

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 149

### “Passchendaele”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Cabinet must regard themselves as trustees for the fine fellows that constitute our army. They are willing to face any dangers, and they do so without complaint, but they trust to the leaders of the nation to see that their lives are not needlessly thrown away, and that they are not sacrificed on mere gambles which are resorted to merely because those who are directing the War can think of nothing better to do with the men under their command. It is therefore imperative that before we embark on a gigantic attack which must necessarily entail the loss of scores of thousands of valuable lives, and produce that sense of discouragement which might very well rush nations into premature peace, that we should feel a fair confidence that such an attack has a reasonable chance of succeeding. A mere gamble would be both a folly and a crime.

David Lloyd George. *War Memoirs*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 149. Passchendaele.

By mid-1917, the situation across Europe was dire. The Central Powers were starving, but so was Russia. Strikes and anti-war protests called into question Italy's commitment to the war, and the exhausted and mutinous French Army was crouched into a defensive stance for the foreseeable future.

Germany could be beaten, but only if the Allies could keep up the pressure. But at just this moment, it isn't clear that they can. The Great War may simply sputter into a stalemate of exhaustion unless one of the Allied powers steps up. And the only Allied nation with the will and the resources is Britain.

Or so it seemed to the commander of the British Expeditionary Force, the now-Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. But after last year's Battle of the Somme, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had lost faith in Haig. Lloyd George had been appalled by the casualties that offensive created and feared that if Haig had his way, 1917 would see a repeat of the disaster.

Unfortunately for Lloyd George, Haig still held the confidence of the Conservatives in his government, and with the Liberal Party divided, Lloyd George needed that Conservative support. As you know, he finagled an arrangement that effectively subordinated Haig to the French commander-in-chief, Robert Nivelle. But the Conservatives were unhappy with that, and so was the King, who privately chided Lloyd George for putting the BEF under French command.

Whatever hope Lloyd George had of resisting this pressure to take Haig off the French leash vanished after the failure of the Nivelle Offensive. The French were taking a defensive posture now under General Pétain, choosing to wait until their crumbling army rested and recovered and, not incidentally, awaiting the arrival of more. More tanks, more Tommies, more Americans. Pétain and the French appear to have made the calculation that time was on their side, and therefore it was prudent to let the clock run out for a while. And you know, they might be right about that.

The British Expeditionary Force, or BEF, under the command of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, had also participated in the Nivelle Offensive. The British portion of the offensive is usually called the Battle of Arras. It put Haig in a difficult position. It was supposed to be a diversionary attack, meant to attract German reserve troops away from the real attack farther south, and the combined one-two punch was supposed to break the German line finally, but it was the French who broke first, forcing Haig to keep up the pressure on his front, in order to keep German pressure off the French. But what Haig was really interested in was his own pet project, an advance along the North Sea coast into Flanders, meant to seize the Belgian coastline all the way to the Netherlands border and thus deny the German Navy the use of the facilities to support the ongoing U-boat offensive.

As you'll recall, the British had a good first day on this offensive, making impressive advances, at least by Great War standards, impressive enough to spoil Erich Ludendorff's birthday party, episode 140, including the Canadian Corps' brilliant assault on Vimy Ridge. But after the initial shock, the Germans put their new elastic defense doctrine to good use, holding the British from any further gains. Haig fought on for six weeks, partly just to keep the pressure off the French, but finally abandoned the offensive in mid-May. British casualties ran upward of 150,000, and if you work out the average number of casualties per day of fighting, the Battle of Arras is by that standard the bloodiest fighting the British have seen yet, bloodier even than last year's famously bloody Battle of the Somme.

Aerial combat was equally bloody. Royal Flying Corps reconnaissance was by now an essential part of British offensive doctrine, but the RFC flew planes that were still inferior to the German

Fokker Albatros and the pilots were badly inexperienced. Manfred von Richthofen and his Jasta 11 were defending the German lines. This was the “Bloody April” of von Richthofen’s career. In the first week of the battle, the RFC lost 75 airplanes to enemy action and a further 56 to crashes attributed to lack of experience on the part of the pilots.

