



MASTERS OF WAR: THE AIF IN FRANCE 1918

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Operation Michael: The German Spring Offensives of 1918

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Operation 'Michael' (named after the archangel Michael, the patron saint of Germany) and the four subsequent offensives that finally concluded in mid-July 1918 represented a final desperate German gamble in search of victory in World War I—the last throw of the dice by the leaders of Imperial Germany. From the beginning of the war in August 1914 the German military leadership had displayed a seemingly irresistible penchant for risky gambles. The Schlieffen Plan in 1914, the assault on Verdun in 1916, the decision for unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, all represented attempts to achieve victory with a dramatic and decisive blow against the enemy. General Erich Ludendorff, who in tandem with General Paul von Hindenburg headed the German Army General Headquarters and exercised near dictatorial political power after mid-1916, was the major architect of the German plans and the key decision-maker. Ludendorff's superb tactical skills would be on full display in the series of five spring offensives that the German army would launch against the Allies between March and July 1918, as would his glaring deficiencies as a strategist.

At the end of 1917 Germany's situation was both precarious and potentially promising. On the positive side, Russia was effectively out of the war following its defeat in the battle of Riga and the October Bolshevik revolution, and Italy was reeling after her disastrous defeat at Caporetto. On the other side of the ledger, however, the failure of the unrestricted submarine warfare campaign and the entry of the USA into the war, along with the dwindling food and manpower resources of Germany and her allies, made it clear that time was not on Germany's side.

Ludendorff faced a choice among three principal options: pursue a negotiated settlement with the Allies; persist with the policy of strategic defense that Germany had followed on the Western Front in 1917; or conduct a major offensive in hope of winning a *Vernichtungsschlacht* (a battle of annihilation) that would lead to decisive victory. The first option had little prospect of success. The US entry into the war had secured the financial situation of the Allies and promised an ever increasing flow of American soldiers and supplies to Europe from mid-1918. Convinced of the certainty of final victory if they could simply hold out until then, the Allies proved unwilling to compromise on their war aims, thus foreclosing any prospect of a negotiated peace. For its own part, the German military leadership's adamant refusal to consider restoring the sovereignty of Belgium and returning Alsace-Lorraine to France also meant that negotiations were a non-starter.

The second option of staying on the defensive with German lines bolstered by troops shifted from the Eastern front had some short-term appeal, especially given the repeated failure of Allied forces in previous years to achieve a breakthrough. But maintaining a long-term defensive posture would require a steady flow of material and manpower to sustain such an

effort in the face of ever increasing Allied pressure. After the war General Hermann von Kuhl, chief of staff of the Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht in 1918, commented: 'The enemy's numerical superiority, enhanced by the prospective arrival of American contingents, rendered the defensive hopeless in the long run...there was no other choice [but to take the offensive].'ⁱ Also militating against prolonging the war was the perilous state of German resources and the increasing instability of the German home front which experienced massive labour strikes in January 1918 caused in part by an ever-worsening food crisis. The situation among Germany's allies was even worse: The Austro-Hungarian War Minister sent a memo to the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser in August 1917 with the alarming title 'Possibilities of Our Lasting Through the Winter of 1917/18'. The memo's grim conclusion was that survival was possible, but just barely. The German High Command had to reckon with the realistic possibility that their allied partners might collapse during 1918.

That left only the third option of making a desperate attempt to strike a devastating blow in the west during the brief period when Germany, by transferring forty-four divisions from the east, could still muster some local superiority over the Allies. In any case, Ludendorff's own predisposition favoured attack over negotiation or defense. As he wrote in his post-war memoirs: 'The offensive is the most effective means of making war; it alone is decisive. Military history proves it on every page. It is the symbol of superiority.'ⁱⁱ Ludendorff was also convinced, probably rightly, that most German officers and troops were tired of defensive battles and longed to escape the trenches and resume a war of movement. Opting for an all-out offensive, however, represented a very risky choice with no guarantee of success. But Ludendorff insisted that Germany 'must either triumph or go under'.

