

The Meanings of 1917

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A Watershed Year in World History

Nineteen-seventeen represents a watershed moment both when seen from our perspective today and in the views of contemporaries. A short article like this one on 1917 could follow a standard recap of the main events of that year, including the two Russian revolutions (in February and October), the entry of the United States into the First World War, and the Balfour Declaration pledging British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This is the approach taken in a terrific exhibit in the National Museum of Jewish History in Philadelphia on which I consulted.² The importance of these events for the war and subsequent world history is so fundamental that any one of them might easily qualify for a separate article of its own. How much different would today's world look without any one of them? Rather than recap these events from 1917, this brief paper will try to put meaning and context into them, especially as they relate to the conduct of the war in that year. Nineteen-seventeen was as much a watershed on the battlefield as it was off of it.

¹ The author would like to thank Matt Davenport for his helpful critique on an earlier draft. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

² See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/arts/design/1917-exhibit-world-war-i-jewish-immigration.html>.

To begin with, we need to place 1917 in context, an exercise that might seem odd in an article aimed primarily at historians. Placing events in time is what, of course, we, as a profession are supposed to do.³ A few salient points seem worth highlighting. We know now, for example, that 1917 was the penultimate year of the war, at least as conventionally periodized.⁴ But contemporaries, of course, did not know what was to come. Even before the year was over, they were planning, especially on the Allied side, for a war lasting into 1918, 1919, or even 1920. They would fight a new kind of war mainly with armadas of airplanes and fleets of tanks, supplemented by unprecedented quantities of artillery and chemical weapons. Undergirding these ideas, of course, was an awareness that the armies of 1919 and 1920 would likely not have enough men to base a war-winning strategy on mass infantry.⁵

The pessimism of planning a war into 1920 speaks for itself, but it reflected the mood of the times. Nineteen-seventeen itself had begun on quite a pessimistic note. American president Woodrow Wilson, reelected to the White House in November 1916, had asked the great powers to state their war aims; they, notably, could not do so in any way that left room for Wilson to open negotiations that might reasonably lead to an end of the war in 1917.⁶ The obvious conclusion to reach was that the belligerents were not fighting for limited goals that an honest broker like the United States could arbitrate, but for a total victory that would only come when one side had completely overwhelmed the other.⁷ In such an environment, there was little that Wilson or the international socialist movement that met in the Hague in 1916 could do.⁸ War in early 1917 seemed to have become the permanent condition of Europe.

³ For one recent example, see Thomas W. Feiler, David K. Ekbladh, and Benjamin C. Montoya, eds. *Beyond 1917: The United States and the Global Legacies of the Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ For a view that challenges that periodization, see Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2016).

⁵ See Albert Palazzo, "Plan 1919 - The Other One," *The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 77 (1999): pp. 39-50.

⁶ Chapter 13 of Charles Seymour, ed. *The Intimate Papers of Colonel [Edward] House, volume two: From Neutrality to War, 1915-1917* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1926) gives an inside account of this process.

⁷ Arbitration by a "disinterested" power that renounced all gains for itself had ended the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. In the latter case, the Americans had led the negotiations, winning then-President Theodore Roosevelt the Nobel Peace Prize.

⁸ The socialists tried to meet in 1917 as well. See <http://www.socialhistoryportal.org/stockholm1917/background>.

Economic and military planners in the halls of power of London, Washington, Paris, Berlin, Ottawa, and elsewhere were therefore planning for a war that would not end until one side had thoroughly destroyed the other. People spoke of another Seven Years War, another Thirty Years War, or even, in the most apocalyptic imaginings, another Hundred Years War. Propagandists on all sides steeled their peoples for a long conflict. One post card in the collection of the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Peronne features a French baby emerging from an egg with a bayoneted rifle in his hands and asking the question “Y-a-t-il encore des Boches?” (“Are there still any Germans?”).⁹ The French National Museum of Education has many other examples, including one from 1917 showing two soldiers asking if the babies born in 1917 should just be called the Conscription Class of 1935, in order to save time later on.¹⁰ It would take a few decades to reveal the prescience of these depictions of generational war, but the central point remained: no end to the war seemed in sight in 1917. On this note, it is worth keeping in mind the awful fact that periodizations of wars lasting years or even decades existed for contemporary Europeans not in the realm of science fiction but in their own history. The events of 1914-1916 shattered hopes for a short war on the model of Prussia’s lightning wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870-1871), suggesting quite a dark future ahead.¹¹

