

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 124
“What Passing-Bells for These Who Die as Cattle?”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.*

Wilfred Owen. “Anthem for Doomed Youth.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 124. What Passing-Bells for These Who Die as Cattle?

Today we're going to conclude our four-part series on the events of 1916 and the Great War. We're at early June now, just after the Battle of Jutland, which we covered last time. In the broader picture, recall that the Germans are still trying to bleed the French Army at Verdun and the Austrians have begun a surprisingly successful offensive against Italy in the Alps. The French are pressing the British and the Russians to attack the Germans and force them to divert soldiers and resources away from Verdun, and the Italians are now calling on the Russians to put pressure on Austria.

Recall, too, that the Russian fronts facing the Germans, the North Front and the West Front, are gearing up for new offensives, but don't plan to begin any sooner than June 14 at the earliest, and more likely July. But then there was the Russian Southwest Front, commanded by General Alexei Brusilov. The Russian military didn't have any supplies or ammunition to spare for his

front, since the units facing the Germans got first priority. But Brusilov had asked for, and gotten, permission to begin his own offensive at the same time his colleagues to the north began theirs. He'd asked even though he knew the Russian high command, Stavka, couldn't spare him any assistance, because he judged the Austrian Army weak and vulnerable. Since there didn't seem to be any downside to his request, Stavka approved it. Then came the Austrian offensive against the Italians, and now Brusilov was asked to begin his own offensive on June 4, even though the other fronts weren't ready yet. Brusilov reluctantly agreed, but then at the last minute, Stavka found his preparations unorthodox, and tried to postpone the offensive, though when Brusilov threatened to resign, they relented and allowed him to begin.

That's where we left off last time, and by now you must be wondering what it was about Brusilov's offensive planning that was making Stavka so nervous. The by-the-book commanders in the north were doing things the conventional way. Since concentrated heavy artillery fire for several days was deemed essential to break an enemy line, and since the Russians never had enough artillery or shells, standard procedure was to concentrate what artillery was available into a high-intensity barrage, inevitably into a very narrow segment of the enemy line. This would obliterate the enemy's defenses, but as we have seen, a small opening in the enemy line doesn't do the attacker much good. When the attackers press into the gap, their flanks still get raked by fire from the enemy positions on either side. And the long artillery bombardment telegraphs the location of the coming offensive, giving the enemy time to send reserve units to that position. Usually those reserves are already there and waiting by the time the offensive begins.

Brusilov, unlike most Russian commanders, had learned from these unhappy experiences, and had devised a new offensive strategy to take these problems into account. In fact, his observations and experience have led Brusilov to draw many of the same conclusions that his colleagues in the British and French Armies, soldiers like Robert Nivelle and Douglas Haig, have reached in their own experiences of attempting to dislodge the Germans from their entrenched positions on the Western Front.

So what did Brusilov's new strategy look like? Well, bear with me, because you and the Austrians are about to find out.

When Brusilov ordered his front to begin preparations, that included digging trenches. The Austrians noticed the increased activity in Brusilov's front, but didn't know what to make of it, since it looked more like defensive preparation than offensive. And General Conrad, who was more focused on his ongoing offensive against Italy, was insisting to anyone and everyone who would listen that the Russians were in no condition to launch another offensive, so there's that as well.

In fact, part of Brusilov's plan was to enlarge the trenches and move them as close to the Austrian line as possible, so that when the offensive came, large numbers of Russians could charge the enemy positions at once, across a minimal distance. Brusilov's soldiers in some cases

got their trenches to within 75 yards of the enemy. The Russians used airplanes to study up on the construction of Austrian trenches, even going so far as to build scale models of them to show to their soldiers to help them visualize what would be expected.

The offensive began at 4:00 AM on June 4 with an artillery barrage everywhere, up and down the front. The barrage lasted three hours, then abruptly ended, leaving the Austrians tense. What was that all about? Were the Russian infantry about to charge? No, a short time later, the bombardment began again. And so it would be for the next 48 hours, the Russian artillery firing, then going quiet, then firing again, with no apparent rhyme or reason.

