

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 161

“Kaiserschlacht”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

By March 20, 1918, all the preparations were in place. Germany was about to begin its final offensive in the West. Erich Ludendorff had already been asked by one of his commanders what would happen if it failed. Ludendorff told him, “In that case, Germany must go under.”

But on that date, the day before the offensive, Ludendorff was nervous but hopeful. He had taken to carrying around a little red Moravian prayer book, which he consulted like an oracle, and today he was reading aloud to everyone tomorrow’s prayer text: “This is the day of the chosen people.” He followed up the reading with a question: “Can we fail therefore to have confidence?”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 161. *Kaiserschlacht*.

Even before the October Revolution, the German high command realized that Russia was almost finished and that the end was just a matter of time, and had already begun the first redeployments of soldiers from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. In the end, more than half the German soldiers on the Eastern Front would be forced to remain there, garrisoning Germany’s enormous territorial gains in the East.

These garrison soldiers tended to be older, less fit, middle-aged men. They also tended to be resentful of their assignments, and given the large swaths of land they were supposed to be controlling, many of them were left to fend for themselves in small, lonely outposts where morale was low and where they were marinating in Bolshevik propaganda.

The rest of the Eastern forces, about three-quarters of a million experienced fighters, were now available for action on another front. But what to do with them?

The new German foreign secretary, Richard von Kühlmann, advocated negotiation. He was an Anglophile who believed that Britain could be brought to the negotiating table if only Germany would renounce its post-war claims on Belgium. Hindenburg and Ludendorff wouldn't hear of it. But here's the thing. Constitutionally speaking, the authority of military commanders is limited to, you know, commanding the military. It is the Chancellor and the Foreign Office who make foreign policy decisions. But Imperial Germany is not operating by the book anymore. Part of the reason for this is the new Chancellor, Georg Michaelis, who made no attempt to assert civilian authority against the military duo, even though the Reichstag had passed that resolution back in July 1917 that called for peace without annexations or indemnities.

And Hindenburg and Ludendorff were not content merely to usurp the responsibilities of the Foreign Office. The second half of 1917 saw them again assert sweeping military authority over civilian affairs in Germany. Civilian morale was low, they complained, and it was impairing the German war effort. While they acknowledged that food shortages and other hardships endured by German civilians played a role, they principally blamed what they called "the deliberate agitation of certain revolutionary elements who are unscrupulously exploiting these hardships to further their political ends and are endeavoring to provoke discontent [and] anti-war feeling in every possible way." In other words, the morale problems weren't rooted in the 1,500-calorie-per-day German diet plan or in the millions of German casualties in a war that seemed to be going nowhere. No, no, the real problem was socialism.

Chancellor Michaelis didn't take long to realize the contradictions between what the Reichstag was calling for and what the military was demanding, and so...he resigned, less than four months after he was appointed. His replacement would be a Bavarian political figure, Georg von Hertling. You may recognize this name; he's the guy who turned down the job of Chancellor once before, but accepted it this time in the wake of Michaelis's resignation. At 74 years of age and a staunch conservative, von Hertling is hardly going to be any more of a counterweight against the military leadership than Michaelis was. He was a "safe" choice, a respected elder statesman who could be counted upon not to rock the boat.

And just now the military was flooding German streets with patriotic posters, German theatres with patriotic plays and speeches, and German libraries with pro-war propaganda, all to get out the message that only military victory could save the Empire, and only Hindenburg could deliver a military victory. Soldiers were subjected to mandatory propaganda lectures in which they were told that the war was the fault of greedy Allied nations that envied German greatness, that a negotiated peace would lead to Germany's annihilation, and that the Reichstag peace resolution was therefore foolhardy, if not treasonous. The soldiers were encouraged to pass these insights along to their friends and families as well as reassure them that Germany would triumph on the battlefield.

These propaganda efforts did little to convince soldiers or civilians. Labor unrest was growing, and strikes becoming more common, hundreds of them in 1917, many in war-critical industries.

