

# Central powers in world war one history essay



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Both the Allies and Central Powers involved in World War One imagined a short war that would be conducted like previous wars, with quick movement and crushing defeats of the enemy by means of overwhelming force. This war however turned out to be characterized by its lack of movement and years of stalemate that existed on the Western Front from autumn 1914 until spring 1918. There was movement on the Western Front in 1914. The war began with significant German advances through Belgium and France nearly reaching Paris. It wasn't long though before deadlock ensued and trench warfare set in. The expected war of movement was not to be seen again until the final months of hostilities. There were small victories along the western front after 1914 and the battle lines changed to a small extent where success was attained in a few areas. Those victories however were not standard as any key breakthrough did not take place.

The circumstances that each army encountered were nothing like they had faced in past wars. This was helped by the arrival of rapid-fire rifles, machine guns and long-range artillery which had created battlefields that had become extended over great stretches of land. The size of the front line alone, over 400 miles from the North Sea to the Switzerland, meant that the age-old system of defeating armies by outflanking them was not going to happen. To defeat the enemy would mean an army would have to breakthrough a well-fortified line of defenses which most certainly meant a great loss of troops.

Developing a way to break through these secure lines was going to take time and planning while the interim saw stalemate as the result. Therefore, the early strategy was to amass large numbers of men and artillery against a section of the enemy's well enforced trench lines, an approach that rarely

worked because even when breakthrough occurred, the opposing forces were able to dig into a secondary line.[1]

Thus, the strategies of each of the powers were to change after the first months of the war when movement was transformed into stalemate. Soon after trench warfare ensued, both sides recognized that they ought to change their objectives in order to meet their grand strategic plan of exhausting the enemy's economic ability to continue the war while simultaneously devising short term military tactics. Understanding that the war could not be won quickly, the allies made an effort to dry up the Central Powers' sources of supply: lack of raw materials and manufactured goods would force them to surrender in the end, and before then there was the objective of an economic crisis caused by poverty.[2]The French grand strategy supported the idea of pursuing a multi-front war against the Central Powers. Within this strategy, they attempted to coordinate their operations with their allies and usually launched operations only after thorough analysis and careful consideration of alternatives while at the same time directing their operations toward objectives linked to broader goals of strategy or policy.[3]

This strategy was understood by the Russians as well, and they held the belief that they were an instrumental part of the allied effort. The Russians were inferior to the Germans in terms of military capabilities on the other hand though they were persistent and resolute. More importantly, the Russians, unlike the Germans, had enormous reserves of manpower. Their troop reserves were at such a sufficient level that they were easily able to replenish their army quickly after heavy losses. As an example, the Brusilov

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offensive in the east, began as an effort to draw German troops off of the Western Front, had relieved Verdun and rescued the British and French position in the west, saved Italy, and forced the Austro-Hungarian Empire to consider a separate peace.[4]

The year 1915 was not a good year for either power on the Western Front. It must be understood that the French army could not make a breakthrough of German lines. On the other side, German General Erich von Falkenhayn acknowledged that the allied line in the west could not be turned; therefore he decided to stand on the defensive, and clear up the Russian front instead. [5]In 1915, the Germans tended to risk too little, and the allies too much; with the results almost always being the same, nearly all ground won in an extend battle being won in the first three hours.[6]

New ideas for conducting battle were introduced as a result of trench warfare. Artillery fire prior to any troop advance was to become one of the most important features of this new type of warfare. Britain was triumphant when she used artillery fire in advance of an attack at Neuve Chapelle in 1915. The British army was able to destroy German defenses using an onslaught of preemptive artillery fire. The problem that resulted from this success was that the British High Command came to believe that this tactic would work prior to every battle. Instead of using a salvo of short, precise, concentrating fire, they were motivated to use barrages with heavier artillery that had longer range. They did not appreciate that this bombardment would so churn up the ground that the advance of the infantry after it would be slower than ever[7]and made it extremely difficult for the guns to be brought forward and the advanced resumed under their protective fire.[8]Completely

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underestimating the weight of bombardment needed to destroy the German front line, Commanders embarked on huge but effectively useless bombardments at both the Somme and Passchendaele[9]