But where should the German army strike? In the end it was decided to focus the main effort against the British forces (BEF) in Picardy between Arras and Saint Quentin where the ground was likely to be drier in March than the waterlogged terrain of the Flanders fields to the north. Ludendorff carefully crafted the tactical preparations for the offensive, but the larger operational and strategic vision remained vague. When asked by the Bavarian Crown Prince Rupprecht what his strategic objective was, Ludendorff rather brusquely responded by referring to his experience on the Eastern Front where 'we always merely set a near goal and then discovered where to go next'. The main point was to smash a hole in the Allied lines; 'as for rest', Ludendorff added, 'we shall see.'ⁱⁱⁱ Ludendorff's disdain for strategy and his unwillingness to set clear, concrete objectives and to pursue them consistently proved to be one of the principal weaknesses of the German offensives of 1918 and contributed to their ultimate failure.

The Germans put extensive effort into the development of innovative artillery and infantry tactics for the spring 1918 offensives. Lieutenant Colonel Georg Bruchmüller, generally considered the most influential artillery tactician of the war, had achieved success on the Eastern Front by using short, intensive bombardments consisting of high explosive shells combined with a careful mixture of lethal and non-lethal persistent gases. As historian David Zubecki explains: 'Most gas masks of World War I were effective against lethal, non-persistent 'Green Cross' (choking) gas, but ineffective against non-lethal, non-persistent 'Blue Cross' (vomiting) gas. Bruchmüller's technique was to fire a mixture of both, which he

called *Buntkruez* (mixed-color cross) against the same target. The Blue Cross gas would penetrate the mask, forcing the wearer to remove it in the presence of the lethal Green Cross.^{iv} Bruchmüller also pioneered the technique of predicted artillery fire in order to eliminate the need for registration, thereby preserving the element of surprise. After achieving a major success with his techniques in the Battle of Riga in September 1917 Bruchmüller was transferred to the Western Front and put in charge of preparing the artillery plans for Operation 'Michael' and all the subsequent offensives.



Figure 1: Lieutenant Colonel Georg Bruchmüller

German 'infiltration tactics' focused on the use of special assault units known as storm troops (*Sturmtruppen*).



Figure 2: German storm troop unit

Consisting of small units of six to nine men, storm troops advanced rapidly behind a creeping barrage, bypassing fortified strongpoints in order to reach the enemy's artillery positions and headquarters. The aim was to disrupt communications, sow confusion and make it difficult for the defenders to reorganize and counterattack. The storm troops were followed by infantry battalions that typically included a trench mortar company, machine gunners, an artillery battery and flamethrowers. Their mission was to destroy enemy strongpoints. Regular infantry units followed on to occupy enemy positions, while the storm troops continued to push forward. The German spring offensives of 1918 would witness the first major use of such stormtrooper tactics on a broad scale.

In the weeks preceding the first offensive morale among German troops was high. As one soldier observed, 'Of course, now every hope is based on the coming offensive in the West which is expected to bring an end to the war. It is clearly observable that these expectations dominate everyone and do not give any room for any short-lived ill feelings at all.'^v Increased rations for the attacking units in the weeks preceding the battle served to lift spirits. The intensive training and the stockpiling of munitions that preceded 'Michael' also inspired confidence and raised expectations that the coming attack would indeed be 'the final blow' as promised in posters promoting the war loan drive of March 1918.