After a while, the Austrians stopped tensing up every time the bombardment stopped. They were getting used to this pattern, and it was just then, when they were off their guard, that the Russian infantry charges began. They came in four waves. The first wave lobbed grenades into the first Austrian trench line, then dove in and took control. The second wave came up close behind, just as the French and British had learned to do, passing over the now-secured first trench and charging into the second trench, which was where the bulk of the Austrian soldiers would be found. Subsequent waves brought up machine guns and light artillery, which the Russians would use to consolidate control over what they had just taken.

The assault was a tremendous success. In two days of fighting, the Austrians were pushed back more than fifty miles at some places on the front, a rate of advance that was positively breakneck by Great War standards. Austria's best and most loyal troops were dead or wounded or captured by now. These troops were mostly Slavs who had been conscripted; they were ill-supplied, they didn't understand why they were even fighting the Russians to begin with, and they felt little love for the Austrian Kaiser, and so they were prone to fall back, or just as likely to surrender, when attacked by the Russians.

The Russians took prisoners by the hundreds of thousands and they captured the city of Lutsk in Galicia, which was the headquarters of the Austrian Fourth Army. The commander of the Fourth Army, Archduke Josef Ferdinand, barely escaped capture himself.

Two days later, on June 8, Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad was on a train for Berlin to meet with his German counterpart, Erich von Falkenhayn. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall at *that* meeting. It had only been a few weeks ago that Conrad was boasting about his Italian offensive and how he was managing it all on his own without German help merely by transferring some units from the East and don't worry about those Russians, they're all but defeated... Yeah. Now he was back to tell Falkenhayn that Austria was on the verge of defeat.

But Falkenhayn has to bear some of the blame for this situation. His own assessments of the Russians were almost as badly overoptimistic. Even now, he persisted in thinking that the French were suffering over twice as many casualties as the Germans at Verdun, which was not even close to true. In fact the casualties were nearly equal. Similarly, he had agreed with Conrad that a) the Russians were incapable of going on the offensive, b) if there were to be a Russian

offensive, advance preparations would tip their hand and give Germany and Austria time to respond, and c) the Russian Southwest Front in particular would not be able to go on the offensive unless it were reinforced by Russian units shipped in from the north, and if that happened, there would be an opportunity to counter the move by redeploying German units from the north. All three of these assumptions were now proved gravely wrong.

Falkenhayn agreed to send in some German divisions to reinforce the Austrians, but he extracted some major concessions from Conrad in return. Conrad would have to agree to redeploy eight of his own divisions from the Alps back to Galicia, thus guaranteeing the failure of his Alpine offensive, Austria would have to agree not to execute any more offensives on its own without first getting the approval of the German High Command, and Austrian field commanders would have to take orders directly from German High Command. Conrad agreed to these terms because he had no choice, and for the rest of the war, the Austrian Army would be reduced to merely a branch of the German military.

[music: *Sonatina No. 5*]

All the way back in December of last year, the British and French commands had agreed on a plan for a joint offensive in 1916, originally planned for July 1, then postponed to August 1 to give the British more time to prepare. But the German offensive at Verdun forced two changes. First, the start date would have to be moved back to July 1 at the request of the French, and second, because of the demands of the fighting at Verdun, this would become a mostly British offensive with French support.

As we've seen, so far in the Great War, British Army operations have never been more than one component of an overall offensive that was mostly French. Now, for the first time, the British Army would take the lead, and this would be the BEF's first offensive under its new commander, Douglas Haig. On the plus side, a great deal of planning and forethought went into this offensive. Western Allied commanders were still learning the lessons of the war and experimenting with ways to break through the German entrenched positions.

On the minus side, most of the British soldiers fighting in this offensive would be new recruits. Conscription had begun in Britain by this time, but the soldiers fighting in France in the new British Fourth Army were mostly volunteers, those who had enlisted in 1915, during the days of "Lord Kitchener Wants You" campaigns. These soldiers had no combat experience and their level of training and skill was regarded by their own officers as questionable.

