

## *The Evolution of Strategic Thinking in World War I: A Case Study of the Second Battle of the Marne*

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In his often-cited but infrequently read classic, *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that war is an extension of politics by other means. Exactly what that now ubiquitous phrase means remains a topic of considerable scholarly debate. Generally speaking, however, a consensus has emerged that Clausewitz was urging policy makers to tie their use of military force to the political ends they wished to achieve. By keeping ends and means in harmony, political leaders can mitigate risk and avoid dangers like the phenomenon we now call mission creep.<sup>2</sup> This consensus also cites nineteenth-century Prussia as a model for how to achieve Clausewitz's vision; Otto von Bismarck, the wily Prussian/German chancellor, kept his war aims limited to the abilities of the Prussian army while taking great care not to involve his state in a long war that he feared it might not win.<sup>3</sup> He therefore had an appropriate understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank David Bercuson, Holger Herwig, Nancy Pearson Mackie, and Russ Benneweis for their assistance and hospitality in Calgary.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on Clausewitz is extensive and deep. At the risk of omitting many fine works, see, for starters, Antulio Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1983), and John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (New York, 2003), chapter 6. The standard translation of *On War* is edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (London: Bloomsbury USA, 2004) and Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), chapter 5. The latest biography of Bismarck is Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

what military force could achieve, and, maybe more importantly, what it could not achieve. As a result, he formed the unified Germany under Prussian dominance that was his strategic goal at an appropriate cost to his state's resources.

Despite Prussia's stunning success, however, European strategists soon wandered far from the model that Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder) set. War planning became exclusively focused on attaining victory at the operational level, which meant dissolving the careful link between military power and political goals that Clausewitz had seen as essential.<sup>4</sup> German planners came to see Clausewitz as a "theoretician to be read by professors" rather a source of strategic inspiration.<sup>5</sup> The war planning process of the great powers before 1914 was almost completely detached from political contingency. German planners, most famously Generals Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger, and nephew of Moltke the Elder) assumed that politics hardly mattered at all. No matter what brought Germany into war, their plans called for the rapid dispatch of seven of Germany's eight field armies to France. As it turned out, the crisis that produced the First World War only indirectly involved France as well as Belgium, an inoffensive nation whose invasion German war planners demanded not for political reasons, but to ease logistical dilemmas. Nor was war planning any more closely linked to political objectives in France. There, too, war planning aimed to achieve operational goals, not political results.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, one of the striking elements of the outbreak of war in 1914 is the wide gulf that separated military and political leaders in all of the belligerent states. Despite the existence of joint bodies ostensibly formed to allow for strategic debate, civilian political leaders knew shockingly little about their armies and what they were prepared to do in the name of the state. Prime Ministers René Viviani in France and Herbert Asquith in Great Britain did not know enough about their own military forces' war plans to contribute intelligently to strategic discussions. In the militaristic and autocratic states of Germany and Russia, the rulers were scarcely better informed,

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis Showalter, "From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890-1914," *Journal of Military History* Vol. 64, no. 3 (2000), pp.679-710.

<sup>5</sup> German General Geyr von Schweppenburg quoted in Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, "Introduction: On Strategy" in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Doughty, "French Strategy in 1914: Joffre's Own," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 67, no. 2 (Apr., 2003), pp. 427-454.

despite their longevity on their thrones and admiration of the trappings of military life.<sup>7</sup> One of the most illuminating anecdotes of the march to war in the crucial summer of 1914 has Kaiser Wilhelm asking Moltke to mobilize German armies only where the crisis required them to do so, in the east. Moltke told the Kaiser that such a scenario was impossible because the German army's mobilization plans allowed for no variations. "Your uncle would have given me a different answer," was his stinging, and telling, reply.<sup>8</sup>

With such a gap between the operational and political levels of war, it should perhaps come as no surprise that serious strategic thinking was so badly neglected. Armies did not craft war plan variants to meet a spectrum of political contingencies. Instead, they planned to win broad, sweeping wars of movement, encirclement, and annihilation to achieve the complete surrender of their foes.<sup>9</sup> Then, presumably, the victors would be in a position to write any peace terms they desired, thus achieving state aims. What they were to do in the event that circumstances (or the enemy) prevented them from achieving such a victory figured not at all. Schlieffen's inspiration, notably, was not Moltke the Elder's use of limited war to achieve desired state ends. It was instead Hannibal's annihilation of a larger enemy force at Cannae in 216 BC.