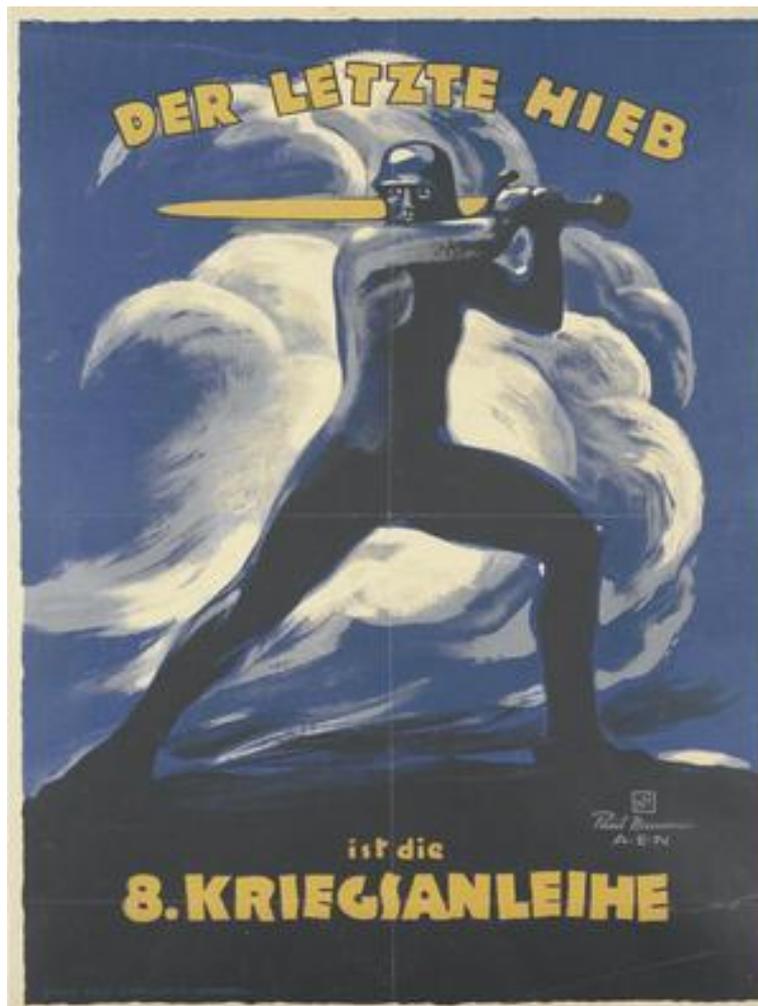


Figure 3: The Last Blow. German poster March 1918

Writing in 1925, Adolf Hitler, who was serving on the Western front in spring 1918, recalled the mood of his fellow soldiers on the eve of 'Michael': 'A sigh of relief passed through the trenches and the dugouts of the German army when at length, after more than three years' endurance in the enemy hell, the day of retribution came. Once again the victorious battalions cheered and hung the last wreaths of immortal laurel on their banners rent by the storm of victory. Once again the songs of the fatherland roared to the heavens along the endless marching columns, and for the last time the Lord's grace smiled on His ungrateful children.'^{vi} For both soldiers and German civilians on the home front there was a euphoric expectation that Operation 'Michael' would bring the long desired total victory over the enemy and the end of the war. If the offensive should fail to fulfil these lofty expectations, however, the stage was set for a disastrous collapse of morale that could threaten the very survival of Imperial Germany.



Map 2 Operation MICHAEL plan (source: Map by Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D., Abilene, Texas, based on sketches and notes provided by David T. Zabecki).