Many in the Reichstag and elsewhere were denouncing the war and demanding that Germany seek peace now. The military fought back with its propaganda efforts and advocated prosecuting striking workers for treason.

The Allies didn't seem to be in any mood for conciliation. David Lloyd George in Britain continued to insist that talks could only come after victory, and even US President Woodrow Wilson, the avatar of peace for so many years, now declared that America would not negotiate with "the bloody and inhuman tyranny of the Kaiser's government."

Allow me to translate that for you: if the German people want to talk peace, the first step they need to take is to depose Kaiser Wilhelm.

Unthinkable to the duo. Certainly unthinkable to the Kaiser. And so, on we go to 1918 and return to the question, what to do with the soldiers newly available thanks to the end of the war on the Eastern Front?

To Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the answer was obvious. They must go to the Western Front. The addition of these soldiers would give Germany numerical superiority on the Western Front for the first time since 1914, and the opportunity to finish now what should have been finished then.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, among others, opposed sending them west. He argued they would do more good in the Balkans, where they could push the Allies out of Albania and Salonika and occupy Greece. Or perhaps in Italy, where they could finish the work begun at the Battle of Caporetto and force Italy out of the war.

But the duo would not budge. There is a certain irony in Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's strategy. For two years, they had pushed back against Falkenhayn when *he* said that the Western Front would be the decisive front. But now that there was no Eastern Front any longer, they were convinced the final showdown would be in the West. The U-boat campaign had not driven Britain to starvation as had been hoped, but perhaps the combination of that campaign plus a German offensive in the West would break the Allies at last.

This was a questionable proposition at best. Three years of terrible experience on the Western Front had demonstrated that outnumbered German forces were able to hold the line against wave after wave of Allied offensives. Would a German offensive, even against outnumbered Allied forces end any differently?

For the Allies were learning, adapting, and growing ever more formidable. The British offensives in 1917 hadn't broken the German line or gained significant new territory, but what they had done was demonstrated that the British Army had the offensive capability to blast its way right through the Hindenburg Line defenses upon which Erich Ludendorff had been pinning his hopes. The French Army under the command of Philippe Pétain had ended its reliance on bold attacks

backed up with *élan*. Now they were employing small-scale attacks aimed at bloodying the Germans while minimizing French casualties. Pétain's new approach was all too effective.

And then there were the Americans. Just a few months ago, Admiral von Holtzendorff had boasted to the Kaiser that not a single American soldier would set foot in Europe. But now, at the beginning of 1918, not a single American soldier, but a hundred thousand of them were deployed in France, with more arriving every month, and in the end, despite the much-feared U-boat menace, not a single American soldier would be killed in transit to Europe over the entire war.

If it were not for the Americans, if the war came down to Britain, France, and Italy against Germany, with whatever help she might still gain from her own depleted allies, Germany might possibly—possibly—hunker down on the Western Front and win a war of attrition. But in fact, the British have been getting better and better at modern offensive warfare. The Somme was a failure. Passchendaele put a scare into the Germans, despite Ludendorff's brand new and carefully devised defensive line. Who knew what might happen in the next British offensive?

Now add in the Americans, who expect to have two million soldiers in France by the end of 1918, and the situation becomes impossible. Time is not on the German side.

But in the first half of 1918 at least, Germany can expect numerical superiority, and so this became the plan. A knockout blow in the West, designed to bring Britain and France to their knees before too many Americans arrive and tip the balance irrevocably toward the Allies. The Germans called it *Die Kaiserschlacht*, the Imperial battle.

But where to attack?

[music: Wagner, "Fantasie" from Siegfried]

November 11, 1917 is, ironically, one year to the day before the armistice on the Western Front, although of course none of our protagonists knows this. On this day, Hindenburg and Ludendorff met with their top commanders in the town of Mons in Belgium, near the border with France. In August 1914, this had been the site of the first battle between the German and British armies (episode 86) and a year from now, it will be the site of the last major engagement between the German and British armies when the Canadian Corps retakes the town just before the armistice. I gotta tell you, the irony fairy is working overtime here.