In part, this lack of clear strategic thinking may be attributable to the lack of genuine state interests in 1914. Imperial issues had long been settled; what tensions remained in Africa and Asia were clearly not important enough to spark a war. The two Moroccan crises had ended peacefully with compromises that pleased no one but removed the issue from the international diplomatic agenda. A similar "crisis" in Fashoda in 1898 had led not to war between the British and French protagonists, but to

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<sup>7</sup> This theme is common in Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig, eds. *Decisions for War 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The actual wording might well have been less dramatic, but an entry from the diary of Moritz von Lyckner, head of the Kaiser's military cabinet, and evidence from others present at high-level meetings confirm the general outline of the confrontation. See William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> For a deeper and highly original analysis of this problem, see Eugenia Kielsing, "Strategic Thinking: The French Case in 1914 (& 1940)," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 13, no. 1 (Fall, 2010), available at <http://jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/view/366/387>.

an entente. Similarly, hard liners had fumed over Morocco in 1905 and 1911 but no one had really wanted war; by 1914 even determined nationalists had stopped talking about it. German proclamations demanding a “place in the sun” and control of central Europe, moreover, were grandiose statements of a young and assertive nation rather than a genuine statement of strategic aims that Bismarck would have recognized. Even Alsace-Lorraine had largely ceased to be an issue for serious French strategists. Most Frenchmen in 1914 long given up the idea of fighting to recover the two provinces, knowing that any war for their reconquest would necessarily be offensive, meaning that France’s British and Russian allies would not be obligated to assist. France would therefore have to fight an offensive war against a numerically superior enemy on excellent defensive ground.<sup>10</sup> Such a war was unthinkable even to the *revanchistes* of the French Right, although if a war with Germany did break out, France would certainly demand the return of the two “lost provinces” should the opportunity present itself.

Nor were strategists any better able to articulate war aims once the conflict began. As a result, strategy often meant finding alternative places to win a war whose ultimate aims remained ill-defined or, in the case of Germany, so outrageous as to almost guarantee that the allies had no choice but to fight even harder. Strategic alternatives proved to be illusions, like the ill-starred Gallipoli and Mesopotamia campaigns, or operational successes that did not materially change the strategic picture, like the Gorlice-Tarnow campaign. For all of Germany’s success in the east, the Russians remained in the war until 1917; even then, German operational success came at the expense of injecting a Bolshevik virus that threatened to infect not just Russia, but Germany as well. That operational success soon produced a strategic challenge of its own as German leaders saw little point in winning a foreign war only to suffer defeat at the hands of a Bolshevik revolution at home.<sup>11</sup>

Strategic opportunities certainly existed, at least in theory. To cite one example, Germany might have approached the Allies in the fall and winter of 1917 with

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<sup>10</sup> For more, see Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 57-60.

<sup>11</sup> Thus the only major feature of the surrender terms Foch read to the German delegation at Compiègne that the latter sought to revise was the number of machine guns the Germans could keep. The delegates assumed they would need those machine guns to maintain order against a Bolshevist uprising. Foch, also fearful of Bolshevism, agreed.

reasonable terms and bargained from a position of strength. With Britain reeling from the failed Third Ypres offensive, unrest for France both at home and in the ranks, the revolution in Russia, and U-boats threatening maritime supply lines, Germany might have done well for itself at the bargaining table. A negotiated settlement that left Germany masters of central and eastern Europe and restored a *status quo ante* in the west would have been difficult, but surely not impossible, to achieve. It would certainly have been no more difficult than committing to a total war for total victory. We can never know how the Allies might have responded, and playing counterfactuals is always a precarious game, but it is likely that they would at least have listened. With the Americans still largely uncommitted and unbloodied, moreover, German diplomats might have found a way to end the war on acceptable terms before the Americans tipped scales. The Germans instead opted for yet another long odds gamble in the form of massive and costly offensives in spring, 1918.<sup>12</sup>

In part because there had been no sustained effort to develop genuine strategic aims, the war became a total war that could only end with the total surrender of one side.<sup>13</sup> The harsh, punitive treaties that Germany imposed on Romania (in 1916) and Russia (at Brest-Litovsk in March, 1918) had nothing to do with serious German strategic aims. They were instead a function of the logic of total war: greater sacrifices demanded greater spoils and German appetites only grew with the feasting. They did, however, force their remaining enemies to fight all that much harder in order to avoid a similar fate. Nor could France or Great Britain clearly articulate war aims other than the obvious one of restoring Europe to the *status quo ante* of 1914 (or, in many formulations, 1870). This stated strategic aim, however, masked the imperial ambitions of the victors, especially in Africa and Asia, where they coveted parts of the German and Ottoman Empires.