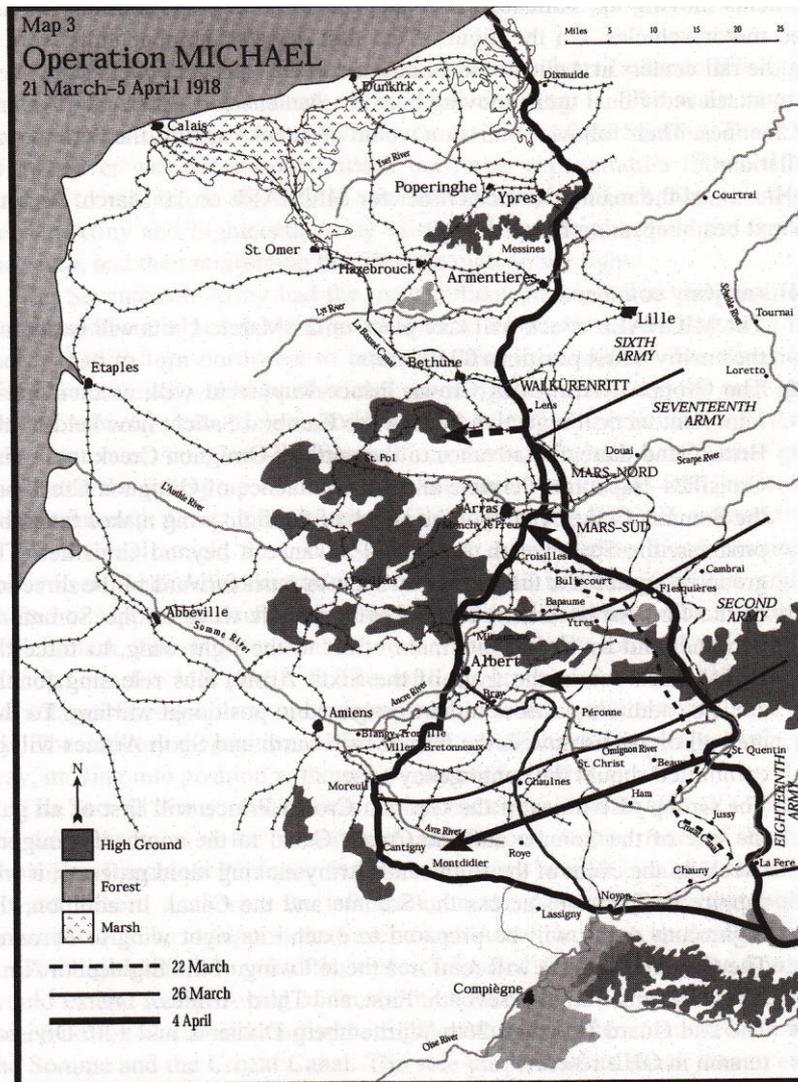
At 04:40 on 21 March 1918 over 6,000 German guns and 2,500 trench mortars launched what was to that time the heaviest artillery bombardment in history. British lines across a seventy-kilometre front were pounded by 3.2 million artillery rounds, about one-third of which were gas shells. A German artillery observer noted, 'Within seconds of the bombardment opening, we could see sparks and columns of fire in the enemy trenches and their rear area. A terrific

roar, an immense noise greeted the young morning. The unbearable tension eased. We were ourselves again and knew that it had come off all right. In the past the French and the Tommies had bombarded us for seven days without a pause; we would now do it in five hours. We laughed and looked happily at each other. Words were useless; the hell of the inferno outside saw to that. There was only lightning and noise.’^{vii} After five hours of hurricane bombardment of British positions German guns began to lay down a creeping barrage behind which thirty German infantry divisions, shrouded by a heavy fog, attacked. Storm troop units advanced in leap-frog fashion followed closely by mobile infantry that targeted the British strongpoints that had survived the initial barrage. By the end of the first day exhilarated German troops had advanced as deep as five kilometres behind the British frontlines. This initial success had come at a high cost, however. Once the fog had lifted German infantry became easy targets for British machine guns and German casualties were high. Together, the casualties of the two sides amounted to the heaviest losses in one day’s fighting in the entire war.

Table 1: German and British Casualties, 21 March 1918^{viii}

	Killed	Wounded	Prisoners	Total
Germany	10,851	28,778	300	39,929
Britain	7,512	10,000	21,000	38,512

On the following two days the German forces continued their rapid advance and by the end of 23 March the Germans had opened up a forty-mile wide breach in the British lines. As anxiety mounted on the Allied side, the German Kaiser exulted: ‘The battle is won, the English have been utterly defeated.’ However, the Kaiser’s victory proclamation proved false. While German forces continued to make significant advances to the southwest over the next few days, British forces held firm in the north and the vital rail centre of Amiens remained in British hands. Ludendorff also weakened his striking power by splintering his main thrust into a number of separate subsidiary attacks.