But with the conclusion of the Battle of Arras, Haig was ready to begin planning his pet offensive in Flanders. One of his first reorganization measures was to dismiss the commander of the British Third Army, General Edmund Allenby. Allenby had been fighting in France since the BEF first arrived in the dark days of August 1914. He had begun as commander of the BEF’s sole cavalry division and had risen through the ranks to corps commander and finally army commander. Allenby regarded his sacking as a “badge of failure.”

He did not know that in London, the British War Cabinet was divided over what step to take next. Everyone knew that in exchange for submitting to French direction during the Nivelle Offensive, Haig was all but promised the opportunity to try out his own Flanders offensive in the summer. But not everyone was happy with that plan. The Tories in the Cabinet mostly backed Haig but there were those who had lost faith in him, including the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. This latter group, the so-called “Easterners,” was convinced that three years of stalemate on the Western Front were proof that the war would never be decided there. They advocated instead that Britain use its naval supremacy and the strategic flexibility that conferred to attack the Central Powers elsewhere, especially the Ottoman Empire, widely viewed on the Allied side as the weakest and most brittle of the Central Powers.

Now as you are well aware, this had already been tried twice. There was the 1915 invasion at Gallipoli, episode 109, and the 1916 offensive into Mesopotamia, episode 120. Both of these offensives ended in embarrassing British defeats after the Turkish Army proved far less brittle than it was supposed to be. Nevertheless, just as the Westerners kept insisting that the next Western front offensive would be different from any of the previous ones, and this time we really are going to drive the Germans out of France, the Easterners kept insisting that the next Middle Eastern offensive would be different from any of the previous ones, and this time we really are going to drive the Turks out of Arabia.

I don’t know; maybe it was something in the water. But by May of 1917, the new British offensive in Mesopotamia had finally taken Baghdad, avenging the embarrassment of 1916. Now the Easterners were eyeing the Egyptian front, which was stalemated in southern Palestine. Lloyd George wanted to see the British advance northward to take Jerusalem and drive the Turks out of the region. He appointed Allenby to the command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. That appointment took Allenby by surprise. He was a Westerner himself in his own strategic thinking and thought at first this must be some kind of joke.

But I'll leave the stories of the Mesopotamian and Palestinian campaigns for a future episode. Palestinian offensive or no Palestinian offensive, Haig is going to have his Flanders offensive back on the Western Front, so let's turn our attention there.

[music: Holst, *Second Suite for Military Band*]

Haig intended to begin his offensive at the Belgian town that its inhabitants call Iper, or Ypres, if you must, or Wipers, if you are a British Tommy. It's already been the site of two major battles, the First and Second Battles of Ypres, which you already know all about, including that this is the first place where poison gas was used in combat. It is the only Belgian town of any size under Allied control, but it juts forward as a British salient into German territory, making it a tempting target for the Germans. Also, the Germans hold higher ground overlooking the town to the east and especially to the south, so the town has been pummeled by German artillery for nearly three years now, and by summer of 1917, there's actually very little left of it.

Now, Haig intends his offensive to drive to the north and east, but this elevated German position just to the south of Iper—or Ypres or Wipers, come on people, cut me some slack here—this elevated German position just to the south of the starting point of Haig's offensive posed a clear danger to its success. Large numbers of British soldiers and supplies could be expected to pass through here after the offensive got going, and the German position on the ridge was like a knife at the jugular of the coming offensive.

So the first step would necessarily be to seize the knife. This operation was fought in the second week in June 1917, and is known as the Battle of Messines, after the name of a small village atop the ridge. Planning for this assault was meticulous, meticulous now being a key element of British strategy. Aerial reconnaissance was employed to develop thorough and detailed maps of the region, which in turn were used to construct a large 3-D model of the ridge. The British developed improved spotting techniques that allowed for more precise artillery fire and more complete and accurate spotting of German artillery. Seventy-two of the latest British Mark IV tanks were made available, and assaulting units were run through training simulations so everyone knew what was expected of them.

