World War I in Outline The Course of the War 1915-1917

1. 1915
   a. War at Sea
     i. Tirpitz’ naval strategy proves bankrupt. Having built a "risk fleet," neither he nor the Kaiser would dare to risk it. Germany begins the war with no naval strategy at all to speak of.
     ii. Great Britain imposes a naval blockade on Germany
        (1) Germany's Emden and a squadron under Graf Spee cause serious headaches without threatening anything truly vital.
     iii. Most significant naval surface action is the cruiser Goeben, caught in the Mediterranean Sea abut escaping to Turkey, where it is given to the Ottoman Empire. This is a factor of consequence in the Turkish declaration of war in November against Russia.
     iv. Submarine warfare: since the Germans cannot raid commerce on the surface, they turn to the submarine. Declaring a war zone around Great Britain, where all vessels will be sunk on sight, they sink the Lusitania on May 7, 1915, killing about 1100 civilians.
        (1) Inflames U.S. public opinion
   b. War in Africa
     i. German colonies quickly snapped up
     ii. The exception is German East Africa, where a remarkable man, Col. Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck led a 5,000 man force, barely 5% of whom were Germans, in a stubborn and brilliant guerrilla war against mostly Commonwealth troops. At war's end, he had invaded an enemy colony, and there surrendered his men, unbeaten. Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign is the most extraordinary of the war, and one of the most extraordinary in military annals. Lettow-Vorbeck went into retirement, refused all blandishments by the Nazis, and survived the bombing of World War II. He was persona non grata in British Africa since he had demonstrated that black African troops could defeat Europeans if well led.
   c. Western Front
     i. Of the uses and misuses of military theory: "'To introduce into the philosophy of war a principle of moderation would be an absurdity. War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds.'" (Clausewitz qtd in Liddell Hart 61) "'Each of the adversaries forces the hand of the other, and a reciprocal action results which in theory can have no limit.'" (Stokesbury 91)
        (1) Clausewitz actually points out that reality limited the development of theoretical limits. His theoretically absolute war had never been fought.
     ii. "The states of preindustrial, prepopular-government world had
never managed to engage in 'total' war. They had never been able to raise the money for it, they had never been able to conscript sufficient numbers of their subjects or citizens to wage it, they had never been able to produce enough surplus from a subsistence economy to generate immense amounts of war matériel . . . . Governments could generate credit, factories could spew out guns, planes, and endless ammunition supplies, and men could be induced to die for slogans in greater numbers than ever before." (Stokesbury 91)

iii. Fruitless offensives in the West, initiated by a French military doctrine of the offensive at all costs.

iv. The Commanders: French General Joseph Joffre and the new German Chief of Staff Erich von Falkenhayn

(1) French offensive at First Battle of Champagne Jan.-Mar. 1915

(2) German offensive at Second Battle of Ypres in April-May

(a) Germans first use chlorine gas, as create a gap in the Allied lines

(i) Unsurprising that Germany, with its superb chemical industries, would use this weapon first. It was first proposed by "Professor Haber, a distinguished chemist of Jewish origin," (Liddell Hart 69)

(b) Falkenhayn did not believe poison gas would work, and made no provisions to exploit it.

(3) French offensive at Vimy Ridge in May

(4) French Second Champagne offensive in September

(a) Falkenhayn digs a second line of defense deep behind the first, out of range of Allied guns

(5) French offensive at Third Battle of Artois in October

(6) British offensive at Loos late September

(a) British use gas

(b) German machine gunners called it the Leichenfeld von Loos--the corpsefield of Loos

(c) As a result of bitter complaints, British commander Sir John French is replaced by Sir Douglas Haig: a mule was being replaced by a donkey.

v. The Butcher's Bill for Western Front 1915 alone

(1) Britain: 279,000 and the end of its professional, pre-War army

(2) Germany: 612,000

(3) France: 1,292,000 (add this to 980,000 in 1914)

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight? Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows? Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish
Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked? Stroke on stroke of Pain—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
And from their hair and through their hands’ palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk in hell; but who these hellish?