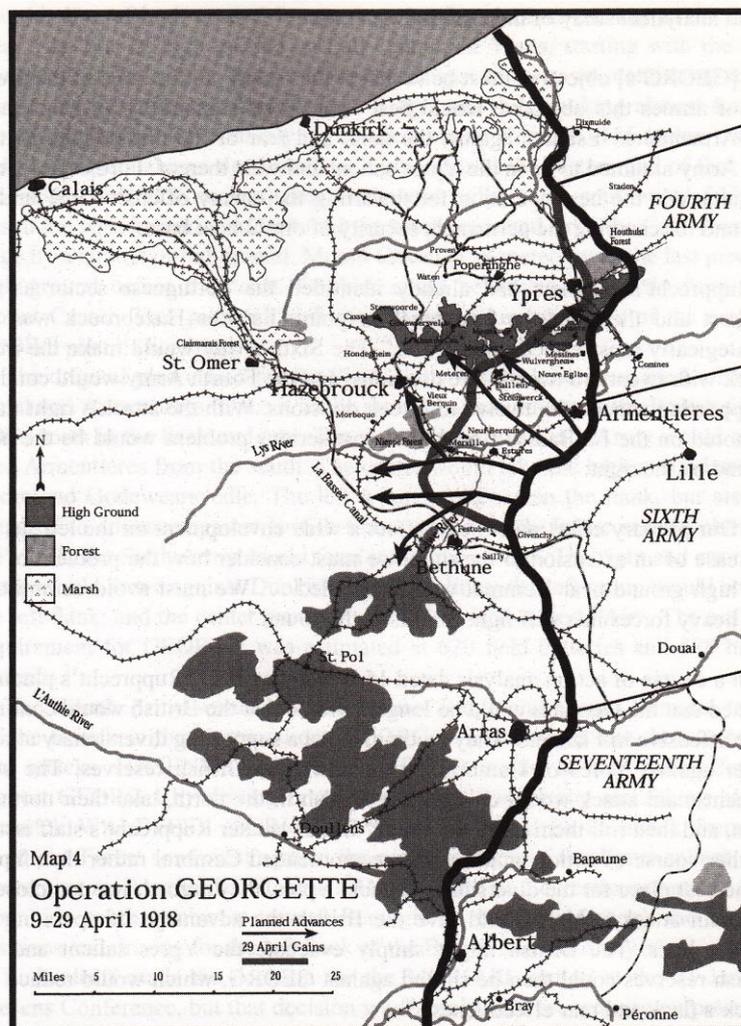


Map 3 Operation MICHAEL (source: Map by Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D., Abilene, Texas, based on sketches and notes provided by David T. Zabecki).

In the final days of March the Germans were unable to maintain their momentum. Logistical bottlenecks caused by the shortage of horses and the lack of motorised transport made it difficult to move up artillery and supplies. The advance was also slowed as some German units stopped to plunder the abundant food and drink they found in British trenches and depots. German commanders bemoaned the extent of drunkenness among their troops and the breakdown of discipline.

Ludendorff formally closed down ‘Michael’ on 5 April having failed to achieve any strategic advantage. In 16 days of fighting German forces occupied 1,200 square miles of territory and captured 90,000 Allied prisoners and 1,300 guns. The cost had been heavy for both sides, with 239,800 German casualties and 254,739 on the Allied side (177,739 British and 77,000 French). In retrospect it is clear that ‘Michael’s’ failure to achieve a strategic victory (such as the capture of the railway junction of Amiens) presaged disaster for the German cause.