But the Battle of Messines is usually remembered for its mines. Royal Engineers from Britain and the Dominions dug tunnels under the German positions. We've seen the British use this tactic before, but never as thoroughly as at Messines. Some of these tunnels ran deeper than a hundred feet underground and across distances exceeding three miles to reach the German positions. On the morning of June 7, over 400 tons of explosives laid in nineteen different mines were detonated. As many as 10,000 German soldiers were killed in those initial blasts. The dazed survivors dug themselves out of the wreckage to discover that they were no longer in trenches, but merely isolated bunkers surrounded by corpses and piles of debris. The mine blasts that opened the Battle of Messines were collectively not so large as the Halifax Explosion that will

take place in Nova Scotia this coming December, but they have the distinction of being the most deadly explosions in human history, until the atomic bomb is first used in warfare.

In a matter of days, British forces secured the ridge. It was unquestionably a British operational victory. The Germans had been pushed back, off a ridge they had held since the Race to the Sea back in 1914, but how much it really matters comes down to the second and larger phase of Haig's offensive, which is coming up next. It is sometimes called the Third Battle of Ypres, and it will dwarf the other two, but I prefer to use its other name, the Battle of Passchendaele, after a village that lies, like Messines, atop a ridge, this one about eight miles to the northeast.

This was to be Haig slipping the French leash and getting his offensive at long last. Of course, last year's Battle of the Somme had been Haig's offensive, too. The Easterners, like David Lloyd George, thought this year's offensive sounded too much like the Battle of the Somme, part two, but Haig was insistent that this year was going to be different. This year's offensive was *not* going to be like the Battle of the Somme.

All right then, Field Marshal, tell us why this offensive is not going to be like the Battle of the Somme. Well, it's not going to be like the Battle of the Somme for six reasons.

First, the BEF, the British Expeditionary Force, is larger than ever. In 1914 and 1915, the BEF was one army, no more than a support force for the French. In 1916, at the Battle of the Somme, the BEF was three armies. Today, the BEF consists of five armies and actually now has numerical superiority over the Germans opposing it, albeit by a small margin. Second, and unlike 1916, when the new armies consisted of untested recruits facing their first real combat, the 1917 British Army is far more experienced. British officers in particular are better trained and capable of making decisions on the spot, allowing greater tactical flexibility, which is now a key component of British combat doctrine. Third, British artillery and aerial reconnaissance are also better than ever, and so are the tanks.

Fourth and most important of all, according to Haig, was that intelligence was suggesting the German defenses were growing thin and brittle. Replacements were in short supply. Germany has been bleeding for three years now, while the British Army is stronger than ever. You'll recall this was more or less Lord Kitchener's idea from the beginning. Haig predicted that one more full-blown offensive in the West would shatter the German line at long last and bring the war to an end by the end of 1917. And even if that proved too optimistic, and the Germans made it to the end of 1917 with their army still intact, it would certainly shatter by the 1918 offensive.

Fifth, the Russians were at this time preparing for the Kerensky offensive, to begin on July 1. The French Army was incapable of more than nuisance attacks on the Germans, so either Britain goes on the offensive at the same time, or it sits back and lets the shaky fledgling Russian Provisional Government bear the burden of the war alone.

Sixth, there was the matter of those U-boats, using the port facilities on the Belgian coast. In late June, when these questions were being debated, the German U-boat campaign was in full swing and the Navy was alarmed. Admiral Jellicoe, now the First Sea Lord, enthusiastically endorsed Haig's ambition to clear the Germans from the Belgian coast.