Anyway, there were three possible offensive options. The first was to attack in the north, in Belgium, in an assault aimed at the British. Crown Prince Rupprecht supported this plan which, not coincidentally, would make his army group the leader. The second option was to attack in the south, an assault aimed at the French. Take another crack at the salient at Verdun, maybe this time we can break the French Army. Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Kaiser's eldest son and heir, supported this plan, which, not coincidentally, would make his army group the leader.

Ludendorff didn't like that second plan. The French had had too much time since the Nivelle Offensive to rest and pull their tired army back together. The British were still licking their wounds from Passchendaele, but Flanders was too low and too wet. Perhaps later in the year, but not the first thing in the spring. This possible future Flanders offensive would be codenamed "George," and stuck into a filing cabinet for future reference.

That left the third option, an attack in the middle, near the boundary between the French and British armies, and this is the plan, codenamed "Operation Michael," that Ludendorff chose. Germany would make use of her numerical superiority and her improved offensive tactics to push the Allies back. The Germans had learned from the Allies the hurricane barrage and the creeping barrage. Over the winter of 1917-18, newly arriving units from the East were put through live fire training exercises to master these new tactics. The creeping barrage in particular is a tricky one, since it requires soldiers to advance right into positions that are currently being shelled by their own artillery. "Don't worry, guys, by the time you get there, they'll have moved on." That must take some convincing.

And then there were the *Stoßtruppen*, the shock troops or stormtroopers, Germany's secret weapon to break the trench deadlock. The German military has been developing this tactic for years now, and getting better and better at it. To review, stormtroopers infiltrate enemy defensive lines, bypassing the enemy's strongest defenses and slipping into rear areas. Then the regular infantry attack from the front, while at the same time the stormtroopers in the rear do their best to disrupt the defender's operations. They cut communication lines, interfere with the movement of soldiers and supplies and generally sow chaos that will diminish the ability of the enemy soldiers in those strong defensive positions to resist the infantry.

The big drawback to stormtroopers is that not every soldier is cut out to be a stormtrooper. It requires a lot of intensive training to get stormtrooper units. And since stormtroopers do dangerous work, sneaking around behind enemy lines and placing themselves in vulnerable positions, commanders usually find that after a big assault involving stormtroopers, most of the stormtroopers don't come back and you have to recruit and train a whole new class for the next offensive. This is not an easy sell when you're looking for new recruits.

Prince Rupprecht in particular was distinctly pessimistic about this new offensive. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had never overseen an offensive in the West. All their experience was against Russians. Rupprecht believed the duo didn't appreciate the challenge of the high-density, high-tech combat in the West and were underestimating the French and the British.

He did his best to warn off the German military, even using his royal status to go over Hindenburg's head and communicate directly with the Kaiser. He had looked over the soldiers coming in from the East and saw they were old, underfed, inadequately equipped, arriving on trains with broken windows and no heat in the dead of winter, long overdue for furloughs to visit their families, and arriving to be told that their furloughs were to be postponed yet again and they

were to report for offensive combat training. These are not the ingredients of victory, but of revolution.

And let us not forget that these Eastern Front veterans all witnessed the Russian Army revolt, sue for peace, and then get to go home. All the creeping barrage training in the world is not going to get them to unsee that.

The German military was short on horses and short on fodder to feed them. What horses they did have were old, tired, and malnourished. You may be thinking, “Still with the horses?” and the answer is yes. The German military has been trying to build up its inventory of lorries—I mean, *trucks*—to move soldiers and supplies about, but they don’t have nearly enough of them, and they are also short on petrol—I mean, *gasoline*—to fuel them. The Germans hoped that peace with Russia would make Russian petroleum available for their war effort, but to make a long story short, they never were able to get enough of it to make that work. At least not in the time Germany has left. Germany was also short on rubber—I mean oh, right, Americans call it “rubber,” too. Anyway, German trucks had iron wheels, which tore up the roads and, well, can you imagine riding on dirt roads or cross country in the back of a truck with iron wheels? Not only is the experience intensely unpleasant, it quickly becomes fatiguing and can lead to a number of health problems like back pain, high blood pressure, kidney damage, and erectile dysfunction. Ouch.