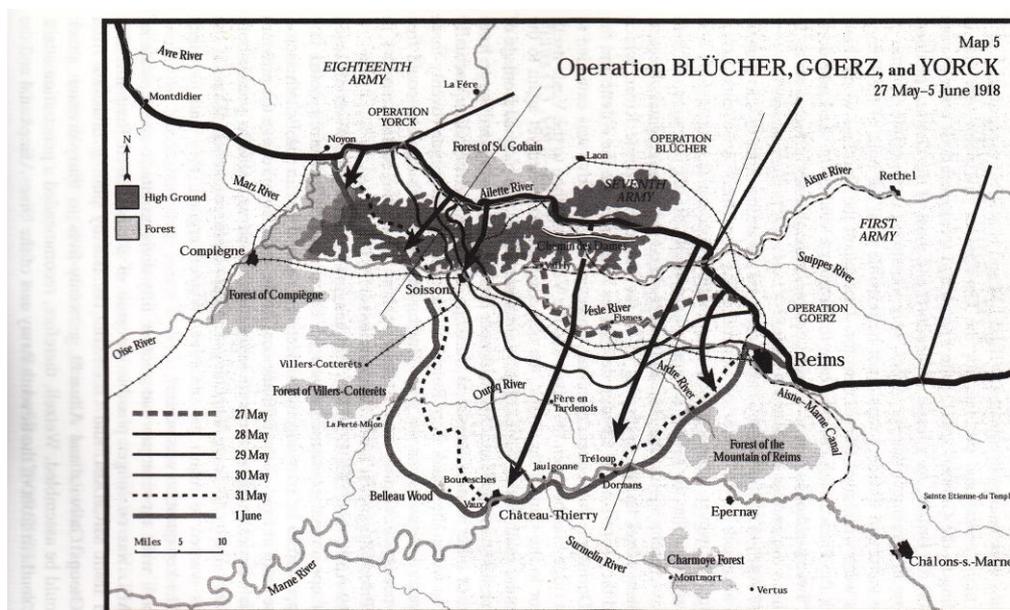
Ignoring the strategic failure of ‘Michael’ and eager to maintain the initiative, Ludendorff ordered a second offensive, this time directed against British troops in Flanders. Ludendorff convinced himself that one more powerful blow would push the Allies over the edge; perhaps he was haunted by what might be called the ‘ghost of the Marne,’ a belief that in 1914 the Germans had mistakenly and prematurely halted their advance in France just when victory was within their grasp. Operation ‘Georgette’ (referred to by the British as the Battle of the Lys) aimed to capture the strategic rail centre of Hazebrouck, putting a critical link in the fragile British logistics network at risk and positioning the German forces for a possible future push toward the Channel ports. Ludendorff’s insistence on launching the offensive as quickly as possible, however, meant that there were only nine days of preparation. As a result, only a limited number of heavy guns could be moved north in time for the opening bombardment on 9 April. The Germans deployed a total of sixty-one divisions against thirty-four on the Allied side. But many of the German troops were less well-equipped and less well-trained than the units used in ‘Michael’, and the shortage of horses and trucks again severely compromised German mobility, guaranteeing that moving munitions, artillery and other supplies forward would be difficult.



Map 4 Operation GEORGETTE (source: Map by Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D., Abilene, Texas, based on sketches and notes provided by David T. Zabecki).

As with ‘Michael’, German troops initially made impressive advances, on the opening day of ‘Georgette’ even achieving the fastest single-day advance since the start of trench warfare. By 11 April they had penetrated to within eight kilometres of Hazebrouck and the situation was looking grim for the British. At this point General Douglas Haig issued his famous ‘backs to the wall’ message to his troops: ‘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 of us at this critical moment.’^{ix} Perhaps Haig’s words provided an inspirational boost; in any event, British resistance stiffened and where retreats were necessary they were carried out without panic. The 1st Australian Division was deployed in front of Hazebrouck and repeatedly repelled German attempts to take the town. By 16 April French reinforcements entered the battle and the German advance stalled, well short of obtaining its objectives. The battle had resulted in 86,000 German casualties, 82,040 British and 30,000 French. Like ‘Michael’, ‘Georgette’ represented a tactical success but an operational and strategic failure.

Despite the failures of ‘Michael’ and ‘Georgette’ Ludendorff persisted with three further offensive operations from late May through mid-July. He continued to believe that that the Allies were on the verge of collapse and all that was needed was the final decisive blow. All three of these offensives were directed against French positions between La Fère and Reims. Ludendorff hoped to draw off Allied reserves from the northern sectors of the front. This would weaken British positions ahead of a planned sixth German offensive, codenamed Hagen, that Ludendorff intended to launch in late July.



Map 5 Operations BLÜCHER, GOERZ, and YORCK (source: Map by Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D., Abilene, Texas, based on sketches and notes provided by David T. Zabecki).

Operation ‘Blücher-Yorck’ was conceived primarily as a diversionary battle rather than an attempt at a war-winning breakthrough. But on the first day of the attack, 27 May, the German Seventh Army achieved total surprise and pushed forward more than 22 kilometres, the largest single-day advance of the war on the Western Front. Ludendorff sought to exploit

this dramatic success by bringing in reinforcements and expanding the attack. In the following days German troops managed to reach the Marne, just 70 kilometres from Paris, but there the offensive stalled. As in the two earlier offensives, problems in bringing forward troops and artillery again crippled the German advance. Exhausted German troops also faced stiff resistance from French troops supported by eight fresh American divisions under French command. On 4 June Ludendorff called a halt to the offensive.

