

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 168

“The Black Day”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Allied armies arrive at the turning point of the war; engaged now in battle they have seized the initiative of operations from the enemy...The moment has come to abandon the general defensive attitude forced upon us until now by numerical inferiority and to pass to the offensive.

Ferdinand Foch, July 24, 1918

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 168. The Black Day.

The last time we looked at the Western Front, episodes 161 and 162, I told you about the four German offensives of Spring 1918, which were collectively an effort to make use of Germany's temporary numerical superiority in the West to break the Allied line and end the war before the arrival of large numbers of American soldiers permanently tipped the balance the other way. Those four offensives racked up some impressive territorial gains but failed to strike the hoped-for decisive blow that would end the war.

In particular, Operation Blücher, the third of the four offensives, had pushed the French back along the sector of the front roughly between the French town of Soissons and the city of Reims. The Germans advanced all the way to the River Marne, reaching a point just a hundred kilometers from Paris and capturing a large swath of French countryside.

Now, I mention Soissons and Reims for a reason. Both of these towns are important rail junctions in a region of France where roads and railroads are scarce. The Germans have a considerable force inside this salient they have just captured, and while they have taken Soissons, meaning they have one rail line from which to supply their troops in the salient, the city of Reims is still controlled by the French.

This is not a sustainable situation for the Germans. As July 1918 began, the numbers on the Allied side of the front have reached rough parity with the Germans. Some commanders on the German side felt this was the time to go over to a defensive posture, but not Erich Ludendorff. He was looking for his next offensive opportunity. What he really wanted to do was attack the British in Flanders once again, but the situation on the Marne salient could not be ignored. The Germans either had to withdraw their troops from the salient, giving up all they had won in Operation Blücher, or else they had to capture Reims, in order to open up a second rail line into the pocket. Which option do *you* think Ludendorff is going to choose?

Yeah, he went for Reims.

The city of Reims was founded in the first century BC by the Remi, a Gallic tribe, hence the city name, although they called it Durocorteron, which means “round fortress.” Somewhere around the year 500, King Clovis was baptized at Reims, more or less marking the beginning of the French state and making Reims an important French cultural and historical site. This led to the tradition of French coronations being held at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Reims. During the Hundred Years’ War, Reims fell to the English in 1425, following the famed Battle of Agincourt, and they held the city for 14 years until it was retaken by Joan of Arc, an event which allowed the coronation of the French Dauphin as King Charles VII.

In the early days of the Great War, the Germans briefly controlled Reims, but withdrew from the city following the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. It has been near to the front lines ever since, and the city and the cathedral have frequently been subjected to German artillery bombardment. By 1918, there wasn’t much left of either one. This was apparently a deliberate effort to hurt French morale by destroying a French cultural landmark, although as we saw with the library at Louvain, actions like this did at least as much damage to Germany’s reputation as a culturally advanced nation. Now Ludendorff meant to capture Reims, in an attack scheduled to begin on July 15, called *Friedensturm*, or “Peace Offensive.”

Ferdinand Foch, who is now the Supreme Commander of the Allied Armies on the Western Front, perceived the German supply problem and anticipated an attack against Reims. His suspicions were confirmed when Allied air reconnaissance picked up the movement of dozens of German divisions to this part of the front. By this time, superior numbers of Allied aircraft production finally have led to Allied air superiority on the Western Front, giving the Allies an intelligence advantage. This advantage might have been countered by moving the German divisions in secret by night, but that would have taken longer, and on the German side, time is a commodity in short supply.

The Germans attacked at two points along the line, just to the east of Reims and just to the west. The attack began with a German artillery bombardment at 12:10, but unfortunately for the Germans, French foreknowledge of the attack was so complete that they had vacated their front line, so most of the German shells fell into empty trenches. Worse than that for the Germans, the

French actually began their counter barrage at 11:30, forty minutes *before* the German attack began, which couldn't have done German morale any good. East of Reims, the German First and Fourth Armies attacked the French Fourth Army, augmented by the US 42nd Division. The French were well prepared and the German attack failed.