Thus an analysis of the First World War from a strategic viewpoint is no easy or straightforward intellectual exercise. Even as late as 1918, the duumvirate of Erich

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<sup>12</sup> My thanks to Bill Astore for helping me think through this and other issues in a discussing of an earlier draft.

<sup>13</sup> I use the term “total war” with all due hesitance after reading Eugenia Kiesling, “Total War, Total Nonsense or The Military Historian’s Fetish” in Michael S. Neiberg, ed. *Arms and the Man: Military History Essays in Honor of Dennis Showalter* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 215-242.

Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg could not articulate tangible or achievable strategic aims. Hindenburg demanded Courland and Lithuania in order to facilitate the movement of German forces “in the next war,” and Ludendorff famously justified his spring offensives with the strategic nonsense of “we will punch a hole. For the rest, we shall see.”<sup>14</sup> Lacking any sense of what military force was supposed to accomplish, they fought on in a quest for an illusion of total victory that proved manifestly unattainable.<sup>15</sup>

By the spring of 1918, however, the outlines of a modern strategic vision began to appear in the Allied camp under the powerful personality of French General (later Marshal) Ferdinand Foch. Foch’s rise came, ironically enough, as a direct result of the operational and tactical success of the German spring offensives. Foch had long warned that the Allies were unprepared to meet a large-scale German attack because they were, in effect, conducting three separate wars: a British war, which saw the western front as one option among many and saw the English Channel coast as the decisive piece of terrain; a French war, which saw the western front in life-or-death terms and saw Paris as the main center of gravity; and an American war, whose strategic goals remained unclear beyond General John J. Pershing’s insistence upon a separate American contribution on a dedicated part of the western front. The Americans had even refused to formally join the alliance, calling themselves an “associated power.”

The astonishing success of the German spring offensives shocked the Allies out of their strategic inertia. The German attacks threatened to separate the French and British armies, with the former heading south toward Paris and the latter heading north along their lines of supply. Such movements would open a massive gap in the lines that the fast-moving German units could exploit. If the Germans had indeed possessed a strategic vision for their campaign, they might well have been able to achieve a decisive triumph along those lines.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the Germans launched eccentric operations that could not easily support one another, while at the same time outrunning their own supply lines. They were fighting war to achieve total victory because they could not articulate any alternative strategic vision.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Murray and Grimsley, “Introduction: On Strategy,” p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> David Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (London: Routledge, 2006) makes a compelling case that the offensives lacked a grander strategic vision.

Nevertheless, the loss of so much territory and the fear that the Germans had discovered the secrets of modern warfare, had produced a panic among Allied leaders. The French government once more left Paris for Bordeaux and the commanders of the Allied armies struggled to find solutions to their new operational and strategic challenge. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig blamed the French for refusing to stretch their lines further north, while the French blamed the rapid collapse of the British Fifth Army under Sir Hubert Gough. Both had a point: lacking any higher direction, French and British forces naturally acted in their own interests rather than in the larger interests of the coalition.

With the possibility of losing the war looming, Allied political and military leaders called an emergency meeting for March 26 at the town of Doullens. Meeting in a room in the Hôtel de Ville, the conferees could hear the sounds of the rapidly-moving front as they debated what to do. The most important decision made that day was to grant Foch the authority “to coordinate the action of the Allied armies.”<sup>17</sup> In essence, Foch was now a generalissimo of the Allied armies with the power to determine military strategy. The Doullens agreement permitted the national commanders (including the French commander, Henri-Philippe Pétain), to appeal Foch’s decisions to their governments but in practice they conformed to Foch’s strategic principles. Foch’s control over a multi-national strategic reserve gave him an instrument through which he could provide or deny manpower as a way of obtaining compliance from Allied generals. On April 3, at Foch’s headquarters at Beauvais, the Allied governments extended Foch’s powers to give him even more direction over Allied strategy.

The agreement did not stop the Germans from advancing, but it did begin the process of forcing the Allies into developing a more coherent strategic approach to the war. Before examining the salient features of that strategy, it is worth briefly examining the man who put that strategy into operation. Foch was in some respects typical of the European generals of his time. In 1914, he was, like most of his peers, attached to the offensive as the only appropriate way to wage war. Like one of his heroes, Napoleon,

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<sup>17</sup> See Michael S. Neiberg, *Foch: Supreme Allied Commander in the Great War* (Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books Inc., 2003). Other recent works on Foch include Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and, in French, Jean-Christophe Notin, *Foch* (Paris: Perrin, 2008).