The German High Command decided that no direct military approach would produce victory against Great Britain. Conversely, the Germans knew that it was not likely an allied offensive would be any more successful against any German emplacements. As a result, the Germans took the tactical defensive and formulated their defensive strategies around the idea that holding off and allied attack would be enough to offset the disparity in Allied manpower. The Germans dug trenches, fortified them with concrete, and strengthened their defensive zone. On both sides of the trench line that made up the Western Front, the high commands would eventually reach the conclusion that, on the densely defended Western Front at least, to break through the enemy's defensive line quickly and to restore a true war of mobility had become impossible under the prevailing conditions.[10]

Germany was faced with a significant dilemma. She did not have enough of a reserve strength that was needed to win a lengthy war. Unlike France or Great Britain, Germany was fighting a two front war and had to keep moving troops off of one front to support the other when casualties started to mount. The German High Command was fully aware that Great Britain was their real opposition but saw no conceivable way to attack directly at the English homeland. In response, Falkenhayn proposed launching a battle that would bleed France white, compel her capitulation, and thereby collapse the Alliance.[11]

Falkenhayn appreciated the significance of the city of Verdun both in terms of it being an impenetrable fortress as well as being a historical symbol of French national pride. As a result, he decided to lure the French army into a battle of attrition that would knock Britain's "best sword" out of her hand.[12]The result however was the opposite, Falkenhayn's 'bleeding white' experiment did not succeed; since it 'bled' the Germans in nearly the same proportion as the French, and in fact hit them harder because of their constant inferiority in manpower.[13]Germany's main chance, Falkenhayn believed, was to conserve forces and let the allies continue their suicidal attacks and by doing this, France's will could be broken in one great battle of attrition. [14]

The allies used their manpower advantage to relieve the pressure at Verdun and launched an offensive on the Somme which placed a massive demand on German forces on the Western Front. Germany tried one last time to capture Verdun and when that failed, Falkenhayn shifted his forces to the Somme to meet the new allied offensive there. S. L. A. Marshall wrote that "History offers the explanation that the Battle of the Somme had to be fought as it was by the British to save the French Army from the crucifixion of Verdun." [15]An offensive by the British was needed to relieve Verdun but even Marshall does not believe it had to be at the Somme since it could have taken place at any point along the front. French General Joffre wanted the battle to be on the Somme on the other hand though; British General Haig favored Flanders since it had been quiet ever since the first Battle of the Marne, and the enemy had taken advantage of the inactivity to make the site (the Somme) impregnable strong.[16]

The British plan on the Somme was to conduct an attack that would kill as many Germans as possible during which the loss to their own army would be minimal. To do this, they considered the idea of seizing points of tactical significance and wait there for the Germans to counter-attack. Haig was not enthusiastic about the plan since any wearing down of the enemy meant that his own troops would be used up no less, possibly more than that of the enemy.[17]Therefore, he favored a massive assault which turned out to be more sacrificial since the first day of the Somme saw the British army suffer 60, 000 casualties while the German defenders suffered only 8, 000.[18]

Once the British started their offensive and Germany shifted troops, France took advantage and commenced an attacked back at Verdun inflicting heavy losses on the Germans who ended up falling back “ almost to their February 1916 starting point.”[19]At this point, the French did not push any further and never made the breakthrough they sought on the Western Front.

The Battle of Verdun created a new dilemma for the French. Their army had been hammered to such an extent that the troop moral had deteriorated to a low that commanders were troubled with. French General Petain was under the impression that the French did not have a single soldier in the front line upon who could be relied on and that discipline was so bad in the French army that they would not be able to resist a determined German offensive. [20]

German, French, and British commanders all concluded that the war could only be won by outlasting their enemy and making him exhaust his resources before they themselves did. They also considered it necessary to

make the conditions on the front so bad for their enemy that they would be too weak to maintain a trench line and be forced to abandon it. Necessity forced each to develop some type of “ strategy of attrition” and to reconceptualize previous ideas of battle and victory.[21]

The allies on the Western Front had devoted a great deal to their offensives that there was no way that they could be permitted to fail. If they stopped attacking after early setbacks, they would feel the pressure from home. Consequently it was politically expedient for attacks to continue in order to justify all the expenditure of munitions, time and optimism that had already been incurred.[22]The negative aspect to this was that the number of casualties increased each day they continued to fight, suffer defeat, and squander their most important advantage, men. Just like the early months of the war, the field commanders were failing, this time to placate the lawmakers back home. This was evident considering the fact that the British kept pushing forward both on the Somme and at Passchendaele months after they realized that their actions were not going to end in victory.