West of Reims, the German Seventh and Ninth Armies attacked the French Sixth Army, supported by the US Third Division, which was still there following the Battle of Château-Thierry. Here the Germans had a greater initial success, until the spearhead of the German attack attempted to cross the River Marne and ran into a unit of the US Third Division, the 38th Infantry Regiment, commanded by the wonderfully named Colonel Ulysses Grant McAlexander. Three days of fierce combat followed. The German soldiers, who had been told to expect little from the raw, untested Americans, were taken aback by their ferocity. "The Americans kill everybody!" wrote one astonished German lieutenant at the scene.

The 38th Regiment played a central role in foiling what would prove to be Germany's final offensive. This regiment, and later the entire Third Division, would take the nickname "The Rock of the Marne" for their performance in the first act of what history knows as the Second Battle of the Marne. Because General Foch, having anticipated the attack against Reims, did not settle for the more conservative strategy of simply reinforcing the line at the point of the expected attack. Foch deduced that its earlier offensives had bled the German Army enough to make possible a more ambitious plan. As the Germans were gathering their forces around Reims in an attempt to open a second rail line into their salient, Foch was gathering forces at the opposite end of the salient, where the Germans held the town of Soissons, with the intent of taking it or at least of severing that one rail line the Germans controlled and making it impossible for them to hold their position along the Marne.

One of the remarkable facts about the Second Battle of the Marne is this: the Allies fielded perhaps the most multinational military force of the Great War. A dozen nations or more were aligned with the Entente powers in what I've been loosely referring to as the "Allies." The exact number is debatable, depending on how you want to count the British and French imperial possessions. Nonetheless, as we've seen over the course of the war, most military operations involved no more than two or three of the allied powers, and often only one. The Second Battle of the Marne is different. It was primarily a French operation, with General Foch in overall command, with substantial numbers of Americans attached, plus a British army corps that included English, Scottish, and New Zealander units (I hope I'm not overlooking anyone else here) plus a couple of Italian divisions. The French forces included colonial units drawn from West Africa, and Vietnamese from French Indochina operated transport units behind the front, although they did not fight on the front lines.

Foch did not have operational control over units of other nationalities, and there were linguistic, cultural, and combat training differences to be overcome, but nevertheless the counterattack against Soissons, though it failed to capture the town itself, did sufficiently threaten the only rail

line available, enough to endanger the gains the Germans had purchased so dearly just three months ago during Operation Blücher.

The other remarkable fact about the Second Battle of the Marne is this: the First Battle of the Marne ended the German advance in 1914 and began the stalemate that lasted three years and eleven months; now, in August 1918, the German spring offensives are clearly over and the German Army exhausted, meaning that the four-year stalemate is over, and mobile warfare has returned to the Western Front.

[music: Wagner, Overture to *Tannhäuser*]

On July 21, the American Third Division advanced cautiously northward to probe the German defenses at the town of Château-Thierry. They found it undefended. The Germans were withdrawing from their salient along the Marne. Three days later, Foch called a meeting with Pétain, Haig, and Pershing. Although the Allies had earlier in the year agreed to hold off on any new offensives until 1919, circumstances were now much different. The German Army was clearly in disarray, and to hesitate would be to give them time to consolidate and reorganize. All four commanders agreed it would be better to strike now, and keep the enemy off balance.

Even better, the Allies had more resources than ever before. By August 1, France hosted over a million American soldiers, or “doughboys,” as they were now being called. (The origin of this nickname is obscure.) Some of these doughboys were behind the front lines in support roles, but even so, about three-quarters of a million were front line combat soldiers, and new soldiers were pouring in at frantic rates: over fifty thousand a week.

Meanwhile the British Expeditionary Force, battered by the German offensive in the spring, had played only a small role in the fighting at the Marne but had had time to recover. Recall that the Lloyd George government had been embarrassed in early 1918 by the revelation that the BEF had fewer front line soldiers than it had had a year earlier, a consequence of the Eastern strategy. Since that time, the British Army has scrambled to build up its forces in France and is now ready.