Foch believed that will and *élan* could overcome any material shortcomings that French soldiers might face on the battlefield. As a professor and later commandant of the *École Supérieure de Guerre*, Foch preached the offensive and the moral superiority of French soldiers to a generation of French officers, many of whom later died with their boots on while putting his ideas into practice.

As many other generals soon discovered, Foch learned that dogged adherence to the offensive was immensely costly in human lives. His 1914 and 1915 offensives led to the deaths of tens of thousands of men without materially changing France's strategic situation. In large part because of the futility of his approach, some French politicians wanted him to join the ranks of other generals forcibly retired or moved to desk jobs. His performance as the commander of the French part of the mostly British Somme campaign in 1916 improved his standing somewhat, but, like everyone else, Foch had no answers to the operational and tactical deadlock that had developed on the western front.

But if Foch was like his peers in many respects, in others he was clearly quite different. Unlike most of his fellow generals from 1914, Foch showed an unusual ability to learn. By his own admission, he had to forget all that he thought he knew about war and go back to basics. He threw out his reliance upon will and came to understand that modern wars were won not with superior *élan* but with the scientific application of modern weapons, most notably artillery. His time away from the western front in 1917 gave him a badly needed rest and a chance to reflect on the lessons of the war. Foch was thus one of the few men in a senior command position on either side of the lines in both 1914 and 1918. Unlike Sir John French, Joseph Joffre, Moltke, and countless others, he proved to be adaptable and able to recognize the changes the war was bringing.

Two other features about Foch are worth noting. First, he was almost alone among French generals in having never served in the empire. While Joseph Joffre, Joseph Gallieni, Hubert Lyautey, and many others made their names in places like Algeria, Indochina, and Madagascar, Foch remained in continental Europe his entire career. Convinced that France's security problems lay across the Rhine not overseas, Foch accepted less glamorous postings inside France while his peers chased adventure and glory in Africa and Asia. His time at the *École Supérieure de Guerre*, moreover, gave him time to digest the strategic theories of the day, including those of Clausewitz.

Perhaps more importantly, Foch had more experience with coalition warfare and great power politics than any other Allied general. In the years before the war, Foch had developed the general outlines of an Anglo-French strategic partnership with his close friend Sir Henry Wilson. Their partnership led to the deployment of the BEF on the French left wing in August, 1914. That fall and winter, Foch commanded the joint Anglo-French force that defended the Belgian town of Ypres and the Yser River against two strong German attacks. The experiences were not all positive; Foch is supposed to have remarked that after commanding a coalition, he had lost some of his respect for Napoleon. Nevertheless, these experiences, plus that on the Somme, gave Foch deep exposure to the intricacies of coalition warfare.<sup>18</sup> Thus in many respects Foch was an ideal candidate to direct the strategy of the Allied powers in 1918. In his new role as generalissimo, Foch could now begin to see the western front as one war. For the first time, the Allied war had one strategic coordinator, or, as Foch described it, the orchestra finally had a conductor.

Three elements of Foch's strategic vision deserve special note. First, Foch saw the western front as the only important theater of the war and the approaches to Paris, not the city itself, as the critical center of gravity. He favored the return of French troops from Italy and, while he could not directly determine the policies of the British government, he opposed any commitment of additional resources to peripheral theaters like the Middle East. In this sense, Foch's vision resembled that of most of his French colleagues, who saw the threat to Paris as nothing short of existential. He had to fight against those like British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who sought alternatives (in part because of his mistrust of Haig) and Pershing, who was willing to envision a retreat behind the Loire River, which required surrendering Paris, in order to gain strategic space.

Second, Foch sought better integration of the various national forces on the western front. Although he understood in principle that national units fight better under their national command structures, he demanded the flexibility to move divisions anywhere along the front where they might best be useful. He worked out an arrangement with Pershing to delay the creation of a separate American sector of the

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<sup>18</sup> Foch had also overseen the dispatch of French troops to Italy following the Caporetto disaster in October, 1917 and had spent several weeks with the Italian Commando Supremo.

front in exchange for a guarantee that American regiments would remain inside American divisions. Those divisions, however, could be placed inside French corps and armies to facilitate staff and logistical arrangements. Foch also assured Pershing that once the immediate crisis had passed, he would agree to the formation of a First US Army with its own sector of the front.

