

FOURTH YEAR OF WAR A BATTLE FOR ALLIES BUT ENDS WITH PROMISE

Russia and Rumania Were Crushed, Great Britain, France and Italy Each Suffered the Worst Defeats of Entire Period of World Struggle, But Growing Tide of American Troopers Turned the Scales in Nick of Time and Next 12 Months Should Be a Story of Victories Over the Teuton.

By Frank H. Simonds.

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The fourth year of the world war in the western nations, the gloomiest of the whole struggle, is ending under conditions which are more favorable than any that have existed in the past 18 months. We are entering the contest not with any prospect of peace now or even within a period of another year, but under circumstances strikingly recalling the situation after the first battle of the Marne. The second, and we may say the final, blow of Germany has not yet been struck. If we have a brilliant new Napoleonic offensive the ruin of a Waterloo, there are signs that the recent defeat may prove some degree suggestive of Leipzig.

The story of the fourth year of the war is measured by two major events: the collapse of Russia and the coming of the United States. When the year opened we were, all of us, still hoping against hope that the Russian operations in Galicia might prove the sign of a new Russian military power, and that Russia might repeat the achievement of the first French republic and, in defending the Dnieper of the Slav world, contribute mightily to the salvation of western civilization.

But before the campaign had come to an end Russia had ceased to be a military factor; treason and madness had done their work and hence the integration within was to be rapid. While German troops, released from the east, were to carry peril to the very edge of Paris and threaten Sir Douglas Haig's mighty force with the fate which had been prescribed for the "contemptible little army" of Field Marshal Sir John French in the opening days of the war.

The world, particularly the allied world, was slow in perceiving what were to be the consequences of the Russian collapse. When the full German storm broke in March of the present year it took the allies by surprise, and brought an unready coalition with a measurable distance of one of the great disasters of human history. But when the March blow had fallen and the extent of the danger was perceived, the war between America and Germany, a race between young troops, hurried across a submarine-infested ocean, and the last flower of German veterans thrown upon the allied lines in offensive after offensive, seeking a decision before America came.

Lost Without America.
As early as June of 1917, when Nivelle's Aisne offensive failed, it became clear that unless America came to the rescue the war would be lost to our allies and Germany would win on the continent something recalling Napoleon's success against Austria in 1807. But what was not perceived at that time was that it was going to be a narrow question whether France, Britain and Italy could hold against our coming, and, blind to the fact, our allies continued to ask for material and money rather than men, until the bitter awakening of March transformed the whole situation.

The Russian revolution and the resulting anarchy, which led to the demoralization of the Russian army, in fact produced a situation in which France and Britain could win the war; it produced a condition in which the possibility of German success was at least to Germans and neutrals. It brought back the old problem of 1914, and in the next 12 months there was to be repeated the German effort of the Marne campaign. From August, 1917, onward the German plan was to organize a new blow which should crush France and Britain before America could arrive, as Germany sought to crush them in 1914 before Russian operations in the east should demand attention.

In a word, we went back suddenly to the conditions of the opening days of the war. By the end of last year Germany was free to strike for Paris again; before the campaign of 1918 was well opened the German success was at least to Germans and neutrals. It brought back the old problem of 1914, and in the next 12 months there was to be repeated the German effort of the Marne campaign. From August, 1917, onward the German plan was to organize a new blow which should crush France and Britain before America could arrive, as Germany sought to crush them in 1914 before Russian operations in the east should demand attention.

Story of Misfortune.
The story of the campaign of 1917, after August 1, is briefly told. For our allies it is a history replete with misfortune. In August and September the brilliant but foredoomed Brusiloff offensive in Galicia faded into the shameful and indescribable flight of Russian troops from the field of victory into the darkness of demoralization and disintegration. There was a moment when it seemed as if Lemberg was again in danger, we read the old names of towns and rivers, the scenes of victories by the Russians in 1914, but in a few brief hours the Russian offensive in Galicia succumbed to the internal diseases of the Russian nation. After August, in point of fact, Russia was gone.

Meantime, in the west the British offensive in Flanders pursued its unlucky road to complete failure. It had been the conception of Haig and Robertson, striking north from Ypres and out of the famous old salient, to break the German line, cut off the troops on the Belgian coast or compel their retreat. The British offensive, however, was to be a surprise, to abolish the submarine bases on this coast and, pressing eastward through the Germans behind the Scheldt and compel their later retirement out of France from the Lys to the Meuse.

point of fact, the campaign of the British was already sure to fail, for German troops were hastening westward from Russia. Yet, doggedly and grimly, the British generals held their men to their task and the toll of casualties for the British in Flanders was not less than that of the French. The Somme, the previous year, while great hopes, excited by a brilliant but brilliant success before Cambrai, gave way to new developments when one more opportunity was sacrificed.

In the map there was proof of German retreat. The Ypres salient disappeared, the British troops held the whole of the Paschendaele ridge and critics talked of the advance from this vantage ground in the next year to Ghent and to Lille, little dreaming that a few days of battle would then suffice to compel the surrender of these hills, won by so much sacrifice and effort, and that Ypres itself was again to be in peril, in peril as deadly as that of October, 1914.

In this autumn the French army was passing through a period of reorganization and renaissance. Its defeat in May had shaken it to the very foundation. For a few weeks its morale was lower than at any time since the war began. To Pétain, who succeeded Nivelle, was given the grim task of restoring confidence and discipline, while behind the army the nation, under Clemenceau, cleaned its high places of those who had conspired against victory and held secret conferences with the foe. A few minor successes above the Aisne and about Verdun served to prove that the task was being accomplished, but for the balance of the campaign of 1917 the French army was limited to the defensive, or to operations which were but local successes.