The French Army, augmented with some American units and flush with victory, is also ready. Foch was able to propose what had never previously been possible. The Germans have skillfully used railroads for rapid deployment of reserves to wherever they were needed to counter an Allied attack. We’ve even seen the Allies attempt coordinated French and British attacks at different points on the line in order to overwhelm the German reserves, but that trick never quite worked. Now for the first time in the war, it would be feasible to coordinate *three* Western Front offensives, one French, one British, and one American. This might be the last straw that would bring down the mighty German military machine.

This suggestion was music to the ears of General Pershing, whose longstanding ambition to field a standalone American Army has been repeatedly frustrated by Allied demands. Now Foch himself was asking Pershing to organize and lead a fully independent United States Army.

Pershing was able to scrape together six US divisions and one French division to form the First United States Army along the lightly defended St. Mihiel salient. It was barely enough of a force to threaten the Germans in that sector, but it was enough. Other US units were still mingled with the French armies advancing into the Marne salient and they would have to remain with the French for the time being.

The rest of the American forces in France had been stationed along the front at the St. Mihiel salient. Remember that this has been a quiet sector throughout the war; both the Germans and the French had gotten into the habit of deploying units there when they needed to rest and refit. Now the plan called for the American First Army to advance north and clear the Germans out of the salient.

The British piece of this three-pronged offensive began first, on August 8, in what became known as the Battle of Amiens. Amiens was another one of these crucial rail junctions; this one was vital to keeping the British Expeditionary Force supplied. The Germans had come close to taking it during Operation Georgette, but they had overlooked its strategic significance. As far as the British were concerned, the Germans were still too close, and an important aspect of this battle would be to push them farther away.

The Battle of Amiens began on August 8. The attacking force was mostly British, with French, Australian, Canadian, and American units also participating. Here Douglas Haig and the British command put together all their hard-won tactical lessons. The attack was prepared in secrecy, made possible by Allied air superiority. The British opened the attack during an early morning fog, beginning with an intense artillery bombardment, fired “off the map,” with no preliminary test shots, thus taking the Germans by surprise. The bombardment successfully targeted nearly every one of the German artillery positions, with enough firepower left over to begin a creeping barrage that shielded the advancing attackers.

The French and British put over a thousand aircraft into the air, including bombers that attacked German trenches. The bombers were deliberately employed so that their engine noise would mask the sounds of the over 500 tanks that were advancing alongside the infantry.

In a matter of hours, five German divisions had been shattered, and the Allied forces advanced six miles in a single day, an amazing rate of advance by Western Front standards. Perhaps more important, the attackers had captured over 400 German artillery pieces and about 15,000 prisoners. Even Douglas Haig was surprised by the outcome. On the other side of the line, Erich Ludendorff famously dubbed August 8 “*der schwarzer Tag des deutschen Heeres*,” “the black day” of the German Army. He called in reserve units up and down the line and managed to plug the opening the British had created, just as the Germans had always been able to do in the past, but even so, over time the German Army suffered irreplaceable losses, including a total of nearly 50,000 soldiers taken prisoner by the Allies, a clear sign that morale was collapsing. Even Hindenburg and Ludendorff now had to concede that Germany was not capable of any further

offensive action. Some staff officers advised withdrawal back to the Hindenburg Line. Ludendorff resisted this idea at first, insisting that all units hold their positions, but a few more days of losses like this convinced even him.

More worrisome than that, though few in the German high command wanted to face it, was that behind the carefully prepared Hindenburg Line, there were no further defensive works this side of Berlin. The Army had drawn up plans for a second defensive line, but just now those exist only on paper. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, though, continued to insist that the Hindenburg Line would hold, and that the Allied armies would exhaust themselves attempting to breach it.

Ludendorff himself began displaying erratic behavior at this time, and appears to have undergone some kind of mental or emotional breakdown, similar to what Helmut von Moltke went through back in 1914, when the Schlieffen Plan began to fail. A doctor was brought in to consult with Ludendorff and do a little of what we today call “talk therapy.” He also persuaded Ludendorff to do better than the three to five hours of sleep every night that he’d been getting.