The battles on the Eastern Front pitted Germany and Austria-Hungary against Russia. With respect to strategy, the Eastern and Western fronts were closely linked since the battles on one front influenced the military situation on the other. At a critical stage of the Battle of Verdun in 1916, the Russians embarked on a surprise attack against Austria-Hungary. This astonishing success required Germany to yet again move reserves off the Western Front in support of the fragile Austrian army.

The battles in the east were campaigns of maneuver. There was no stabilizing front or the kind of siege warfare that was typical of the Western front. The objective of the Central Powers in 1915 was to force Russia out of the war and to do this Germany relied on Austria to take the lead with minimal support. Germany's plan called for one army to hold off the Russians until France had been defeated. After this was accomplished, the full German power could then be turned against Russia. Historian John Keegan gives an analysis of the Eastern front saying " Germany had expected a one-front war fought in two stages: first against France, while a token force held its eastern front, then another victorious campaign against Russia. Instead, it was heavily engaged on both the Western and the Eastern Front, on the latter sustaining substantial forces on Austrian territory to prop up its Hapsburg ally." [23]

Initial Austrian success against Russia came at a high price. Austria was also fighting a three front war being tied down in Serbia at the same time while also facing a new nemesis in Italy. Any belief that Austria could defeat the Russian Army on its own quickly diminished. The ineffective leadership of the Austrian army had them conducting massive frontal attacks that " produced extreme and avoidable losses which resulted in a major portion of the Hapsburg army being composed of replacement troops or recruits." [24] The defeats suffered by the Hapsburg Empire caused Germany to once again save its ally by relieving Russian pressure in the Carpathian Mountains.

Two late entries into the war both came in on the allied side and further attracted the Central Powers from the Western Front even if for a short time. Italy once a Central Power partner had decided that war against Germany

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and Austria-Hungary would be the most profitable course and would also have the side effect of strengthening liberalism in Italy. Therefore, they entered the war for among other aims to annex those Austro-Hungarian territories that were populated by Italians. Alone among the major Allies, Italy claimed no defensive reasons for fighting, she was an open aggressor, intervening for territory and status.[25]

Rumania had entered the war from much of the same reasons. The Allies had offered to double the territory of prewar Rumania for her assistance in attacking Austria. Rumania had stayed on the fence not deciding to join until after the success of the Russians during the Brusilov Offensive. By then though, the Germans had anticipated this and quickly defeated them. The Rumanian decision for war had been disastrous; they lost 310, 000 men and almost the whole of their country including their most important asset, the Ploesti oilfields.[26]The Rumanian entry into the war also proved hurtful to the Russian cause. She managed to redirect German and Austro-Hungarian troops from Russia, but in the end, needed Russia to send troops to its aid. Russia had suffered scores of casualties during the Brusilov Offensive and the loss of so much Rumanian territory curtailed Russia's capacity to launch further attacks.[27]

War weariness had set in in on all of the countries involved. The effects of the struggle on the Western Front were felt far beyond the battlefields and had a huge impact on domestic life. Each country encountered problems. Britain relied heavily on imports, and German U-boat tactics proved a tough menace. The Allied naval blockade was an enormous dilemma for Germany as well and impacted her ability to import goods. France had to deal with the

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fact that the Germans had occupied the iron and coal deposits in her northern regions. Certain problems were common to all. It was an immense task just to mobilize both human and industrial resources and also took extraordinary steps to control raw materials and food production for an indeterminate time. On the home front, each of the countries involved required people not fit for military service: women, children, and the elderly to step up. These citizens replaced men in the workforce and their adaptability, plus their patriotism, eased the pinch on the labor market and put greater human resources at the disposal of the government.[28]

World War one began in Europe and most of the fighting was for the most part contested on that continent. However, the war eventually involved all the continents of the world. By the end of the war, all the great powers of the world were involved: France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary in Europe. In due time, Japan and the United States would join making it a total war. It can be said that most of the population of the world was to some extent drawn into action during World War One.