The offensive began with seven-day artillery bombardment. Over 1,500 British artillery pieces fired over a million shells into the German positions over 25 kilometers of front line. But the preparations for this offensive went beyond merely collecting stockpiles of shells. British soldiers had secretly dug underground tunnels and packed explosives under key German positions.

On Saturday, July 1, at 7:30 in the morning, the British blew up those explosives in a series of blasts that by some accounts were the biggest man-made explosions in history. They could be heard in England, over a hundred miles away.

Then, up and down the line, officers blew their whistles and the British Fourth Army went over the top. Because these soldiers were mostly green, they were ordered to approach the enemy trenches at a walking pace. It was feared that the units would become disorganized if they tried to move too fast. Some units were experimenting with the creeping barrage, which you may remember we first encountered all the way back in the Boer War. This is the kind of artillery support where the artillery fires progressively farther forward as the infantry advances, sweeping the enemy positions just before the soldiers arrive.

It mostly didn't work. It was uncoordinated. The movement forward was too slow. Too much of the German barbed wire was still intact. The creeping barrages got out ahead of the infantry, giving the Germans time to recover in between. An optimistic Haig had mustered a few cavalry divisions in the hope of exploiting the breach he was sure was about to open. It didn't.

July 1, 1916 will go down as the bloodiest day in British military history, with nearly 20,000 soldiers killed and a further 37,000 wounded, missing, or captured. German casualties were only about 10,000. The French did quite a bit better, advancing a few miles on the first day at a fraction of the casualties. It may have been better in the long run if they hadn't. In spite of the awful carnage of the first day of the offensive, General Haig took heart from this modest French advance, and ordered the offensive to go on. When it became obvious that there would be no breakthrough, Haig pressed on with the offensive anyway, now convincing himself that the Germans were suffering worse casualties and were on the brink of collapse, in just the same way that Erich von Falkenhayn carried on with the Verdun offensive, convincing himself that the French were suffering worse casualties and were on the brink of collapse.

And it would continue for a further twenty weeks, 140 days of bitter fighting, before the Battle of the Somme would be called off in November. Total British casualties for the offensive were about 450,000, a staggering figure without precedent in British military history. German casualties were about the same; French casualties ran about 200,000, meaning the Allies lost about three soldiers for every two Germans.

But at the same time, on the Eastern Front, Brusilov's Southwest Front was still on the move. Austria was suffering appalling casualties, and Falkenhayn was forced to transfer divisions from the West to the East in the midst of the fighting at Verdun and the Somme. As Brusilov's front continued to advance, albeit more slowly now, Stavka abandoned plans for an offensive against the German sector of the Eastern Front, and instead began shipping troops and supplies south to reinforce Brusilov's offensive.

But Brusilov's offensive had only succeeded as well as it had because of Brusilov's careful preparations and the element of surprise. Now there was no time to prepare and it was too late to

surprise anyone, so Brusilov fell back on the conventional strategy of heavy artillery bombardments—now that he had plenty of artillery—and frontal assaults on enemy positions—now that he had plenty of soldiers. Unfortunately, these tactics aren't going to work any better this time than any of the other times.

In particular, after their success in capturing Lutsk, the Russians pushed on in that sector toward the town of Kowel. In early July, Austrian units were in retreat across the front, with the notable exception of the Polish Legions. The Polish Legions were an ethnic Polish force within the Austrian Army created by the Polish socialist leader Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski had seen in the Great War an opportunity to restore Polish independence on the battlefield. In his view, that would only happen after Russia was defeated by the Central Powers, and then they in turn were defeated by the Western Allies. And, spoiler alert, that's exactly how it's going to go down.

But in order to facilitate the first half of this plan, Piłsudski founded the Polish Legions to assist the Central Powers. The Austrian Army was only too happy to take in Slavic soldiers who actually were enthusiastic about fighting Russians, and the high point of the history of the Polish Legions came at the Battle of Kostiuchnówka on July 4, when they held off a Russian force twice their size for two days, allowing other Austrian units to escape and blunting the Russian move toward Kowel. The Russians would finally be stopped by a German force under the command of General Alexander von Linsingen at the Battle of Kowel in early August.