Finally, more clearly than most other Allied commanders, Foch saw the purpose of war as political. Unlike his German counterparts or even many of his Allied colleagues, Foch argued that fighting until achieving the unconditional surrender of German forces was unrealistic and unnecessary. As Allied forces eventually learned how to stop the Germans, then began to advance, they would extend their own supply lines while those of the Germans shortened. The Allies could also expect the Germans to fight much harder to protect their own soil. Such a war, Foch believed, would be far too costly and quite possibly interminable. Instead, the Allied armies should fight to put their politicians in a place to negotiate a favorable peace as quickly as possible. "I am not waging war for the sake of waging war," Foch told Woodrow Wilson's emissary Edward House in October, "If I obtain through an armistice the conditions we wish to impose on Germany, I am satisfied. Once this object is attained, nobody has the right to shed one more drop of blood."<sup>19</sup> Compare that statement to Ludendorff's "punch a hole."

Foch also believed that the processes of signing an armistice and negotiating a peace treaty were two related, but ultimately separate, processes. He successfully kept politicians from tinkering with what he saw as the demands the Allied militaries needed to attain to force the Germans to stop fighting. He was less successful in trying to elicit from the Allied political leaders what they saw as their ultimate aims for a postwar peace, partly because these aims remained unclear and unarticulated. Politicians were also reluctant to cede too much authority to a military man in questions that were not strictly military. Clemenceau largely shared Lloyd George's observation that "I love and admire Marshal Foch very much, but on political questions he is an

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<sup>19</sup> Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, translated by T. Bentley Mott (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1931), p. 463.

infant.”<sup>20</sup> Thus Foch, although kept in the dark on larger political matters, had a relatively free hand until the guns stopped firing.

The first few weeks of Foch’s tenure as generalissimo did not go as well as the politicians who extended his authority had hoped. In May and June, the Germans smashed through Allied lines twice more, placing pressure on the critical approaches to Paris. Foch urged patience, arguing that the Germans would soon reach their culminating point (another Clausewitzian term), meaning that they would be ripe for a major counterattack. Foch also knew that the German attacks had been terribly bloody, killing off Germany’s best troops, notably their irreplaceable and highly-trained storm troops, at incredible rates. Germany’s supply problems were also obvious to see; German units became nearly ungovernable once they overran Allied supply depots because the troops stopped to eat, drink, and loot. Foch knew that the Germans could not sustain such operations for much longer.

Foch’s strategy thus called for allowing the Germans to overextend then leave themselves vulnerable to a massive counterthrust. The German offensives had created several enlarged salients, or bumps, in the line. Difficult to resupply and exposed on three sides to attack, salients were inviting targets as long as an attacker could mass enough military force to threaten them from multiple angles. Foch hoped to crash into an exposed German salient, cut the rail and road lines that supplied it, and thereby force the surrender of isolated troops. Once they had destroyed one salient, the Allies could then attack others from the rear, implementing Napoleonic battlefield concepts on a theater level against Germany’s second and third line troops.

Not everyone agreed. Henri-Philippe Pétain, commander of the French Army, and army commanders like Marie-Émile Fayolle and Henri Giraud, preferred a strategy of defense. In their eyes, time was on the side of the Allies. With more than 20,000 Americans arriving in France daily, the scales would eventually tip over to the Allied side. The best strategy, they argued, involved slowing the Germans with elastic defenses in depth, but not attacking until 1919 when the Americans would be better trained and able to play a major role. Where they had been carefully implemented,

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<sup>20</sup> Jere Clemens King, *Foch Versus Clemenceau: France and German Dismemberment, 1918-1919* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 26.

defenses in depth had worked well; most of the German successes in spring, 1918 had occurred in areas where such defenses were lacking. To Pétain, the best offense was a good defense. While this strategy promised to save French lives and avoided the need for another costly round of attacks, it did not provide a way to end the war in the near future.

Sir Douglas Haig argued for a strategy aimed at, in his words, “what we intend to hold” rather than one that would help France “pay off old scores.”<sup>21</sup> Haig, like most British strategists, saw a virtue in leaving Germany strong enough to play a role in the future security of Europe. Following closely the outlines of British strategy in past wars, Haig hoped that a beaten, but not destroyed, Germany would help to balance out the postwar ambitions of other European powers such as Soviet Russia and, indeed, France. Allies they may have been, but the British and French did not entirely share a strategic outlook, a problem that manifested itself repeatedly during the Paris Peace Conference.