Meanwhile, the Allies kept up the pressure. The Battle of Amiens had done considerable harm to the German Army but it had not broken the front. On August 15, Foch asked Haig to begin another offensive, but Haig refused, on the grounds that the German defenses were too strong, and perhaps too, because Haig was becoming sensitive to accusations that he spent his soldiers’ lives too freely. They agreed on a smaller offensive at a different location—Picardy—on August 21. This was mostly a diversion for another French offensive, again directed against Soissons. The French captured the town this time, too late to stop the German withdrawal from the salient, although in their haste, the Germans were forced to leave behind valuable supplies and equipment.

As for the Americans, Pershing was planning his own offensive, into the St. Mihiel salient. After the Americans captured the salient, Pershing’s big idea was to turn his army east, cross the border into Germany, and capture Metz, the fortress city that was the linchpin of the German defensive line in Lorraine, as well as, say it with me, a critical rail junction for shipping supplies from Germany to the front lines in France. Pershing believed the Americans were capable of taking Metz and that quite possibly could force a German surrender. This may have been a little optimistic.

Speaking of optimism, Douglas Haig, the man who six months ago argued that there should be no Allied offensives in 1918, had come around to fully embracing Foch’s view that the German Army was crumbling. Now he proposed two more large-scale offensives, a joint British and Belgian push into Flanders at the north end of the line and a Franco-American offensive in the east aimed at the town of Sedan. It was an ambitious plan. Just as the Allies had forced the Germans into withdrawing from the Marne salient by attacking at both corners, Haig was proposing to replicate this victory on a much larger scale, to force the Germans off of French soil altogether by squeezing both corners of German-occupied France.

Marshal Foch, who had received a promotion after the Second Battle of the Marne, endorsed this idea and on August 30, he visited Pershing at his headquarters and asked him to call off the St. Mihiel offensive and instead join with the French and British in executing Haig's plan. He must have known he would get an argument, and he did. To Pershing, this was giving up the US Army independence he had fought for months to secure, and he refused.

"I must insist upon the arrangement," Foch told him.

Pershing replied, "Marshal Foch, you may insist all you please, but I decline absolutely to agree to your plan. While our army will fight wherever you may decide, it will not fight except as an independent American army."

The meeting ended without an agreement. The next day, Pershing discussed his objections to the plan with the French commander, Philippe Pétain. Pétain came up with a compromise. The St. Mihiel offensive would go forward as Pershing intended, but afterward, instead of turning east toward Metz, the Americans would continue to push on to the north along the Meuse river valley and into the Argonne Forest. This meant the Americans would be advancing parallel to the French and to their east, shielding the French right flank. They would be assisting the French, but maintaining an independent command.

This was an ambitious goal for the still largely untested US Army, and the thankless job of organizing all this with very little lead time fell to the 37-year old Lieutenant Colonel George Marshall. It was a huge challenge, but Marshall rose to it, proving himself an exceptional military administrator. Don't be surprised if you hear that name again.

The offensive began on September 12, and the Germans were hopelessly outmatched. They had ten divisions, but these were tired, understrength units of low quality that had been sent to St. Mihiel precisely because that's where the Germans sent units that needed to rest and rebuild. Pershing had fourteen American divisions and four French divisions, and don't forget that an American division is twice the size of anyone else's. The Americans also had air superiority, and two battalions of tanks. That was a first. These tanks were French Renault FTs, a smaller, lighter vehicle than the British tanks, but with an important innovation: a turret on top that rose above the treads, allowing the tank's gun a 360-degree range of fire. The US tanks were commanded by another promising young lieutenant colonel, the 32-year old George Patton. Don't be surprised if you also hear this name again.

By the way, this offensive is also the first known use of the terms "D-Day" and "H-Hour" in US military planning.

On the first day of the offensive, American units advanced so rapidly, they outran their supplies. In the First Division, there was a young lieutenant from Texas named Maury Maverick, the son of a noted Texas family who gave the word "maverick" its other meaning. The green Lieutenant Maverick had been assigned command of his regiment's ammunition wagons, but he wasn't sure

what to do when his unit lost sight of the infantry. No one had thought to give him a map. So he rode his horse cross-country to scout a route for his command and found himself in the middle of a German platoon.