Linsingen's victory stalled out the northern end of Brusilov's offensive, ending the threat to the German flank, but south of Kowel, the Russians continued to advance against the disintegrating Austrian Army until they reached the Carpathian Mountains once again in September.

The dramatic advance of the Russians back into Austrian territory, along with the equally dramatic collapse of the Austrian Army would have political repercussions in the neighboring neutral nation of Romania. Diplomats of the Allies and the Central Powers alike well understood that Romania, like Italy and Bulgaria before her, might be tempted to enter the war, if she saw an opportunity for territorial gain. Wedged in between Russia and Austria-Hungary as she was, Romania's contribution might just be enough to tip the balance in the East in either direction. Romania had a fairly large army, 23 divisions, over half a million strong, although the Romanian Army wasn't especially well trained or equipped. Still, beyond her military, Romania's entry into the war might give a political and diplomatic boost to whichever side she threw in with.

Since her trade with the Central Powers couldn't be blockaded, the Romanians were doing quite well selling their agricultural surpluses to Germany and Austria. Romania was also the only source of petroleum the Central Powers had access to, making her valuable to the war effort. But these commodities could be purchased just as easily, and more safely, from a neutral Romania. So that made Romania much more valuable to the Allies; moreover, the territorial acquisition Romania coveted the most was Hungarian Transylvania, meaning the Allies could offer the larger bribe.

Falkenhayn was fully aware of all this, and the Germans kept up pressure of their own on Romania. The German, Bulgarian, and Ottoman governments all privately warned Romania that an attack on Hungary would bring down the wrath of all of her alliance partners. Falkenhayn and his general staff believed this threat to be sufficient, and they were confidently assuring Kaiser Wilhelm that there was no danger of Romania siding with the Allies right up until August 28, the day Romania declared war on the Central Powers.

After the successes of Brusilov's offensive, the Romanians must have felt that if they didn't make their move to claim Transylvania right now, it might well end up under Russian control and out of Romanian reach forever. The Allies approved Romania's action, believing that the Romanian Army would be able to march right in and seize the region. Surely neither Germany nor Austria could spare enough soldiers to oppose them, with Brusilov's offensive and the Battle of the Somme still underway.

Initially, the Romanian offensive into Transylvania was a success. There was little resistance, and the ethnic Romanian majority in the region greeted Romanian soldiers with open arms. The first casualty of the Romanian offensive was Kaiser Wilhelm's mental health. When he first received the news, he descended into yet another of his dark moods, lamenting that the war was lost and all that remained was to ask the Allies for terms.

The second casualty was the career of Erich von Falkenhayn. A number of people in the German government and military were already of a mind that Falkenhayn had to go. Among them were the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg, and of course Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, who quarreled constantly with Falkenhayn. The combination of the failure of Falkenhayn's brain child, the Verdun offensive, the shock of a Russian offensive that Falkenhayn had assured everyone Russia was incapable of, and now Romania entering the war after Falkenhayn had assured everyone that was impossible too, well, it was just too much. The Kaiser was still leery of Hindenburg, far and away the most popular person in Germany at the moment, but facts are facts. In two years of fighting, it seemed that Hindenburg had been right about everything, and Falkenhayn wrong about everything, and even Kaisers have to bow to the inevitable.

But the entry of Romania into the war would not be the wild card everyone thought. The Allies had also miscalculated when they concluded that Germany would not be able to find the troops to oppose the Romanian invasion. The German military scraped together eight divisions and put them under the command of none other than General Erich von Falkenhayn. This command was given to Falkenhayn of course as a way to help him save face.

Falkenhayn's army met the Romanians in Transylvania. And don't forget August von Mackensen, who commands a mixed army of German, Austrian and Bulgarian units in the Balkans. This is the force that defeated Serbia and has since been occupying Serbia and keeping a wary eye on the Allied forces in Greece. Now Mackensen attacked Romania from the south.

