

In the meantime, though, Germany would construct U-boats at a feverish pace during 1916, and some in the Navy were thinking that if the number of U-boats available for blockade duty rose high enough, the benefits of returning to unrestricted submarine warfare might outweigh the risks of antagonizing the United States.

[music: Granados

The Russian Army had been battered pretty badly in 1915 and few military strategists in Germany or Austria expected much out of Russia in 1916. You'll recall though, that the British and the French were planning an offensive on July 1 and were looking to the Russians—and the Italians—to begin offensives of their own at about the same time, the idea being to press the Germans everywhere at once and neutralize the German advantages of a central position and a well developed rail network that allowed rapid shifting of German forces from one place to another. The Russians agreed to help, in spite of the condition of their army. In fact, it has to be said that the Russian military during the Great War showed a steadfast, one might even say touching, loyalty to their French allies throughout, often shouldering difficult burdens merely to ease the pressure on France.

But then, as you know, the Germans unleashed their Verdun offensive. Now the carefully laid plans for a summer offensive were out the window, and the French were crying out to Russia to

do something right away to distract the Germans. The Russians responded with an offensive in mid-March.

But before we get into that, I want to say another word about the names of military formations. I went over this at the beginning of the war, when I explained about divisions, and how divisions make up corps and corps make up armies. And remember that we use the word “army” in a general sense to mean a nation’s entire body of soldiers, as in “The German Army,” but it can also mean a specific military formation, so for example you’ve heard me speak of “The German Fifth Army” or “The French Second Army,” the two formations facing each other at Verdun. These can also be called “field armies,” but remember: “army” can mean either of two different things, depending on context.

But now I have to introduce a new formation. By 1916, some of the belligerents in the Great War, like France and Germany, have so many armies in the field they need to create a new and bigger formation, one consisting of a group of armies. These formations would come to be called “army groups,” logically enough. In last week’s episode, for example, you recall I mentioned that Joffre had promoted General Pétain to the command of “Army Group Center.” So that’s nice and easy to remember.

Only, here’s the catch. The Russian military also has created army groups, but the Russians call their army groups “fronts.” This can be confusing, because a front can also mean the line along which an army is deployed and is in contact with the enemy. So now you have to remember that “front” can also mean either of two different things, depending on the context. Sorry about that.

I have to trouble you with all this in order to explain the situation on the Eastern Front in early 1916. You’ll recall that last year’s German-Austrian offensive pushed the Russian Army as far east as the Pripyat Marshes, and that was where Falkenhayn ordered the offensive to stop. Since the marshes are virtually impassable to large military formations, they form a sort of dividing line in the middle of the Eastern Front. To the north of the marshes stretches most of the German Army, and facing them the Russian North Front and West Front. South of the marshes the line is mostly held by the Austrian Army, with some German support, and facing them is the Russian Southwest Front.

I mentioned before that the Allies had decided that in 1916 they would all begin offensives against Germany at about the same time. The Russian military, now under the overall command of the Emperor himself, planned their piece of the offensive against Germany for May. Austria would have been more vulnerable, but the Emperor and Stavka agreed that Germany was the greater threat. She had the better army and she had penetrated deeper into Russian territory, so the need to attack the Germans was more urgent.

But then the Verdun offensive began in late February. The French called for help, and the Russians responded by moving their own offensive up to March 18.

Now after all the setbacks Russia had suffered in 1915, it was widely believed among the Central Powers and even among some Allied commanders that Russia was simply not capable of mounting a major offensive in 1916. But the Russians had put the winter months to good use, reinforcing and resupplying the North Front and West Front. Now they held the numerical advantage there. More Russian soldiers had rifles than ever before, and there were more shells for the guns, as Russia ramps up its industrial production for the war effort, although there's still not quite enough of everything to go around.

They had enough shells to fire off a preliminary artillery bombardment that was larger than anything the Russians had ever managed before, though it was nothing special by Verdun standards. The Germans were able to weather it, and more than that, the preliminary bombardment gave them advance warning of where and when the Russian offensive would take place.

The offensive failed badly, costing the Russian Army 100,000 casualties for zero gain in territory. German casualties were about a quarter of the Russian number. In spite of their numerical advantage and improved supply situation, Russian morale was still low, and most important of all, the *rasputitsa*, the season of mud, had come early that year. The mud made the attacking Russian units impossible to resupply; Russian soldiers were often short on ammunition, and even on food. The offensive was called off at the end of March, having failed in its objective of forcing the Germans to divert soldiers from Verdun. The Germans were able to hold off the Russian offensive using only the forces that were already deployed in the East.

The Russians used the rest of the mud season to rest and resupply the army. But remember that the fighting at Verdun is still fierce, and the Western Allies are still planning an offensive of their own for July first, and they still want that simultaneous Russian offensive, in the hopes that pressuring the German Army everywhere will cause it to crack somewhere.

On April 14, the Russian Emperor Nikolai hosted a council at Stavka headquarters in Mogilev. Present were Russia's top military commanders, and the topic was what to do next. The French were as insistent as ever that they needed their Russian allies to take the pressure off of Verdun, where there is still heavy fighting. The Emperor and his Chief of Staff, General Mikhail Vasilyevich Alekseyev, agreed and proposed a renewal of the March offensive. In their view, Germany was still the greater threat, and so the new offensive should look much the same as the old offensive, except of course that this time, we're going to do it in the summer, when the weather is actually conducive to offensive warfare.

The commanders of the North and West Fronts objected. The German defenses were too strong. The only hope of breaking them was after an extended artillery bombardment, and the March offensive had exhausted their reserves of artillery shells. It would take until June at the very earliest before those would be built up enough to try again.