The final two spring offensives, 'Gneisenau' from 9 to 14 June and 'Friedensturm' (Peace Storm) from 15 to 17 July were smaller scale offensives that sought to reduce dangerous salients that previous German advances had created. Ironing out these inward bulges would shorten the German lines and free up troops for 'Hagen'. 'Gneisenau' achieved some limited initial success, primarily due to the fact that the French still had too many of their troops deployed in forward positions that were pounded by the opening German artillery bombardment. But the French quickly recovered and launched punishing counterattacks. By the time the fifth and final offensive began on 15 July German morale was at low ebb. The enthusiasm that had accompanied 'Michael' had long since dissipated, and the efforts of the previous months had left German forces exhausted. To make matters worse, the first wave of the influenza epidemic that was to sweep around the globe in 1918-19 hit the German forces in June and affected an estimated 140,000 soldiers. It was hardly surprising, then, that 'Peace Storm' quickly floundered. French intelligence detected German preparations, and information about the date of the attack was gathered from German deserters and escaped French prisoners. As a result, French troops were pulled back from the front lines and the initial German artillery bombardment, so lethal in 'Michael' and 'Georgette,' fell on empty trenches, while French artillery pounded the first line of German trenches filled with infantry waiting to go over the top. After absorbing the first three days of the German attack, on 18 July French and American troops, supported by over 500 tanks and 1,100 aircraft, launched a punishing counter-attack that forced a German retreat. In just four days of fighting the Germans suffered around 110,000 casualties including 30,000 dead. 'Friedensturm' failed both tactically and strategically. The 18 July Allied counterattack marked the end of German offensive action on the Western Front and the beginning of the relentless 100-day Allied rollback of German forces that would culminate with the Armistice.

In total the five German spring offensives resulted in almost 948,000 Allied casualties, including 225,000 prisoners. The Germans suffered 963,000 casualties, including a high percentage of their very best troops. Over the course of the four months of fighting more than 1 million American troops arrived in Europe, more than making up for the Allied losses. The Germans, however, were unable to replace their massive losses and found themselves in a much weaker position militarily than they had been at the outset of the spring offensives. Their front line had expanded from 242 miles to 316 miles, and they now had less well-fortified defensive positions and fewer troops to man them. Morale among the exhausted German troops plummeted, and defeatist attitudes became more prevalent. In one of his post-war writings Ernst Jünger, who had been a storm troop officer and one of the most highly decorated German soldiers in the war, recalled the downcast mood of his soldiers in the aftermath of the failed offensives: they 'fight with the old reliability, but without

expectations, I would like to say without hope and only because it is their duty...One can observe an exhaustion in expression and posture, which is also visible in the style of dying.’^x

Why did the last great German gamble fail to come off? The German army was simply not strong enough to accomplish a decisive *Vernichtungsschlacht*. Three long years of attritional warfare had left Ludendorff without sufficient troops to achieve the breakthrough he sought. Inadequate logistical support and lack of mobility also undermined German efforts to transform stalemate into a war of movement. Perhaps even more importantly, Ludendorff’s leadership and decision-making proved faulty. His habit of splintering his attacking forces and shifting objectives meant the German advances in 1918, while impressive in terms of territorial gains, were little more than breakthroughs into a void. In the end the spring offensives resulted in a clear defensive victory for the Allies and determined that the war would ultimately end in their favour.

ⁱ Hermann von Kuhl, chief of staff for army group commander Crown Prince Rupprecht, quoted in David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 94.

ⁱⁱ General Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memories 1914-1918* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1919), vo. 2, 543.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted from Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel. Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. The People’s War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 517.

^{iv} Zabecki, *German 1918 Offensives*, 55.

^v Quoted from Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *German Soldiers in the Great War. Letters and Eyewitness Accounts* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010), 173.

^{vi} Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. Translated by Ralph Manheim, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 198-99.

^{vii} Quoted from Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser’s Battle. 21 March 1918: The First Day of the German Spring Offensive* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 147.

^{viii} Statistics from Middlebrook, 322.

^{ix} Quoted from David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall. Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 73.

^x Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125*, first published in 1925, quoted in Matthias Strohn, ‘German Tactical Doctrine and the Defensive Battle on the Western Front’ in *World War I Companion*, edited by Matthias Strohn, 107-120 (Oxford: Osprey Press, 2013), 119.

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