Field Marshal Haig spent two days in London, discussing and debating his plan with members of the Cabinet, including Lloyd George, who remained unconvinced and peppered Haig with sharp questions but could not shake his arguments. Lloyd George expressed doubt as to how much of an offensive the Russians were truly capable of, doubts that a few weeks from now will sound prescient. He wondered whether the Germans really were in as bad a shape as Haig insisted. He even suggested that British troops might be more usefully employed on the Italian front, and that a joint Italian-British offensive there might knock the Austrians out of the war.

It's a little puzzling why a political leader as adept at coalition-building as Lloyd George would find himself unable to convince either Haig or his Cabinet colleagues to back off from this offensive. In the end, it likely comes down to Haig's utter conviction that the offensive would succeed against Lloyd George's understandable reluctance as a civilian to overrule the military judgment of a distinguished soldier like Haig.

And so the offensive began, though it began late, due to the controversy and organizational and logistical problems. This was an enormous undertaking. Last year's Battle of the Somme had begun with an artillery bombardment of one million shells. This year's offensive will begin with four million.

Those delays meant that the offensive came too late to do much to aid the Russian Kerensky Offensive, which by this time had already failed. Still, Haig pressed on with his offensive, the offensive that was going to be not at all like the Somme offensive for so very many reasons.

And yeah, it turned out to be much like the Somme offensive. Only shorter, because it got a later start. Thankfully, the casualty figures were significantly lower, though still high enough. And whereas the Battle of the Somme had lasted twenty weeks, Haig called off this offensive after fourteen and a half, on November 10, just after the battered Canadian Corps staggered into the smoldering pile of rubble that had once been the village of Passchendaele, which lay, as I already said, about eight miles from where they had started. Part of the reason why the offensive had to be called off was the Caporetto Offensive in Italy and the need to divert British and French forces to help the Italians stabilize their line.

[music: Holst, *Second Suite for Military Band*]

So what went wrong? Some of the problems are familiar ones, if you've been following along from the beginning of the war. Haig and his subordinate commanders weren't entirely in agreement on objectives. Some still advocated "bite and hold" tactics, where the British simply seize a few miles of enemy territory and then hunker down to consolidate their gain. Haig was

selling his offensive on the one hand as an attack on the U-boat bases along the Belgian coast and on the other hand as a grand offensive that would break the German line, but those are two different statements of objective and Haig himself never seemed to be sure what the goal was.

Also, and again, coastal Flanders is low, flat terrain with poor drainage and prone to flooding, making it a less than ideal as a site for an offensive. Also you can't blame Haig for this, but August of 1917 happened to be the rainiest August in Flanders in thirty years. The massive artillery bombardments eradicated what drainage channels there were, and the landscape became a sea of mud, pockmarked by craters full of stagnant water. Mud and wet and rain are conditions that generally favor defenders, and this mud was something remarkable. The ground was so wet and the mud so deep that soldiers drowned in it.

This wasn't good terrain for trenches, either, but the Germans had prepared for that by constructing what British soldiers are only now beginning to call "pillboxes," which are small, above-ground concrete bunkers allowing a few soldiers a safe location from which to fire on an advancing enemy. Something like the blockhouses the British built in South Africa during the Boer War. The Germans sited their pillboxes well, with overlapping fields of fire, and often constructed them inside ruined buildings as a form of camouflage.

By the way, the origin of the nickname "pillbox" for this sort of bunker is in dispute. It is tempting to conclude that the name was inspired by the little tin boxes that pills were sold in during this period, but I think a more persuasive etymology is that it comes from "pillar box," those distinctive funky red mailboxes found in Britain. The slits the soldiers fire through do look a lot like the letter slots in a pillar box.

The lesson of Passchendaele is that weeks of careful planning and profligate expenditures of ammunition and tanks could give you a bite out of the enemy line. But the Germans know how to bite back, and in any case it was going to take more than a few bites to drive the Germans out of France, and the Allies had yet to unlock the secret of how to unleash the kind of broad and continuous offensive it would take to drive Germany out of occupied France and Belgium.