At this point, the newly appointed commander of the Southwest Front spoke up. He was the 61-year old General Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov. Now, we've met Brusilov before, when he was commander of the Russian Eighth Army back in 1914. Back then, his Eighth Army played a key role in the offensive against the Austrians that pushed them out of Galicia. Everyone knew that Brusilov was one of the most capable Russian commanders and certainly the most aggressive. So no one was surprised when Brusilov's pitch was that he wanted a piece of the upcoming offensive.

Only, Russia just doesn't have the resources to support offensives by all three fronts at once. Yes, General, we understand that the Austrians are in sad shape. Yes, we know that the Austrian Army is in bad shape. And yes, we don't doubt that you are supremely qualified to lead an offensive against the reduced Austrian forces arrayed against you. We hear you when you say that you can knock Austria out of the war, and believe us, General, when we say we do not doubt that if anyone can do it, it's you. But Germany remains the principal enemy, and the resources just aren't there to go after Austria at the same time.

All right then, General Brusilov said, Will you give me permission to begin an offensive against the Austrians without any additional supplies, with only what I already have? The Austrian Army is a mess, let's face it. With any kind of luck, I should be able to do a lot of damage, and even if I can't, the sight of *my* front preparing for an offensive will at the bare minimum distract the Austrians and the Germans. They won't know for certain where the real offensive is, and might even be lured into sending troops down my way instead of to the north.

Well, there didn't seem to be any downside to that, so the Emperor and Stavka granted Brusilov permission to begin an offensive against the Austrians once the commanders of the North and West Fronts began their own offensives against the Germans. Brusilov ordered the Southwest Front to begin preparations for an offensive immediately and instructed his units to be ready to begin no later than May 11.

Unfortunately for the energetic Brusilov, May 11 came and went with no sign of that Russian offensive in the north that he was supposed to be coordinating with. The commanders in the north were still husbanding their deliveries of shells, building up their stockpiles, and biding their time. And all the while, the Germans continue their efforts to wear the French down at Verdun.

But that is the story for next week's episode. We'll have to stop here for today. Thank you for listening, and thank you to Melissa, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Patrons and donors help keep the lights on around here, so if you have a few bucks to spare, consider becoming a patron, or making a one-time contribution. Go to historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on "Help the Podcast" for the links. And while you're there, leave a comment and let me know what you thought of today's episode. Like us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, and leave a rating and review at iTunes. These are other ways you can help keep the podcast going.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our march through 1916. General Brusilov gets to launch his offensive at long last, General Conrad of Austria finally succeeds at something, apparently, and in the North Sea, there seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships. All this and more, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. October 1916 saw a political uproar in Germany when the German high command conducted a census of Jews in the German military.

By our modern standards, Germany was rife with anti-Semitism before and during the Great War. But in fairness, the same could be said of most any country in Europe. We've talked about this a little bit in the podcast already, particularly in episode 8. Anti-Semitism was not so strong in Germany as it was in Russia, perhaps not even as much as in France, though neither was Germany as tolerant as Austria or Britain.

Traditionally, the officers of the Prussian Army were all Junkers, the class of landholding aristocrats. Over the course of the nineteenth century, that began to change as the Prussian Army became the German Army and Germany became a Great Power. The Junkers grudgingly conceded that commoners could now become officers, provided of course that they were devout Lutherans. Catholics were looked upon with suspicion, except in Catholic Bavaria. As for Jews, well, for a long time it was explicit policy in Prussia that Jewish Germans just flat out could not be military officers. That policy was rescinded in the nineteenth century, officially, but in fact not a single Jewish German got an officer's commission in the German Army in the thirty years leading up to the Great War.

But the Great War had changed everything, or so Jewish Germans hoped. The official German government position was that all political and ethnic factions in Germany were now united in a common cause, winning the war. There were about 600,000 Jewish Germans, about one percent of the population of the country, and they volunteered for military service in numbers proportional to their Gentile neighbors. Jewish soldiers were now being promoted to officer ranks. Jewish Germans bought war bonds, they aided the war effort in science and industry, and the Jewish community in Germany had reason to hope that their contributions to the war effort would lay to rest once and for all the old slander that Jews weren't really Germans and couldn't be counted upon to support the Fatherland.

But the slanders did not go away, especially as the war dragged on and Germany's position grew more difficult and the lives of German civilians grew harder. Whatever your explanation was for why Germany was struggling, the Jews were behind it. The capitalists want the war to drag on for the sake of their profits, and we know that all the capitalists are Jews. The socialists and pacifists undermine national morale, and we all know that the socialists and pacifists are Jews. The liberals keep pushing for more democracy, which breeds national discord, and we know that all the liberals are Jews. And so on.

There were persistent accusations, too, that Jewish Germans were dodging conscription and shirking national service. In fact, by 1916, three thousand Jewish German soldiers had already fallen in battle, and over five thousand had been awarded medals, and these numbers would both quadruple before the war's end. But these facts did not silence the accusations.

In October of 1916, the war minister ordered a census of Jewish German soldiers, which created such a political uproar that the minister was replaced by the end of the month. But the census was completed anyway, much to the distress of the German Jewish community, even after the government announced that the results showed that Jewish Germans were defending the nation in numbers proportional to everybody else's.

But neither did the government release the underlying census data, leading the anti-Semites to charge the government with a cover-up. For Jewish Germans, those high hopes of 1914 were dashed, replaced by a fear that Jews may never be accepted as fully German.

[music: Closing War Theme]