In sharp contrast to the short war hopes of 1914, the experiences of the years 1914 to 1916 had shown the great fallacy of the arguments of men like the Polish banker Ivan Bloch and the British writer Sir Norman Angell who had presumed that modern societies would not suffer the costs of modern total war.¹² Each in their own way, they predicted that under the strains of war, entire economies would break, populations would demand peace, and the resources needed to conduct war would run dry, leaving states with no option but to opt for peace. Contrary to these expectations, however, European economies had held up in the face of intense warfare, as had the wills of the European people despite the hecatombs of Verdun, the Somme, and many others.¹³

⁹ <http://www.histoire.ac-versailles.fr/old/pedagogie/enfant14/graine.htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/musee/collections/fr/museum/>

¹¹ Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds. *An Improbable War?: The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture Before 1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

¹² Jan Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible?* (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1899) and Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (London: W. Heinemann, 1912).

¹³ See the essays in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, *Great War, Total War*

Even if most Europeans were sick of the war, they still demanded total victory from their governments, both to redeem the losses they had already incurred and to ensure sufficient gains to offset those losses. The rise to power of David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and the duumvirate of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff proves the point. All were committed not to finding a pathway to compromise but to the pursuit of a final victory, no matter the cost. If European populations continued to demand not peace but a complete victory, what hope was there of ending this war?

Thus it is worth noting what a watershed 1917 really was, especially if one argues, as I have elsewhere, that the outbreak of the war in 1914 came as a great surprise to a European populace that thought that the war scares over crises in Morocco in 1905 and 1911 belonged to a fading past.¹⁴ Instead, the shocks and surprises just kept coming with every week of war. Casualty lists grew, states like Belgium and Serbia all but disappeared under the weight of foreign occupations, and societies militarized in ways no one could possibly have anticipated. Within a few short months, Europe was barely recognizable, the stability of the prewar years now just a distant memory of a bygone age for which people were already becoming nostalgic.

And more change was coming. At the start of 1917, Imperial Russia was still a state, if a sometimes fragile-looking one; the United States was anti-German but still neutral; most of the Middle East was still under Ottoman control; and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, though under great stress, had not yet imploded despite the death in November 1916 of the aged Emperor Franz Joseph, who had ruled since 1848. The destinies of peoples, nations, and empires still had to be decided on battlefields, but the instability of the world was plain for all to see.

By the end of 1917, that instability had produced massive change that left people dazed and disoriented. The centuries-old Romanov dynasty had given way first to the fragile liberal democracy of Alexandre Kerensky then to the (depending upon one's point of view) inspiring or terrifying Soviet Union.¹⁵ In April, the United States became a belligerent and decided to mobilize its tremendous industrial, financial, and military

Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ See my *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Catherine Merridale provides a readable account of these complex events in her *Lenin on the Train* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016).

potential on behalf of the Allies, setting in motion a train that has not yet returned to its station.¹⁶ In the Middle East, Jerusalem was, by the end of 1917, in British hands, something hard to envision at the start of the year and impossible even to conceive in 1914. Finally, central Europe had, by December 1917, begun at long last to envision a future without the Habsburgs, who, however much some of their subjects despised them, had provided the glue for a disparate and fractious part of Europe.¹⁷ We cannot underestimate these seismic changes. Nor can we ignore the impacts they had on the people living through them. Keeping all of this change in mind should give us a sense of just how transformational this year really was.