Maverick had just enough time to contemplate the misfortune of being shot dead on his first day of real combat before the German soldiers, 26 of them in all, threw down their weapons, raised their hands, and called out “Kamerad!” One of them knew a little English and begged Maverick to accept their surrender. The befuddled lieutenant was still focused on his mission of finding a route forward for the ammunition wagons, so he simply pointed them toward the American lines. The German begged him to escort them, saying they feared they would be shot dead if they approached Americans by themselves. Maverick noted that two of the German soldiers were crying. They were just frightened kids, pressed into service by a nation depleted of men of fighting age.

Moved with pity, Maverick escorted them back to the American line. They hung so closely to his horse that he would later describe them as acting like a pack of dogs accompanying a hunter. One of the Germans offered him a meager bit of food. When they arrived, Maverick, knowing no German, sent them on to join a larger group of prisoners by shouting “*Allez! Allez!*” in French.

In another incident that same day, an American sergeant named Harry Adams saw a German soldier run into a bunker. Sergeant Adams fired the last two bullets in his revolver into the door and called for the German to come out and surrender. He did, and along with him came 373 other German soldiers, including a colonel and eighteen other officers, all of whom surrendered to one American sergeant with an empty pistol.

The salient was cleared in a matter of days. Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur, who still hadn’t given up on the idea of capturing Metz, took an automobile off in that direction to scout the German defenses himself. He got within sight of the town, but could not find any sign of enemy defenders, so he radioed Pershing’s headquarters asking permission to take the city. Headquarters told him to get the hell back to where he was supposed to be. MacArthur would later say, “I should have taken Metz and *then* asked his permission.”

Because, as we all know, it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

These stories of mass surrenders and empty defensive positions tell us a lot about how far the German Army has fallen since 1914. Back then it was the most highly trained, respected, and feared fighting force in the world. We’ve heard tales earlier in the war of embarrassing mass surrenders in the Austrian Army, but it’s only been since Amiens that German soldiers began surrendering in large numbers. By this time, most of Germany’s soldiers are too young or too old, too hungry or too sick, to be an effective fighting force. Morale is nonexistent. The end is near.

For the US Army, the battle for St. Mihiel turned out to be what Americans might call a “cakewalk.” An easy battle is a good training exercise for an inexperienced army, but in less than two weeks, the Americans are going to have to attack all over again, this time into better German defenses held by more experienced soldiers, in what will become the bloodiest campaign in American military history.

But that is a story for another episode. We’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Tim, for making a donation, and thank you, Nick, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Patrons, donors, and listeners are what keep this podcast going, not to mention keeping me going, so I am thankful for every one of you.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to East Africa for the final days of the war in that theater. Yes, it’s still going on. *Tipperary mbali sana sana*, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. On July 30, 1918, as French and American units at the Second Battle of the Marne were advancing into that salient the Germans were abandoning, a German sniper shot and killed an American sergeant who was leading a scouting party probing the location of a German machine gun nest. That sergeant was a 31-year old native of New Brunswick, New Jersey named Joyce Kilmer.

Just five years earlier, Joyce Kilmer had published a short poem in iambic tetrameter, titled “Trees.” The poem, a romantic paean to its titular subject, is elegant in its exquisite simplicity. It became popular immediately upon its publication in 1913, and has remained one of the best known and best loved of American poems ever since. I bet that most of you listening can recite its first and last couplets along with me:

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree.

...

Poems are made by fools like me,

But only God can make a tree.

“Trees” has been frequently repeated and quoted in the past century, and since its simple symmetric structure lends itself to parody, it has been much parodied as well, most successfully, I think, by the later American humorous poet Ogden Nash, whose poem “Song of the Open Road” begins with the lines, “I think that I shall never see/A billboard lovely as a tree.”

“Trees” is very much in the Romantic tradition, a tradition that was already on its way out before the Great War killed it entirely. Later Modernist criticism has not been kind either to Kilmer’s sentimentality or his religiosity, but the poem remains popular. Indeed, Kilmer’s reputation as a poet rests almost entirely upon this one poem.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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