

THE LUDENDORFF OFFENSIVE

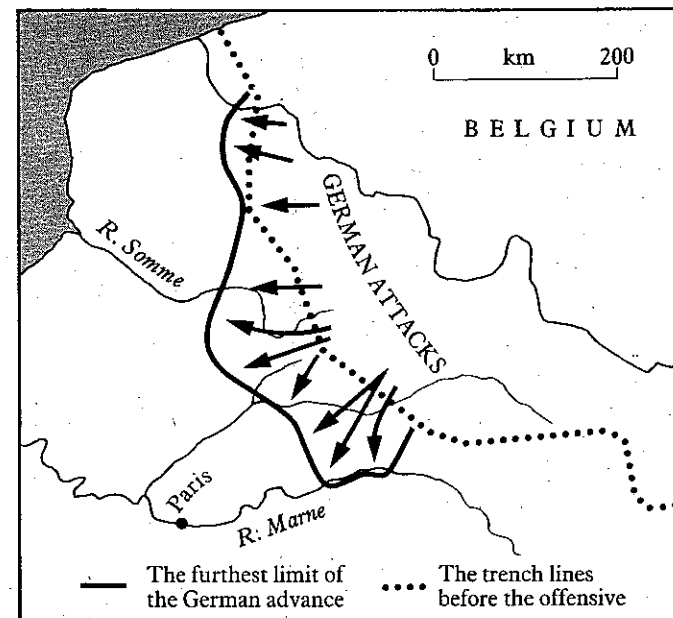
The German offensive

21 March was the day that General Ludendorff chose for his great offensive. Before dawn, 6000 big guns burst out in a shattering bombardment that lasted five hours. Deadly mustard gas billowed out to blind and suffocate the Allies in their trenches. Then, moving under the cover of dense fog, seventy German divisions dashed forwards towards the British lines. Totally outnumbered and confused, the British climbed out of their trenches and ran. The Germans had broken the stalemate on the Western Front and were now marching through open country towards Paris.

In this crisis, the French and British leaders decided to place all the Allied armies under the command of one general, a Frenchman, **Ferdinand Foch**. His job was to make sure that the British, French and American armies acted as a single force instead of as separate units.

At first it seemed that the Germans were unstoppable and that Foch could do nothing. The Germans advanced 65 kilometres and by July they had reached the River Marne. For the second time in the war it looked as if Paris would fall.

In fact, Ludendorff's gamble had already failed. He



The Ludendorff Offensive

had sent too many men too far, too fast into French territory. Now he had no reserves to send after his exhausted army. Worse still, his rapid advance had made a salient, or bulge, 130 kilometres long and 65

Specially trained German shock troops in gas masks attack French positions through thick woods



kilometres wide. As you can see from the map on the opposite page this meant that his forces could be attacked from three sides.

Meanwhile, Foch had been keeping men in reserve, and American soldiers were arriving in France at the rate of 50,000 a week. On 18 July he gathered all these forces for a great counter-attack. After a fortnight of heavy fighting they drove the Germans back from the Marne. Foch kept up the pressure. On 8 August he sent British forces into the attack, led by 456 tanks. From that day on the Germans retreated continuously until they were back at the Hindenburg Line.

Victory for the Allies

While Ludendorff was gambling away his armies, the Allies were winning victories on other fronts. In Salonika they made a sudden advance against the Bulgarian army and forced it to surrender. In October the Italians crossed the River Piave and won a great victory over the Austrians at the **Battle of Vittorio Veneto**. Turkey was defeated in the same month when General Allenby advanced north from Palestine. And in Germany itself the civilians on the home front were near to collapse. Thousands were dying of starvation while an outbreak of Spanish influenza was killing hundreds every day. Riots were common, talk of revolution was in the air.

Germany could no longer avoid defeat, but Ludendorff hoped at least to delay it. He persuaded the government to write to President Woodrow Wilson of the USA, asking for an **armistice** – an end to the fighting. He knew that Wilson was a moderate

man who wanted to offer Germany fair terms of peace. Meanwhile the German army could build up its strength to fight again later.

Revolution in Germany

But while Woodrow Wilson and the Allies talked about whether to offer Germany fair peace terms, a revolution broke out there. In a last attempt to win a victory at sea, the High Seas Fleet was ordered to get up steam and make ready for battle. But the sailors refused to put to sea and began a mutiny. After taking control of their ships they went ashore and took over the town of **Kiel**. Sailors in other ports followed their example and mutiny quickly turned into full-scale revolution.

As the revolution swept through Germany, the army generals took matters into their own hands. They sent two politicians to France to sign an armistice, whatever the terms. Another politician was sent to Kaiser Wilhelm to tell him that the army would no longer take orders from him. That same day, Wilhelm quietly left Germany and fled to Holland, never to return. A **Republic** was set up in place of his empire.

Two days later, Foch met the two German politicians in his personal railway carriage at Compiègne in northern France. When the terms of the armistice were read out, one of them began to cry, for the terms were harsh. But there was no choice but to sign. They put their signatures to the paper at five in the morning of 11 November 1918. Foch left the carriage without shaking their hands. The Great War was over.

Work section

A Study this document carefully, noting the date when it was issued. Then answer these questions:

1. a) Why did the enemy begin to make attacks against the Allies three weeks before this order was made?

b) Why were the attacks successful?

2. Do you agree with the statement that 'he has as yet made little progress'? Explain your answer.

3. Why do you think Haig gave this order to all soldiers in the British Army?

4. Some soldiers were disheartened by this Special Order. Why do you think it had this effect on them?

B List as many reasons as you can why General Ludendorff's great offensive failed.

C Study the photograph on the opposite page. What was unusual about this kind of fighting on the Western Front?

D Make notes on *The Terms of 1918* using the summary on page 40 to help you.



SPECIAL ORDER OF THE DAY
By FIELD-MARSHAL SIR DOUGLAS HAIG
K.T. G.C.B. G.C.V.O. K.C.I.E.
Commander-in-Chief, British Armies in France.

D. Haig, F.M.

TO ALL RANKS OF THE BRITISH ARMY IN FRANCE AND FLANDERS.

Three weeks ago to-day the enemy began his terrible attacks against us on a fifty-mile front. His objects are to separate us from the French, to take the Channel Ports and destroy the British Army.

In spite of throwing already 300 Divisions into the battle and enduring the most ruthless sacrifice of human life, he has as yet made little progress towards his goals.

We owe this to the determined fighting and self-sacrifice of our troops. Words fail me to express the admiration which I feel for the splendid resistance offered by all ranks of our Army under the most trying circumstances.

Many amongst us now are tired. To these I would say that Victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest. The French Army is moving rapidly and in great force to our support.

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man; there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end. The safety of our homes and the Freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment.

D. Haig, F.M.

General Headquarters,
Thursday, April 11th, 1918.

Commander-in-Chief,
British Armies in France.