The Changing Character of War

These changes, naturally enough, influenced changes in war fighting at all levels of war. First, 1917 ended the myth that the wills and capacities of the European peoples were unbreakable. In 1916, Europeans had tolerated, even accepted, the monumental casualties of unprecedented battles like the Somme and Verdun, on top of the deaths from 1914 and 1915, without much cause for consternation among the ruling elite. The exception that proves the rule is that what major disturbances there were in 1916 came very much on the peripheries from small groups of disaffected rebels, most notably in Dublin and in the Arabian Peninsula. The Irish Republican Brotherhood's rising in Dublin in April and the Hashemite Revolt in the Arabian desert that began in June would later have enormous implications, but at the time they seemed neither to be harbingers of the future nor any cause for serious concern in the capitals of Europe that peoples in Berlin, St. Petersburg, Paris, or Prague were ready to follow their example.

But 1917 was to be quite different and infinitely more frightening to the ruling elite. Soldier morale showed clear signs of finally coming apart. We think most obviously of the failures of Russian soldiers to continue their support of Kerensky's provisional government and the mutinies of French soldiers on the Chemin des Dames

¹⁶ Michael Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For another view of this process see Michael Kazin, *War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

¹⁷ Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* second edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

in April.¹⁸ But the problems ran much deeper. Even in the British Army, often thought of by historians as an exception to this pattern, more recent research is showing clear cracks in morale following the unmitigated disaster at Third Ypres. The British Third Army's censor, for example, reported in October that British soldiers feared that they were "drifting into an endless destruction and sacrifice" and had lost faith in their senior officers as well as their politicians.¹⁹

Civilian morale, too, showed cracks, in Russia especially, but not only. It does not appear any longer sustainable to connect the strikes in France in April with the soldier mutinies on the Chemin des Dames, but the correlation of the two events frightened French officials who had every reason to worry about a soldier-worker alliance against an ineffective wartime government.²⁰ The French had seen that combination before in the bloody horror of the Paris Commune of 1871. A need to avoid a repeat played a major role in bringing Georges Clemenceau to the prime minister's office with enormous powers in November 1917. In Germany, the so-called Turnip Winter of 1916-1917 led to a doubling of crime and a spike in labor unrest, most seriously in the summer of 1917 in Dusseldorf.²¹ There was no point in winning a war on the battlefield if the home fronts came apart.

In the German Army, we think of the end of 1918 as the start of major problems of indiscipline, but 1917, too, showed the cracks in this once-vaunted force. The 1917 parts of Hans Herbert Grimm's largely autobiographical novel of the war, *Schlump*, is replete with deserters making up their own worlds, turning abandoned churches into bars and railway stations into refuges for soldiers who had deserted their units and refused to return to the senseless butchery of the front. They often do so out of their anger at the stupidity of the war, but most commonly they do so in an attempt to care for their starving relatives at home. The eponymous character of the novel watches his own father starve to death because there is too little food, and he also watches as soldiers try to sustain themselves on watery soup and slices of bread so thin that the

¹⁸ Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 154.

²⁰ Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), chapter four provides an excellent micro-level study of French morale.

²¹ Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), chapters six and seven.

soldiers can see the moonlight shine through them. Even potatoes, a food many German peasants had once considered fit only to feed to livestock, had become rare delicacies.