David Lloyd George would later deride the Battle of Passchendaele as "senseless" and "one of the greatest disasters of the war." It's hard to see what was gained. Haig argued that wavering France and Russia needed to see a British victory to keep them in the fight. But it's not like they got one. Indeed, the British got a minor mutiny at their coastal depot near the French village of Etaples. New soldiers arriving from Britain underwent a grueling two-week training course there before proceeding to the front, sufficiently grueling to provoke a brief outbreak of strikes and demonstrations.

Passchendaele would not be the final battle of 1917. There would be one more battle between British and German forces, farther south in what would be called the Battle of Cambrai. The idea here was to capture the French town of Cambrai, which the Germans were using as a supply depot for their Hindenburg Line defenses. This was a bit of an experiment; it involved the

massed use of tanks, over 400 altogether, of the latest design, the Mark IV. The British were also able to move hundreds of artillery guns to this sector of the front undetected and open accurate fire at once. This latter innovation was a result of three years of careful mapping of the Western Front and improved methods of calibrating artillery. Previously, artillery had to begin firing and then observe where the shells fell and make corrections before hitting the target. This inevitably alerted the enemy that an artillery attack was coming. But now artillery could “shoot off the map” as the British put it, and the shells would strike the intended target immediately, without warning.

This ability to surprise the enemy with sudden mass tank and artillery attacks, along with improved coordination between artillery and tanks and the infantry were initially very successful. The British advanced several miles in a week and were threatening Cambrai. But—stop me if you’ve heard this one—although the initial British advance was successful, it soon sputtered to a halt in another version of a story by now all too familiar to you. Now it was the Germans’ turn, and they had a few tricks up their own sleeves, including the use of *Stoßtruppen*, or stormtroopers with their ever more refined infiltration tactics, combined with improved artillery accuracy, tricks learned on the Eastern Front, which they used to push the British back and essentially erase all the gains.

Not much was accomplished in the Battle of Cambrai, but for both the British and the Germans, it pointed the way to the future. For the British, precision artillery fire plus tanks plus improved tactics for coordinating both with the infantry—what will soon be called “combined arms”—leads the way into how future wars will be fought. But for now, the Germans have more reason for hope. Their counterattack at Cambrai proved that tanks are not invincible, that artillery is still the queen of the battlefield, and that highly trained soldiers, which Germany excels at producing, can still make the difference. British tactics may lead the way into future wars, but German tactics lead the way into 1918, and the coming *final* final offensive.

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d also like to thank Barry for his donation and thank you, Matthew, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Barry and Matthew help keep the words going and the bits flowing, so if you’d like to help out, visit the website at [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on Help the Podcast. You can also help the podcast by tweeting and sharing links to the show or with a rating and review at the iTunes store.

I’m going to be taking next week off for reading and research, because I’m still not caught up, and yes, I know I have been in this state called “not caught up” for more than a year now, but I still have hopes that one day I will reach this increasingly theoretical state that I like to call “caught up.” In the meantime, if you miss the sound of my voice, in lieu of an episode next week, I’m going to post a video of a presentation I gave at last year’s Mythmoot conference, where I did a reading from my short story, “The Boy Who Didn’t Know How to Recognize a



King,” and talked about how the story was written, so you can check that out if you’re interested. I’ll also include a link to the story itself, if you’d like to read the rest of it.

And I hope you’ll all join me in two weeks’ time here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up a story thread I left hanging today, about that Central Powers offensive in the Alps. Caporetto, in two weeks’ time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The British offensive did succeed in bleeding the German front line, enough to cause some alarm in the German command, although it bled the BEF just as well.

Casualty figures for the Battle of Passchendaele are surprisingly hard to come by. The numbers range all over the place, but the best estimates are around 250,000 for the British, while German numbers are comparable, perhaps somewhat greater.

But while the Germans had their armies on the Eastern Front, which shortly will no longer be needed after Germany and Russia make peace and which will afterward be available for duty on the Western Front, the British and French, by contrast, don’t have a whole other army to bring to bear. Unless of course, you count the Americans.

[music: Closing War Theme]