In Italy, Too.
The first months of the fourth year of war saw Italy winning considerable successes along the Isonzo, where for two years Italian soldiers had been fighting to break through the gigantic Thermopylae between the Julian Alps and the Adriatic, by which ran the road to Trieste and the Austrian capital far beyond, the road Napoleon had taken more than a century before in his attempt to reach the Adriatic. In October the gate seemed forced; Austrian recoil was general north and south, and allied capitals, looking southward, saw in Italian success at least consolation for their own failures.

But in November, Italy suffered a first great defeat. Her population and her army, like those of the French nation, had been corrupted by enemy propaganda and by defeatist and pacifist efforts. The taint of bolshevism was already beginning to do its work in Italy as it had in France. Suddenly, along the Upper Isonzo front, out of the mountains about Caporetto, a German army appeared and struck an Italian army holding the flank of Cadorna's main forces to the southward, and holding it carelessly and with little thought of danger.

In a few short hours this Italian army was destroyed in exactly the fashion Radko Dimitrieff's Russian army had with consequences to other armies equally grievous. On the day of the victory, Cadorna's armies on the Lower Isonzo and about Gorizia found themselves on the next with their rear and flank imperiled, condemned to a swift and noisy rush backward, behind the Tagliamento, and then behind the Piave. The invasion of Austria was over and the Hapsburgs once more occupied at least a wide sweep of their old province of Venetia, while it was the fate of Venice, not of Trieste, which was now in doubt.

Thanks to an Italian rally and to the rush of British and French troops to their stricken ally Venice was saved, and the retreat ended at the Piave and not at the Adige, but Italy had suffered one of the great disasters of history and was henceforth condemned for long months to the defensive. She had, in fact, been on the edge of ruin; her escape had been by a slight margin, and at the moment the question of her future capacity to fight, brilliantly answered at the Piave the other day, was to give her allies grave concern.

Thus the calendar year and the campaign of 1917 ended amid the most gloomy of all possible circumstances. British successes in the early months of the year were dimmed by the failure of the bloody battle in Flanders. The French army had not merely seen its hopes come to nothing at the Aisne, but had, for the first time, been shaken in its confidence and was only beginning to find signs of renewed constancy and efficiency. The Italian army had suffered one of the great disasters of the war. The minor efforts in the Balkans had been without even the smallest material benefit.

To swell the balance on the wrong side, Russia was sinking to a hapless derelict and Rumania was obviously soon to quit the war. All hope of an offensive in 1918 had now to be surrendered. The allied high command did not preserve the secret, but it was clear that the role would be one beset with difficulties so great that disaster might impend, but it did recognize that there was no longer any chance of victory in 1918 nor at any other time until America should be able to replace the Russian in the battle line.

As for the German, he could look forward to a return to the west now with his armies victorious in the east; he could look forward to superiority in guns as a result of Russian and Italian successes and to advantage in numbers as a result of the suppression of the Russian and Rumanian fronts. For him the new year dawned brilliantly. For his enemies it was the beginning of a time which they already foresaw was to be one of grave trial. How grave it was to be they could not suspect, and not suspecting, failed to provide against.

The German Strikes.
On March 21 the German struck between the Scarpe and the Oise, 40 divisions against 15, swiftly destroyed the Fifth British army, swept over its ruins to the outskirts of Amiens, opened the road down the Oise valley to Paris as far as Noyon and took Montdidier, and cut the main railroad from Paris to Amiens by artillery fire. Only the swiftest possible work on the part of the British army, to the advantage of the British allies prevented the separation of the two armies. The blow was checked at the moment when further German progress would have meant separation and separation approximate ruin.

erately accomplished her military program. They saw themselves condemned to a desperate defensive, while America feverishly rushed to France those divisions without which a Ludendorff victory seemed inevitable.

By his first attack, Ludendorff, for his part, became the master mind in the German high command, employing the method of a brilliant Lieutenant, Hutier, had succeeded where all predecessors had failed. He had pierced and broken an enemy front on an extent of 60 miles, from the Oise to the Somme, in three years and a half of a war of positions, of stagnation, of siege and trenches, he had carried an offensive into open country beyond all defense zones.

Checked in Picardy, Ludendorff carried his offensive to Flanders and again achieved swift and substantial victory. Breaking the Allied line south of Ypres he pushed forward 15 miles toward the channel ports, won back all the lost ground of the Paschendaele campaign of the previous year, took Kemmel, the German salient, and pushed rear of Ypres, and threatened to reduce this restored salient, which had proved for the British empire the same significance Verdun carried for the French nation. This greater success was not attained, and a sharp repulse on April 29 closed the Aisne campaign, but this second episode had served to demonstrate anew the efficacy of German tactics and the advantage of German numbers and interior position. It reopened the question of the arrival of the Kaiser at Calais and emphasized again the greatness of allied peril.

The third German blow was in the larger sense even more terrifying than the first. Although two months had passed and the allies had been allowed time to study the German method and prepare an answer, Ludendorff was able in late May to duplicate his March successes, and, sweeping across the Aisne and the Vesle, the victorious German troops reached the bank of the Marne once more, after nearly three years of German inactivity. All the British positions in Picardy had lacked any dominating military strength, but the French positions at the Aisne were among the finest on the western front. And, as at the Somme, Ludendorff was unable to gain an answer, Ludendorff was able in late May to duplicate his March successes, and, sweeping across the Aisne and the Vesle, the victorious German troops reached the bank of the Marne once more, after nearly three years of German inactivity. 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