Because of the peculiar geography of their nation, the hapless Romanian Army suddenly found itself fighting along a front line a thousand miles long. By the end of 1916, the Romanians had been forced out of Wallachia, the southern part of the country, and Falkenhayn had taken Bucharest.

Brusilov's offensive petered out after the Battle of Kowel failed to dislodge the Germans. The offensives of Verdun and the Somme were finally called off in November, with the onset of winter.

[music: *In Flanders Fields*]

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

1916 was the bloodiest year yet in a war remarkable for its bloodiness, and yet the first sun of 1917 would dawn over a Europe where the battle lines had not changed very much. It is really this year, 1916, that gives the Great War its terrible reputation for mass death, endless and futile.

The casualty figures are mind numbing. At Verdun, nearly 400,000 French soldiers dead, wounded, or missing, and a comparable number of Germans. Today at the site of Fort Douaumont stands an ossuary that contains the bones of some 130,000 soldiers from both sides who have never been identified, finding together in death the peace they could not find together in life. The Italian front saw about 300,000 Italian and 230,000 Austrian casualties.

On the Eastern Front, the Austrians took about a million casualties, including 400,000 of their soldiers taken prisoner. Germany took about 400,000 casualties, as did Romania. Russian casualties are hard to pin down, but it may have been as many as a million. Brusilov's offensive surprised everyone who thought Russia was beaten. This was the only front in Europe where the lines moved much. But the reality is that the soldiers Russia lost in the fighting were far more important to her than the ground gained. The Brusilov offensive is not so much Russia's comeback as it is her death rattle.

And then there's the Battle of the Somme, which cost the Germans 500,000 casualties and the French perhaps 200,000. The British lost over 450,000 by the time it was over for the winter lull. I say "British" as a catchall term; please take note that this number includes many thousands of Australians, South Africans, Irish, Canadians, New Zealanders, and Newfoundlanders.

The German Army has by now lost all its trained and experienced officers and men. The German Army was once regarded as the best in the world, but after two and a half years of attrition, it has been reduced to callow youths and middle-aged men, hastily conscripted and armed, and sent to the front with minimal training. In other words, it is now like every other army in Europe.

The French Army did not break as Falkenhayn had hoped. But it is close to the breaking point, in even worse shape than the Germans. The name "Verdun" will always be remembered in France with dread, for its terrible bloodshed. And not only in France.

The British Army is the one army that is still building up rather than wearing down. But that is no comfort to the British nation, which has seen the bloodiest single day of what will become the bloodiest war in British history. The name of "the Somme" will forever resonate through the English-speaking world with the same horror that Verdun evokes in France.

Britain's foreign allies and domestic government critics called on her to shoulder a greater share of the war burden. The casualty figures from the Somme are the awful confirmation that Britain is now bearing her full share of the Allied war effort.

The Canadian physician and poet, John McCrae, was one of those Canadian soldiers who had come to Flanders in early 1915 just in time to take part in the Second Battle of Ypres. He experienced the nightmare of the German gas attack and seventeen endless days of brutal fighting. McCrae lost a close friend in the fighting, named Alexis Helmer, and at his burial, McCrae observed how quickly the wild poppies, which are a weed in Flanders, grew up over the graves of the soldiers. This observation inspired the poem "In Flanders Fields," which I read to you a few moments ago.

The poem was published in *Punch* magazine in Britain in December 1915 and it soon became the most popular poem in the world. It was read and distributed throughout the English-speaking world, even in the United States, and was translated into many other languages. It was already well known by the time of the Somme. The symbolism of the poppy flowers springing up from

the graves with their blood-red petals, life emerging from death, was irresistible. Fields of poppy flowers have come to represent the bloodshed of the war, and in Britain and the Commonwealth, they still spring forth every year on Remembrance Day.

Douglas Haig was lionized after the war, but by the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, many would be deriding him as “The Butcher of the Somme.” In an episode of the 1989 BBC TV series *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the title character famously and cynically derides the Somme as a “gargantuan effort to move [Field Marshal Haig’s] drinks cabinet six inches closer to Berlin.”