And while the Germans have numerical superiority, the Allies still have more artillery guns, more airplanes, and way more tanks.

Most important of all, just what is this initial blow to the Allied front line supposed to accomplish, exactly? Prince Rupprecht put this very question to Ludendorff and was told, “We make a hole [in the line] and the rest will take care of itself.” Not very inspiring, although Ludendorff insisted it had always worked for them in the East.

[music: Wagner, “Fantasie” from Siegfried]

Operation Michael began at 4:40 AM on March 21, 1918 with a massive artillery attack. For the past three years, the Germans on the Western Front had mostly been on the receiving end of this kind of bombardment. Now, with the benefit of a concentration of guns and ammunition redeployed from the East, it was their turn. The artillery bombardment was well planned. It targeted British headquarters, communications lines and artillery with high explosives and gas that disrupted British positions. German airpower, previously used mostly for reconnaissance and anti-aircraft combat, now strafed ground positions and dropped explosive bombs, the beginning of a new chapter in the history of aerial warfare.

The gas attacks were particularly insidious. Building on years of experience, the Germans began with irritants, chemicals that were not lethal, but caused lung irritation and vomiting, which induced the British soldiers to pull off their ungainly and uncomfortable gas masks. Then came

phosgene, the most lethal gas in the German arsenal, and after that, mustard gas, in many ways the worst of all. The Germans had only introduced mustard gas a few months ago. It was less lethal than phosgene, but it caused excruciatingly painful chemical burns wherever it struck, and it was a heavy, oily substance. Once it settled onto buildings, equipment, even the ground itself, it might remain active for days, rendering a trench or an artillery position uninhabitable. Doctors and nurses tending victims of mustard gas attacks could and sometimes did become victims themselves if they allowed the soldier or his clothing merely to touch their own bare skin.

The British had reorganized their defenses over the winter of 1917-18. They'd adopted the German doctrine of defense in depth, wherein the front line is only thinly defended and any enemy advance is allowed forward into what the British called the "battle zone," where they would be subjected to artillery and machine gun fire from carefully chosen strong points with overlapping fields of fire. Only on this particular day, the Germans were aided by an unusually heavy fog that reduced visibility to a minimum and neutralized the defensive fire.

Also, the British Expeditionary Force were short on personnel. The losses from 1917 hadn't fully been replaced. David Lloyd George's "Eastern" strategy was drawing units away from the Western Front to Italy and Greece and Palestine and Mesopotamia, over the objections of Field Marshal Haig. Recruits were needed for the Royal Navy and the Royal Flying Corps, which by the way is about to be reorganized into the Royal Air Force, the first in the world to be established as an independent fighting force separate from the Army and Navy. The demand for shipbuilding was huge, owing to the losses from German U-boats, and of course British manufacturing needed workers to produce munitions. So for a variety of reasons, the BEF of 1918 was scarcely larger than the BEF of 1917. And by some measures, it was smaller.

Complicating the personnel shortage, Lloyd George's government had agreed to a French request for the British to take over a greater share of the Western Front. At the end of 1917, the French held 350 miles of front line to the British 100, even though the BEF is now over 40% of the total number of troops on the Western Front, so the request was not an unreasonable one. Unfortunately for Haig and the British, the sector they were asked to assume control over was exactly the place where the Germans would launch Operation Michael. It had been taken over by the British Fifth Army in January, but they had not yet had the time to fully organize the new style defenses.