One soldier tells Schlump that his two small children and his wife had nothing at all to eat. His two older children have had to stop their schooling to scrounge and beg. His oldest child lights his cigarettes with one mark notes because the money is useless for buying food that is no longer available for purchase at any price. Morality, too, has collapsed, as young men sleep with war widows and girls once of good character go off with pimps who promise them “a few scraps of silk” as payment.²² It might be worth noting that the pimps tempt the women with cloth, not food, which even experienced black marketeers find hard to obtain. The book is full of illegitimate pregnancies, alcoholism, and even a few suicides in a Germany that still believed it was winning the war. Still, as one railway worker said in the book, if the war did not end soon, the workers “would have to bring it to a close” themselves regardless of the consequences for the fate of Germany.²³

Throughout Europe in 1917 concerns about how much longer soldiers, sailors, and civilians would accept a war seemingly without end began to change strategic calculations. Clemenceau’s ascendance is a key case in point. When asked for specifics about his war policies he typically responded “Je fais la guerre” (I make war). His determination to win at all costs made him politically untouchable despite the many enemies he had made in government and in the press over his many decades of political infighting. One might also note the German desire to focus on the eastern front in 1917, in part to take sufficient food from Ukraine and what Timothy Snyder calls the “Bloodlands.” The German goal was to ensure that there would be no repeat of the Turnip Winter in Germany in 1918, even if occupied eastern Europe had to starve to death.²⁴

Second, with hindsight it is possible to see that 1917 reveals the start of a shift in the centers of gravity of what had become a truly global war. The traditional powers of

²² Hans Herbert Grimm, *Schlump* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics Edition, 2016), p. 186. The book was initially published in 1928.

²³ Grimm, *Schlump*, p. 190.

²⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012). See also Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and even Russia became constrained from a number of directions. From above, their movements became increasingly constrained by the United States, whose strategic goals did not exactly overlap with those of Britain and France, as Wilson's Fourteen Points quite starkly revealed. His calls for national self-determination, freedom of the seas, and a league of nations meant that even if they won the war, Britain and France might not be able to operate as independently and unfettered as they had in 1914. Wilson may have seen these reforms as positive changes, but Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George most surely did not. As Clemenceau later said of the president's idealism, "Wilson bores me with his Fourteen Points. God Himself was content to give us Ten."²⁵

From the imperial perspective, Britain especially became constrained by the desires of its Dominions to exercise a co-equal voice in wartime strategy. Here we can explore what Vimy Ridge means as a symbol of this transition. At least according to the national myth, it was on the heights of Vimy Ridge that Canada became a nation, earning a right to co-equal status by virtue of its sacrifices on the battlefield.²⁶ It was also in 1917 that Britain's former Boer foe, the South African Jan Smuts, joined the Imperial War Cabinet and the War Policy Committee, influencing those bodies to think much more about the war beyond France and Flanders. Australia provides another example of this phenomenon, as its politicians grew more assertive in demanding a voice in the direction of British strategy.²⁷ No longer were the colonies of the British Empire content to see themselves as subordinate to the mother country, as they had in 1914. They had sacrificed too much and their politicians had too much to answer for at home. The dynamic in the French empire was slightly different, but no less consequential for the relationship of the motherland to the periphery in places like Senegal, Algeria, Indochina, and Tunisia.²⁸

²⁵ http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/teachers/lesson_plans/pdfs/unit8_11.pdf and John Milton Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁶ Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

²⁷ John Connor, Peter Stanley, Peter Yule, and Jeffrey Grey, *The War at Home: Volume IV: The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁸ Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War, 1911-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Christopher M. Andrew and Alexander S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas. The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

Third, 1917 demonstrates a shift in emphasis at the senior levels of command from operations to strategy. In the French Army, this transition came after the removal of Robert Nivelle, the ill-fated architect of the disastrous Chemin des Dames offensive in April. Nivelle had begun from the assumption that the key to victory lay in modernizing the French Army's operational methods of war. By better coordinating artillery with infantry, by introducing armor and aviation, and by just pushing harder, the French Army would break the German lines on the heights of the Chemin des Dames and restore mobility to the battlefield.²⁹ There is little evidence, however, that Nivelle had thought much about what was to come next. Political and strategic victory would somehow follow on from operational victory.³⁰