The longer the war went on, the greater voice the Americans would demand in the shaping of Allied strategy.<sup>22</sup> Pershing wanted his divisions to gain experience on the western front but conserve their main effort until 1919, by which time the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) could have as many as 100 divisions in the line, supported by enormous numbers of airplanes, tanks, and other modern weapons.<sup>23</sup> The Americans would then be a position to take over a dominant role on the battlefield, driving along the Metz-Saarbrücken line, cutting the railroads to Strasbourg and the critical juncture of Thionville. In the words of the American official history, “Together with the French interdiction of the rail lines to the north of Metz, this action would sever the German armies from the vital resources of Lorraine and the German left wing from the right and would precipitate the Germans to withdraw from some if not all of

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<sup>21</sup> Haig diary for October 19, 1918, cited in Andrew Wiest, *Haig: The Evolution of a Commander* (Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> See David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> It is highly unlikely that Pershing would have had the weapons he dreamed of at his disposal given the political and industrial problems in the United States. See the opening chapters of Linda Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

their lines from Belgium and France.”<sup>24</sup> If successful, such operations would break the Germans in two and theoretically allow for the more mechanized and mobile American and Allied forces to exploit the gaps in the German lines.

These alternative strategic visions had merit, most importantly the merit of slowing down the carnage the Allies had experienced for four years. But Foch saw an opportunity in mid-July along the Marne River. His reading of the strategic picture and the intelligence coming into his headquarters led him to believe that the Germans would attack in the region of Reims. Pétain remained convinced that the Germans would instead try to exploit their gains east of Paris and Haig feared that any attack on Reims or Paris would be merely a feint to cover a massive attack on British forces in Flanders.

Foch disagreed. He saw near Reims a chance not just to win an operational victory but to change the entire strategic course of the war. Here was a chance to put his vision into place. He believed that if he could amass enough force in and around the Soissons-Reims salient he could win not just a battle but a war. If he was right, then the Allies might have a chance to attack in open country without trenches. A rapid mobile war without fixed defenses was just what Foch wanted. He believed that the greater manpower and materiel advantages of the Allies, most importantly in tanks, gave them combat power that the Germans could not match.

Both Foch and Ludendorff understood the risks in the symbolic valley of the Marne. Ludendorff and his staff knew that a successful capture of the rail lines in Reims would enable a German drive on Paris, the only possible object of strategic value on the western front. Ludendorff, however, had still not worked out any strategic goal other than the capture of the enemy capital in the hopes that its fall would force the French to sue for peace. If they did not, or if the Americans and British decided to fight on, then even the seizure of Paris might not lead to German victory. War, for the German high command, still meant a quest for absolute victory. If he had succeeded on the Marne, Ludendorff’s next attack was not to be aimed at Paris but in Flanders,

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<sup>24</sup> American Military History, Volume II, The US Army in World War I, 1917-1919, US Army Center of Military History, p. 3, available online at: <http://www.history.army.mil/books/AMH-V2/AMH%20V2/chapter1.htm>.

revealing the scattered nature of this strategic thinking. Nevertheless, Ludendorff had convinced himself that “if my blow at Reims succeeds now, we have won the war.”<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, Foch saw the importance of the battle in almost identical terms, saying “if the German attack at Reims succeeds, we have lost the war.”<sup>26</sup> Foch was, however, reasonably sure that he had read the situation correctly and had done what he could to ensure victory. For weeks he had been moving units into the Marne theater to be prepared not just to defeat the German attack but to conduct a massive counterattack as soon as it became evident that the Germans had failed. Because German attention was focused on the eastern edge of the salient at Reims, Foch planned his counterstroke on the western edge, near Soissons.