So when Operation Michael began, the British Fifth Army crumbled, then collapsed. German infantry advanced forty miles over the next two weeks, an advance on a scale not seen since 1914, one that threatened to tear a hole in the Allied line between the French and the British. The French Army, under General Pétain, withdrew its left flank south, to shield Paris from the German advance, but potentially at the cost of isolating the BEF. On March 26, there was a hastily organized Allied conference between British and French representatives, including the French President, Raymond Poincaré and the prime minister, Georges Clemenceau. The outcome of this meeting was to appoint a new commander-in-chief of Allied armies on the Western Front,

and tasked specifically with coordinating the British and French response to Operation Michael. Pétain was viewed as too cautious a commander for this responsibility, and so it fell to the 67-year old General Ferdinand Foch. In Britain, the Lloyd George government began sending Haig the reinforcements he'd been begging for since last fall.

But as dramatic as the opening days of Operation Michael were, this German offensive, like so many Allied offensives before it, ground to a halt and for many of the same reasons. The best German soldiers, the *Stoßtruppen* and other advance units, suffered the most casualties and were unavailable for follow-up operations. The German advance outran its supply lines. The heavy artillery, so crucial to offensive operations in 1918, could be moved forward only very slowly and it was impossible to continue the advance without it. German soldiers, who have been getting by on poor quality rations since the Turnip Winter, quickly discovered when they began rummaging through abandoned British positions that their enemies were eating quite a bit better than they had been. This was quite contrary to German propaganda, which had assured the Army that the British soldiers were all starving because of the U-boat offensive. German soldiers developed a disconcerting habit of ignoring orders to advance so that they could plunder enemy supply caches for whatever goodies they could get their hands on: food and wine and raincoats and wine and boots and...did I mention there was wine?

Finally, there was the influenza epidemic of 1918, which had already struck the Allied side of the line, and it was just now reaching the German side, at the same time as their grand offensive. To what degree influenza influenced the outcome is a question some still debate. For what it's worth, Ludendorff himself would later blame the flu outbreak for the failure of the offensive, although you have to bear in mind Ludendorff is in the habit of blaming everyone and everything but himself whenever things go wrong.

Was the influenza epidemic responsible for the failure of the 1918 German offensive? Maybe...? If so, it would mean that the biggest epidemic of the twentieth century determined the outcome of the second biggest war of the twentieth century. That's a mind-boggling possibility. I'll have more to say about the epidemic in a future episode—okay, I'll be honest, a couple of future episodes, but I'll have to leave it there for now.

The territory seized in the Operation Michael offensive, about 1200 square miles, looks pretty impressive when you study it on a map. But before you get too impressed, consider this: the advance was along the Somme River valley, the same corridor that had been the center of the British offensive back in 1916, and the same land the Germans had voluntarily surrendered and devastated just a year ago, during Operation Alberich. Now, in 1918, it was a savaged, blasted ruin of splintered, decaying trees, shattered buildings, poisoned wells, and wounded earth littered with the festering remains of fallen soldiers from offensives past, shell craters full of stagnant water, and trenches abandoned by the humans who had dug them and now defended by battalions of rats. Small wonder the Germans had difficulties running supply lines through this hellscape.

To put it more simply, the Germans suffered a quarter of a million casualties to take back ground they had abandoned as not worth the cost of defending just a year ago. The one strategic objective that might have made the game worth the candle was the town of Amiens, on the banks of the Somme. It was a key rail junction between Paris to the south and the Channel ports to the north. Two of the three rail lines that supplied the BEF ran through this town, and had the Germans captured it they might have forced the British to withdraw from the continent altogether. But the Germans didn't know that, and Operation Michael sputtered out less than twenty miles short of the town.

This was the end of Operation Michael, but not of the *Kaiserschlacht*. When it became clear that Michael was not going to be the knockout blow, Ludendorff turned to the next plan, an attack further north, the one originally favored by Prince Rupprecht and designated Operation George. The new, scaled down version was renamed Georgette. Who says Germans don't have a sense of humor?