We are thus left to ask of Nivelle, or Field Marshal Douglas Haig at Passchendaele, or General Arthur Currie at Vimy for that matter, the same question I ask my students to contemplate when we are standing on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Assume for a moment that Pickett's charge had worked and the Confederates had broken the Union line on Seminary Ridge on July 3, 1863. What then? Would that operational victory really have led to a great Confederate strategic victory? Would it really have produced the outcomes that William Faulkner so vividly imagined in *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948? Thinking of 1863, he wrote: "we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This Time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose than all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago."³¹

Lyrical it is a lovely, evocative passage and a shining example of how to use words to craft an image. But when I read it to my students on the Confederate High Water Mark, I ask them how it sounds as a piece of military analysis. What would have followed a Confederate victory on that ground? Could desperate, tired, bloodied men have really chased the Union Army all the way to the golden dome of Washington? I sincerely doubt it, just as I doubt that even an Allied operational victory on the Chemin

²⁹ Nivelle's plan relied heavily on Senegalese soldiers. Consequently they suffered enormous casualties.

³⁰ Michel Goya, *La Chair et L'Acier: L'armée française et l'invention de la guerre moderne, 1914-1918* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004).

³¹ William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 190.

des Dames or the Passchendaele Ridge would have made much difference because operational victory was no longer the key to winning wars that it had seemed to generals in 1815, 1863, or even 1916.

Ferdinand Foch, named chief of the French general staff in the wake of Nivelle's disaster on the Chemin des Dames, saw the role of battle differently.³² Notably, we do not have a catchy name for the coalition battles that Foch coordinated in 1917 and 1918. We call Haig's battles at the battles of the 100 Days, but Foch's have no easy descriptor, and not only because the battles of the 118 Days is a less elegant phrase.³³ Nor would Foch have been too much bothered that his battles are not really remembered as such today. For Foch understood that winning battles mattered little to final victory; the Germans had won battle after battle, at tremendous human cost, without materially affecting their chances for a permanent victory. Foch was at first nearly alone in perceiving this critical shift in emphasis to the strategic level of war. Henri-Philippe Pétain, his fellow general and sometime rival, never did make this transition, nor, one could argue, did Haig or American Expeditionary Forces commander General John J. Pershing.³⁴

Foch was among the few generals who had internalized the Clausewitzian maxim that war is an extension of politics by other means. Victory, therefore, would come from setting political objectives and then tailoring military resources to achieving them. Taking a ridge, or temporarily breaking a line, or attriting the enemy would not achieve those ends without an effective linkage to a political end state. Foch's time as commandant of the French Army War College gave him a deep appreciation of Clausewitz. This appreciation helped him adapt his thinking about the war between 1914 and 1917 and to be one of the few senior commanders from the beginning of the war still in command at its end after so many others from John French to Joseph Joffre to Helmuth von Moltke had faded from the scene.

Foch's view of war, developed in 1917, produced the armistice that ended the fighting in the west. In October, 1918, Foch wrote to Prime Minister Georges

³² Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³³ Beginning with the Second Battle of the Marne in July, 1918.

³⁴ Gary Sheffield may well disagree with me here. See his *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press, 2014).

Clemenceau with the request that the French government dispatch to his headquarters a liaison officer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Foch wanted to be informed, he told Clemenceau, about “your views and those of the Allied governments regarding the terms of the Armistice.”³⁵ That the Allies read his request as a threat to their authority over political matters speaks volumes about their own lack of experience at strategic level thinking. Foch’s laser focus on the strategic level of war did cause friction with the politicians and it did produce its own drawbacks, most notably in his conflicts with Clemenceau over the future of the Rhineland and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.³⁶ Foch was so furious about the latter that he boycotted the signing ceremony and later waged a war of memoirs with Clemenceau.