Wilfred Owen

d. War in the Mediterranean

i. Turkey's hostility poses a really serious problem for Russia, since it blocks the logical entry port for munitions and supplies of all types. To all intents and purposes, Tsarist Russia is strategically isolated. Its armies become increasingly desperate for weapons, munitions, clothing, and food. This contributes in a very important way to Russia's collapse and the Russian Revolution.

ii. Gallipoli in April 1915 potentially could have solved this problem. A successful landing there could have opened the Straits and led to the fall of Constantinople, which would deprive the Turks of their only source of munitions (Liddell Hart 78) The operation is horribly botched, and the British eventually evacuate after 214,000 casualties.

(1) The Turkish Army in the region was trained and commanded by German General Liman von Sanders, (who was a Jew, which must have been rare in the German army, especially since he has the "von" in his name indicating nobility; and how many Jewish generals have commanded Moslem troops? I do not, unfortunately, know more about this man's biography than this). The local Turkish commander was Mustapha Kemal, later called Atatürk, head of the Turkish state.

e. War in the East

i. Battle of the Masurian Lakes: Ludendorff mauls a Russian army in February, forestalling an offensive

ii. Austrians launch an offensive in Galicia in April, with German Generals Mackensen in command with Hans von Seeckt as Chief of Staff.

(1) Von Seeckt introduces the tactical idea of reinforcing success and by-passing strong points, which became the basis for German tactics in 1918. (Liddell Hart 86)

(2) The Russians are rolled back with heavy losses. The sheer size of the front, primitive road conditions, and Germany's other commitments prevent an effort adequate to finish the Russians off.

(a) The Russian armies were badly mauled and no longer pose a direct threat to Germany
b) The Russian armies were desperate for munitions. This is the chief reason for their defeat.

iii. Destruction of Serbia
   (1) Germany concludes a treaty with Bulgaria to bring them into the war.
   (2) Mackensen crosses the Danube while the Bulgarians invade in Serbia's rear. Caught, the Serbian army is driven through Albania. Survivors were picked up by the British and moved to Salonika.

f. Italy's Entry into the War
i. Treaty of London 1915
   (1) Allies offered Italy Trieste, the Trentino, South Tirol, Gorizia, Istria, and northern Dalmatia to enter the war.
   (2) The Italians begin a series of battles on the Isonzo River--11 in all from 1915 to 1917. At the end of that time, they had hammered their way all the way to the Isonzo River.

2. 1916
a. Verdun: This battle comes to symbolize the entire French war effort and experience. Its psychological impact lasts long after the battle itself is over.
   i. Von Falkenhayn decides to "bleed the French white" by attacking a point that the French would be forced to defend to the end.
   ii. Offensive opens in February, and achieves a strong advance, but fails to break through.
   iii. Gen. Henri Pétain is placed in command of the sector. Pétain differs from most French generals in that he is not so enamored of the offensive and believes that "Fire kills."
      (1) Pétain opens up la voie sacrée, a single road under steady shell fire to supply the entire salient. He institutes a rotation system, pulling troops out of the line at regular intervals. This means that some 70% of the entire French Army experienced the hell of Verdun first hand. (Stokesbury 146) The French poilu swore "Ils ne passeront pas." and they didn't, but at truly hideous cost.
   iv. The battle lasted 10 months. At the end, neither side had won. The "meat grinder" had ground up both sides.
   v. The battlefield is not large, and, taking into consideration size of the field, duration, concentration of forces, conditions of life, and casualties, Verdun might be the "worst" battle in recorded history. (Horne 327)
      (1) Combined casualties are somewhere around 420,000 dead and 800,000 gassed or wounded. The French reburied 150,000 unidentified or partial bodies in an ossuary after the war. The French lost perhaps 542,000 men and the Germans 434,000. One can't be precise because bodies
were blown up, dismembered, buried, exposed, blown up again, buried again, etc. etc. Different authorities vary, but all figures are ghastly. (Horne 328, Stokesbury 147-8)

(a) As a comparison, British Empire casualties for all of World War I were: 353,652 dead, 801,529 wounded, and 90,844 missing. (Horne 328)

(2) The battleground remains to this day very dangerous as a result of unexploded ordnance. I have a friend who left the guide paths and immediately saw numerous unexploded mines and shells.

vi. Neither the French nor the German army was quite the same. There was never as much trust in their leaders. The fighting was senseless, horrible, and futile beyond imagination.

vii. The "Verdun Mentality"—Joffre was fired during the battle, and Pétain became a national hero.