This was an assault through Flanders, in the region of the French-Belgian border, and aimed at another strategic rail junction, this one at the town of Hazebrouck, in northern France. Again, this was a crucial transit point between the BEF and the Channel ports at Calais and Dunkirk, and the German objective was to take the junction, disrupt British supply lines, and press on, hopefully to capture Dunkirk and Calais and thus isolate a large portion of the BEF in a narrow strip of coastline with their backs to the sea, where they would be not have the room to fight effectively and could be defeated in detail.

Right idea, wrong war. Operation Georgette stalled out five miles short of Hazebrouk, although it did succeed in recapturing Passchendaele and Messines and all the rest of the modest territorial gains the British had captured at so great a cost in casualties just six months earlier.

Germany suffered about 380,000 casualties in these two offensives, against about 320,000 British and French casualties. But the German offensives had reduced or incapacitated a number of British units, so the divisional numbers tell a different story. Germany has about 206 divisions on the Western Front against 160 French and British. This is actually a wider gap than it was at the beginning of the year. Germany also retains large numbers of heavy artillery guns it can concentrate where it wills.

To end the *Kaiserschlacht* now would be to grant the British time to recover and reduce the German advantage. Also, there's a wild card in the form of the US Army, which is putting soldiers into France at a steadily increasing rate. The US Army is 650,000 strong by May, although General Pershing still judges that most of them are not ready to take up front-line positions.

And so Ludendorff attempted two more offensives, Operation Blücher and Operation Gneisenau. Blücher was an assault against the northern end of the French line, that is, just south of the site of Michael. It began on May 27 with the heaviest artillery bombardment yet. In three hours it

shattered eight Allied divisions, and in a matter of days the Germans had advanced to within sixty miles of Paris before this offensive, too, sputtered to a halt. Gneisenau was an attempt to link up the gains of Michael and Blücher and was only a modest success.

The map would tell you that Germany made significant territorial gains, gains that almost match her farthest advance into France and threaten Paris once again, just as in 1914. But these gains do not make Germany stronger. Nothing captured was worth the cost, and the new front line is longer and more vulnerable, and more difficult to defend. This is not the beginning of a German victory, but the end of German hopes.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Ben for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons are the bricks and mortar of podcasting, so if you'd like to help support the podcast, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. While you're there, leave a comment and let me know what you think of the show. And if you'd like to support the podcast, but actual cash money isn't an option, consider leaving a rating and review at the iTunes store. Your ratings and reviews help other listeners find the podcast, and who knows? Maybe one of them will become a donor or a patron, and you will have helped make that happen. That is also support. Thank you to every one of the 185 of you who have left ratings so far, and thanks so much for the kind reviews you have left. They always brighten my day. They make Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century happy too, and that's the most important thing.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we leap over to the other side of the front and consider the 1918 battles from the Allied point of view, and especially that of the green American troops coming into France and facing twentieth century warfare for the first time. We Just Got Here, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. These 1918 German offensives also saw the introduction of one of the most remarkable artillery guns in the history of warfare, called by the Germans *Kaiser Wilhelm Geschütz*, or Kaiser Wilhelm Gun, and often referred to in English as the Paris Gun. It had a massive, 70-foot long barrel and could fire a 234-pound shell over a distance of 75 miles. On March 21, the gun was used to fire shells at Paris at the beginning of Operation Michael.

Although it was a powerful gun, it couldn't shoot very often. It only fired 23 shells on Paris on its first day of operation, which would also be its most successful day. From March to August, when the Germans dismantled it and shipped it back to Germany to prevent its falling into Allied hands, it fired about 350 shells in all.

In the early days of Operation Michael, the fact of artillery shells falling on Paris convinced many civilians in the government that German troops were approaching the city, despite assurances from General Foch and the French Army that this was not the case. The initial panic induced by the bombardment is likely one reason why General Pétain prioritized defending Paris over maintaining contact with British forces during the offensive.

Still, while it had some minor value in propaganda terms, the Paris Gun played no significant military role in the events of 1918.

[music: Closing Theme]

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[music: Closing Theme]

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