Historians argue to this day whether and to what degree it is fair to blame British casualty figures at the Somme on Haig or whether it’s merely the British Army getting a taste of what the other major combatants have been experiencing for the past two years. The British Army learned valuable lessons from the fighting at the Somme, but whether it was necessary to pay such a high price for them remains debatable.

For all the bloodshed of 1916, the map of Europe has scarcely changed. The disconnect between the sacrifices made and the victories gained was readily apparent even at the time. As a result, the places where the fighting of 1916 really had an impact were not the battlefields of the war but the field headquarters and the capitals of the belligerents. Every nation concerned saw important changes in its government, in its military, or in both.

Józef Piłsudski’s Polish Legions fought well enough that by late 1916, he was able to demand of the Central Powers their consent to an independent Poland. On November 5, 1916, the two Kaisers, Wilhelm II and Franz Josef, signed a declaration pledging to create a Polish state after the war as a way of recruiting more Polish fighters. Their intentions were more along the line of a puppet state acting as a buffer between them and Russia, but the declaration itself was enough to spur the Italian government to call for an independent Poland in December. By early 1917, the Russian Emperor reiterated his endorsement of an independent Poland, and the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, took up the call for an independent Poland as part of his own peace plan.

The Act of November 5 would be one of Kaiser Franz Josef’s final acts as Emperor. Less than two weeks later, he would contract pneumonia and succumb on November 21, at the age of 86. His reign lasted for 67 years, 11 months, and 19 days, being one of the longest reigns in European history, an 18th-century sovereign utterly incapable of leading his 19th-century Empire into the twentieth century. His 29-year old great nephew would succeed him as Kaiser Charles, or Karl if you like, in Austria and King Karol IV in Hungary. The new Kaiser would take formal command of the Austrian military for himself, relieving Archduke Friedrich. He would also promote General Conrad to Field Marshal, but that was but the first step in a move to take responsibility away from him. Conrad will lose his chief-of-staff position on March 1, 1917. With the Austrian military on the brink of collapse, Kaiser Karl will shortly begin to put out secret peace feelers to the Allied powers.

In Germany, the duo of Hindenburg and Ludendorff has replaced Falkenhayn, and major changes in German strategy will soon follow. Italy had a Cabinet shake-up and got a new prime minister, as we have already seen. France had had its own Cabinet shakeup late in 1915, but after the bitter fighting at Verdun and the collapse of Romania, Prime Minister Aristide Briand had a Cabinet revolt on his hands. His war minister, General Gallieni, had had just about enough of the imperious commander-in-chief, General Joseph Joffre, who claimed absolute power to make all military decisions and dismissed the very concept of input from the civilian government of the Republic as arrant nonsense, not only unwise but a threat to the nation. Gallieni presented Briand with an ultimatum. Joffre had to be reined in and made to accept direction from the war minister, or else replaced, or else Gallieni would resign. Gallieni was the hero of Paris, the commander of the taxicab army that had saved the day at the Battle of the Marne, and his resignation would surely have brought down the government.

Briand had no choice. He rearranged his Cabinet and gently eased Joffre into a new position with far less power than Joffre at first realized. Joffre was also promoted to Marshal, the first officer to be raised to that rank in the history of the Third Republic, to soften the blow. For the new commander, the government would pass over Pétain, who might be regarded as the obvious choice, in favor of Robert Nivelle, the commander of the Second Army at Verdun. The Chamber of Deputies went into a rare secret session to discuss Joffre and his conduct of the war, and by the end of the year, Briand's changes would narrowly survive a confidence vote.

That's in contrast to the situation in the United Kingdom. The death of Lord Kitchener led to the popular and capable David Lloyd George, who was riding high on the success of the Ministry of Munitions becoming the new War Minister. Alas for him, he took over the ministry just in time to oversee the Battle of the Somme. Lloyd George was outraged at the bloodshed and came to believe that Haig and Joffre both needed to be replaced, but he found no support among his ministerial colleagues for the sacking of Haig, particularly not from the prime minister, Herbert Asquith.