To amass the forces he needed, Foch relied on his command authority over the multi-national strategic reserve. Although the Soissons-Reims sector fell inside the French portion of the western front, Foch’s careful husbanding of forces allowed him to move British, American, and even Italian units onto the western and southern edges of the salient. Many of these units arrived only at the last instant, making their trips arduous in the extreme, although the haste also helped to hide from the Germans the actual number of men, tanks, and airplanes assembling opposite them. The presence of heavy forests and Allied control of the air also helped to mask Allied movements. Foch planned a two-stage operation. The Allies would first allow the Germans to attack around Reims and Dormans, then, at the right hour, open up a furious counterattack near Soissons. As Foch noted, “circumstances seemed to favor the success of our enterprise,” even as Pétain continued to urge a cancellation of the offensive phase of the battle.<sup>27</sup>

Those circumstances included the kind of luck that comes from careful preparation. The interrogation of two captured soldiers gave the Allies the exact time and place of the German attack on Dormans. Allied gunners thus opened a counter barrage ten minutes before the start time of the German attack early on the morning of July 15, 1918. The barrage disrupted the careful timing of the German artillery, which

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Trask, *AEF and Coalition Warmaking*, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Jennifer D. Keene, *The United States and the First World War* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, translated by T. Bentley Mott (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1931), p. 354.

was crucial to supporting the infantry. Allied airplanes were over the skies as soon as the German attack began and Allied infantry was fully on alert. The German attack also struck a sector commanded by Henri Giraud, one of France's best defensive generals. He had overseen one of the most sophisticated and complex defenses in depth to be found anywhere on the western front. The German attack stood no chance of success.<sup>28</sup>

Three days after the Germans attacked, Foch ordered Allied forces to drive into the Soissons sector. They achieved complete surprise and caved in the western face of the salient. Foch had changed the war in an instant. Never again would the Germans come so close to Paris nor would they have the power to assume the offensive again. Hindenburg wrote of the events of July 18 "How many hopes, cherished during the last few months, had probably collapsed at one blow!"<sup>29</sup> Imperial Chancellor Georg von Hertling understood how much more desperate Germany's strategic situation had become:

At the beginning of July, 1918 I was convinced, I confess it, that before the first of September our adversaries would send us peace proposals. . . . We expected grave events in Paris for the end of July. That was on the 15<sup>th</sup>. On the 18<sup>th</sup> even the most optimistic among us knew that all was lost. The history of the world was played out in three days.<sup>30</sup>

The events on the Marne did not make Allied victory inevitable but, along with the continued arrival of tens of thousands of Americans on a daily basis, they almost certainly guaranteed that the Germans would never be able to win a decisive strategic victory. "This was the first great setback for Germany," Ludendorff wrote. "There now developed the very situation which I had endeavored to prevent. The initiative passed to the enemy. Germany's position was extremely serious. It was no longer possible to win the war in a military sense."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I cover the details of the battle in *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Paul von Hindenburg, *Out of My Life*, volume 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1921), p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in James Harbord, *The American Army in France, 1917-1919* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), p. xiv.

<sup>31</sup> *The Two Battles of the Marne: The Stories of Marshal Joffre, General von Ludendorff, Marshal Foch, and Crown Prince Wilhelm* (New York: Cosmopolitan Books, 1927), p. 224.

The Germans recovered and prevented a complete collapse in the Marne salient, proving once again how difficult it was to convert an operational success into a strategic victory. Nevertheless, the Germans had suffered a terrible defeat, losing more men than they did at the famous “black day” at Amiens on August 8. The tens of thousands of German prisoners, many of them 16 or 17 years old, convinced Foch and others that the Germans were at long last reaching the end of their manpower resources. That they were willing to surrender rather than fight to the death also hinted at a low level of morale.

After the victory on the Marne, it fell to Foch to implement his strategic vision in the hopes of winning the war in 1918. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, Pétain, Fayolle, and others wanted Foch to order a pause to allow French and British units to regroup and recover while the Americans bore the brunt of the battle. Foch refused, ordering all of his units forward to pursue the retreating Germans in open country before they could reach the safety of new lines. Foch saw a chance to end the war in the fall or early winter, before the weather gave the Germans some badly needed time to rest and reform. “We are not going to stop to breathe,” he told a frustrated Fayolle.<sup>32</sup>

By October, Foch had worked out the general framework of an armistice that had four tangible goals. First and foremost, it would require the Germans to surrender sufficient stocks of weapons to make a resumption of the war impossible. Second, the German navy had to be neutralized to end the blockade and permit the free flow of Allied shipping. Third, the Germans would need to surrender their conquests in France and Belgium, return Alsace-Lorraine to France, and permit Allied bridgeheads across the Rhine. The bridgeheads were ostensibly to make a 1919 military campaign easier should one be required, but it also allowed Foch and several of his senior subordinates to play politics in the Rhineland in the hopes of detaching it from Germany.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Foch wanted an armistice to put in place the conditions whereby the Allies could implement what later generations would call regime change and remove the Prussian leadership that he believed had forced Germany into war.