Fourth and finally, 1917 marks the end of a belief in technology as a war winner of its own. Throughout 1916 war planners had put their faith in a number of potential technological advances, including the Eindecker single-wing fighter plane, the tank, and the flamethrower. To be sure, all of these technologies had potential and all of them terrified their opponents. But the advantages they provided proved ephemeral. The so-called “Fokker Scourge” of 1915 that led German planners to believe in the permanent superiority of German aviation had begun to fade as early as April 1916 with the appearance of the French Nieuport 11 and new tactics for their use. The battles of 1917 proved that the side with the latest technological edge could not rely on that edge alone to provide victory.

Although Pétain famously said after he quelled the Chemin des Dames mutinies that France would wait for the tanks and the Americans, even he knew that the tanks by themselves could not possibly win the war. They required massive industrial investments, trained mechanics, and several more generations of research and development to make them decisive. In 1917 they were still far too unreliable to win a war on their own. Clever and far-sighted commanders began to accomplish a great deal with these technologies on their own and in combinations, but in places like the Chemin des Dames and the Ypres salient, the terrain and the difficulties of employment greatly

³⁵ *The Memoirs of Ferdinand Foch*, edited and translated by T. Bentley Mott (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 457.

³⁶ Foch wanted to see the Rhineland detached and made its own state, tied to France by economics and mutual security guarantees. Clemenceau and Lloyd George were opposed and resented what they saw as Foch’s meddling in civilian affairs.

limited their utility. This is not, of course, to argue that technology was irrelevant, merely that by 1917 faith in its ability as a war winner had waned.

In its place came a new emphasis on soldiers, as in the German Hutier or storm troop tactics. These methods relied on technology, to be sure, but they were at base less an innovation in technology than in command and control. The key lay not in bringing some new secret technological solution to the battlefield, but in devolving decision making to lower levels of command. Soldiers, not weapons, would win the war.³⁷ American “open warfare” methods similarly did not depend primarily on technological innovations. Instead, General John Pershing assumed that American doughboys would win battles using their rifles, supported by limited numbers of field artillery pieces and the occasional tank.³⁸ Arguably, the most famous American engagement in the war, that at Belleau Wood, is celebrated at least in part because the Americans allegedly won it by the sheer will and courage of the soldiers and marines fighting in a place so geographically constrained that it neutralized technological advantages in favor of rifles and bayonets. Such a memory of the battlefield focuses on the human dimension and the heroism of the Americans, but it ignores the high levels of casualties that unsupported American troops suffered to take strategically insignificant ground.

Foch recognized what Pershing had not, namely that the key to winning the war lay not in winning battles, but in convincing the Germans to lay down their arms. He knew that doing so in 1917 or 1918 would not be spectacular and it would not come after just one battle, à la Jena in 1806, Waterloo in 1815, or Könningratz in 1866. It would instead come from forcing the Germans to acknowledge that they had less to lose by agreeing to an armistice than they did by continuing to fight. Germany’s Erich Ludendorff, by contrast, said the goal of his 1918 spring offensive was to “punch a hole, then we’ll see.”³⁹ He was trying to win a campaign, but Foch was trying to win a war.

Foch’s approach, developed in 1917, carried with it a number of assumptions, each with implications for the peace and the postwar years. First, he assumed that victory need not be total. The key lay in breaking German will before the Germans

³⁷ Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

³⁸ Mark Ethan Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁹ David Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in The Operational Level of War* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 29.

could break Allied will. The events of 1917 had shown him that Allied will was not an inexhaustible resource. "I am not making war for the sake of making war," he once remarked. "If I obtain through the armistice the conditions that we wish to impose on Germany I am satisfied. Once this object is obtained, nobody has the right to shed one more drop of blood."⁴⁰ Second, Foch's focus was on Germany, meaning that imperial issues and even eastern Europe did not enter into his calculations. And finally, Foch recognized that the politicians, not the soldiers, had the ultimate responsibility for signing a final peace treaty. His job as he saw it was to set the preconditions through an armistice for them to negotiate a that treaty and thereby ensure a lasting peace. That they failed to do so is a topic for another paper.

⁴⁰ Foch, *Memoirs*, p. 541.