As the bloodshed continued, Lloyd George became increasingly disillusioned with Asquith's laid-back leadership. What happened next is not entirely clear even today, but it seems Lloyd George and the Conservative Leader, Andrew Bonar Law cut a deal between themselves, agreeing that Asquith had to go. With the support of Lord Northcliffe, both privately and publicly in the editorials of his newspapers, Lloyd George and Bonar Law engineered a confrontation with Asquith over his leadership of the war effort. Asquith believed, no doubt correctly, that his government would not survive the resignations of the Conservative Leader and its most popular Liberal minister, so he submitted his own resignation to the King, no doubt thinking the King would soon be forced to turn back to Asquith and ask him to form a new government.

The King asked Bonar Law first, as was customary, but the Conservatives didn't have the votes without Asquith's support and Asquith declined Bonar Law's invitation to join his new

government. But David Lloyd George proved able and got the nod in December. About half of the Liberals in Parliament supported the new government along with Labour and the Tories, with Lloyd George as prime minister, but with more Conservative ministers in the new Cabinet. This was due in part to the fact that most of the Liberal ministers in the previous Cabinet were loyal to Asquith and would refuse to participate in the new government. This included Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, who, as you know, has held that post roughly since the late Paleozoic Era. He will be succeeded by Arthur Balfour, the last Tory Prime Minister.

The faction of the Liberal Party still loyal to Asquith would become the new Opposition for the rest of the war, and Asquith would serve as its Leader. The new PM had had to promise not to sack Douglas Haig as a condition of getting that Conservative support, but he will definitely be looking for ways to change how the war is being conducted.

As for Russia, well, the Emperor is conducting the war from the front. He left the Empress in charge of the nation's domestic affairs in Petrograd. Her rule has been erratic and unpopular. The only figure she really trusts is the religious mystic, Grigori Rasputin. On December 30, 1916, a group of aristocratic conspirators will murder Rasputin, a desperate deed done in the hope that, with his malevolent influence gone, the Imperial couple would come to their senses before it was too late. Alas for them, it already is.

And so we finish 1916 and move on to 1917. The map of Europe looks the same. But everything else has changed.

We'll have to stop there for today. As always, thank you for listening. I'd like to thank Markus for making a donation, and a thank you to Marcus for becoming a patron of the podcast. And just for the record, no, they are not the same person, and no, neither one of them is me. If you have a few bucks to spare, I invite you to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, even if your name *isn't* Marcus. Just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

I'm going to take the next week off for research work, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* for episode 125, which seems like a nice number to try something different. Listener Brent volunteered to interview me. He and I thought that a lot of you might have questions about me and about the podcast, so he's acting as a sort of listener surrogate to ask some of those questions you may have been wondering about. So if you have questions, listen to the interview and hopefully I will be answering them. That's in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I said that John McCrae was the most popular poet of the era, and so he was. I should also mention Rupert Brooke, the soldier-poet who died at Gallipoli, author of those well-known lines: "If I should die think only this of me:/That there's some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England."

But after the war ended, and in the decades of disillusionment that followed, poetry such as McCrae's or Brooke's seemed to many to romanticize the war at the expense of confronting its horrific bloodshed. By the latter part of the twentieth century, the first name most English speakers would think of in connection with the poetry of the Great War would be neither McCrae nor Brooke but a different soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen, whose poem "Anthem For Doomed Youth" I read from at the top of the episode.

In 1962, the English composer Benjamin Britten would incorporate the text of nine of Owen's war poems into a grand musical setting of a requiem mass, which he called *War Requiem*. The work was first performed at the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, built to replace the previous 600-year old building that was destroyed by German bombs in the Second World War.

Owen's war poems are quite different from McCrae's or Brooke's. They are stark and bitter, capturing the waste and futility of the Great War in a way that speaks far more eloquently to us today than it did to his contemporaries. "My subject is War," he said of his poems, "and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." Sadly, most of his poems were published posthumously; Owen was killed in action on November 4, 1918, exactly one week before the fighting ended on the Western Front. His parents received the telegram informing them of their son's death at the very moment that church bells were pealing across England in celebration of the Armistice.

[music: Closing War Theme]