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<sup>32</sup> Jean Autin, *Foch* (Paris: Perrin, 1987), p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Clemenceau discovered these plots, reassigned several senior officers, and threatened to dismiss Foch from the French Army if these activities continued.

After much tough fighting and thousands more casualties, he famously got that armistice in the railway clearing near Compiègne on November 11, 1918. He then brought the armistice terms to Clemenceau, who knew almost nothing about their details until after the Germans had agreed to them. Placing the signed documents on the prime minister's desk, Foch said "My work is finished; your work begins."<sup>34</sup> Foch believed he had given Clemenceau the leverage the politicians needed to assure a future of security for France. His horror at the terms of the Versailles Treaty led him to boycott the signing ceremony and describe the treaty not as peace but as "an armistice for twenty years."

It is always a dangerous exercise to second guess the decisions of historical actors decades later. In this case, especially, we should be careful in judging the 1918 actions of those who lived through the deaths of millions, the start of a worldwide influenza epidemic, and the emergence of the Bolshevik menace. Historians are better served to explain the causes of events than they are to evaluate decisions made in the midst of crises. Whether Foch's strategy was the "right" one must always remain a matter of conjecture; all strategies, then as now, bring with them both strengths and weaknesses. We can, however, conclude this brief introduction into the strategic environment of 1918 with a few observations on the trade-offs involved in Foch's views.

First, Foch made the conscious decision to press the Germans as hard as he could in the months following the Allied victory on the Marne. Although this decision led to the deaths of thousands of men on both sides, keeping the war going into 1919 by no means guaranteed a less bloody result. But if Foch's thinking had come around to the logic of attritional war, the fictional Dick Diver had it right in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* when he observed that, at least on the strategic level, 1918 was not the "mass butchery" of Ulysses Grant in 1865.<sup>35</sup> Foch's goal was never to kill more of the enemy than the enemy killed of his men, partly because he could not count on the numbers being in his favor until very late in the war, and partly because, unlike his

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<sup>34</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *Foch: Man of Orléans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932), p. 405.

<sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald's beautiful passage is much more complex than I have allowed in this brief citation. I urge readers to consult the entire passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996 edition), 64. The book was originally published in 1933.

German foe Erich von Falkenhayn, he could not envision a battle that served no purpose but to kill.<sup>36</sup>

Second, and following on from the first point, critics then and now have argued that perhaps Foch ended the war too soon. People as diverse as French President Raymond Poincaré and John Pershing argued for pushing the war into 1919 and invading Germany. Doing so, they argued, would prove to the Germans beyond any shadow of a doubt that they had been beaten. It would also have allowed the Allies to make even harsher demands on a defeated foe. Tempting though the clarity of hindsight makes this viewpoint appear, we should not assume that an Allied invasion of Germany in 1919 would have prevented the rise of the Nazis. More to the point in 1918, Foch refused to accept the responsibility for the lives of the 50,000 to 100,000 Frenchmen alone whom he guessed would die in the effort to force Allied troops across the German frontier before the end of the year. "Enough blood has flowed," he told the members of the Supreme War Council. "That's enough."<sup>37</sup>

Third, Foch's building of a multi-national coalition formed a model that others, most notably Dwight Eisenhower, were later to follow and modify. Foch brought the efforts of the nations of the coalition together in a way that avoided the strategic anarchy of the anti-Napoleonic coalitions as well as the dominance of the larger partner that characterized Germany's World War I alliance with Austria-Hungary. Eisenhower modified Foch's system by creating a much larger multi-national staff and ensuring a greater unity of command, but he did not stray from Foch's model of national chains of command that ended with national commanders.<sup>38</sup>

Whether intentionally or not, Foch's strategy created second and third effects that also left important legacies. His bitter public arguments with Clemenceau over the terms of the final peace treaty contributed to the poisonous nature of French civil-military relations that endured long after the deaths of both men in 1929 (Foch in March, Clemenceau in September). His advocacy of harsh terms with Germany and the

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<sup>36</sup> See Robert Foley, *German Strategy and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Autin, *Foch*, p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Some discussion of Eisenhower's understanding of Foch's 1918 system is in Harry Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), pp. 137-138. Butcher was Eisenhower's naval aide.

formation of a separate Rhineland state tied to France by treaty and economics did little to help the post-war reconciliation that statesmen like Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresmann were trying to shape. These debates underscored the difficulties inherent in shaping strategy at the nexus of military affairs and politics. Clausewitz, above all, would have understood France's problem.