(1) In the post-war era, Pétain emphasized the use of massive field fortifications, noting that the Verdun forts stood up to inconceivable hammering. French military outlook becomes static and defensive (a trait that culminated in Dien Bien Phu).

viii. Von Falkenhayn is also fired, and replaced by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who swiftly become not only the military commanders, but also virtually the German government as well.

ix. A remarkable number of German leaders in World War II saw action at Verdun: Manstein, Guderian, Rommel, von Brauchitsch. They came up with different solutions.

x. Military innovations

(1) A modern conception of an air force, as both sides sought to control the air over Verdun in order to spot for artillery.

(2) Use of trucks to supply a large battle over an extended period of time.

(3) Use of phosgene gas.

(4) Introduction of the flame thrower.

(5) Use of infiltration tactics by the Germans.

But War,—as war is now and always was
A dirty, loathsome, servile merder-job;--
Men, lousy, sleepless, ulcerous, afraid,
Toiling their hearts out in the pulling slime
That wrenches gum-boot down from bleeding heel
And cakes in itching arm-pits, navel, ears;
Men stunned to brainlessness, and gibbering:
Men driving men to death and worse than death;
Men maimed and blinded; men against machines—
Flesh versus iron, concrete, flame and wire:
Men choking out their souls in poison gas:
Men squelched into the slime by trampling feet:
Men, disembowelled by guns five miles away,
Cursing, with their last breath, the living God
Because He made them, in His image, men . . .

Gilbert Frankau

b. The Somme

The Somme holds the same mythological place for Great Britain as Verdun has for the French. In this battle, the rebuilt British Army, made up for the first time of conscripts instead of professionals, is shattered uselessly. The first day of the Somme is the bloodiest day in British history, and in the history of World War I.

i. There was no special military significance to the Somme sector--it was convenient.

ii. The British amassed the largest concentration of guns to date in history, and fired the heaviest barrage in history to prepare the advance. The British amassed 1,500 guns to 18 miles of front; the French sector had an even higher concentration.

iii. When the advance came, the British found that the German wire had not been cut by the barrage nor had the German machine gunners been killed. They crawled out of their bunkers and massacred the heavily laden troops.

(1) The cream of the British Public Schools, the cream of the British middle class, was slaughtered that day.

(2) It is the worst day in the history of the British Army: over 19,000 killed and about 38,500 wounded, in most cases without actually reaching the first objective. (Stokesbury 154)

(a) In 40 minutes, a battalion from Newfoundland with 752 men lost 658 men and all 26 officers killed or wounded: 91%.

iv. The battle becomes a monster, with Haig throwing in new attacks because he couldn't think of anything else better to do.

v. When it ends, Britain had lost 420,000 men, the French 195,000, and the Germans 650,000. Nothing had been accomplished. (Stokesbury 156)

c. The Naval War

i. Two earlier surface engagements at Heligoland Bight and Dogger Bank were inconclusive.

ii. Admiral Reinhard Scheer named new commander of the High Seas Fleet.

(1) Receives permission to sortie the fleet.

iii. Sir John Jellicoe, picking up increased wireless traffic and having the German naval code, sorties as well.

(1) Note the use of technology to provide intelligence.

iv. In Churchill's words, Jellicoe was the only man who could lose the war in a single day. Jellicoe was far more aware of this than
anyone else. Also, he probably had an unparalleled technical knowledge not only of the strengths and weaknesses of his own fleet, but also the Germans’. To put it bluntly, despite its superior size, the Royal Navy had serious weaknesses. There are those who criticize Jellicoe’s handling of the Fleet, but their criticism is based on poor understanding of the problem.

v. The Battle of Jutland. May 31, 1916 is the largest battleship engagement in history. It also is the last great naval battle fought only in one dimension.

1. The battle cruiser screens engage first, and the Germans try to lure the British onto the main fleet. Here, the Germans maul the British.

2. Despite being hampered by an almost complete lack of communication from his cruisers, Jellicoe puts his main force into a favorable position to attack Scheer’s main force.

3. Scheer extricates himself with taut ship handling and escapes.

4. Jellicoe pursues into the night, but the forces pass each other by.

5. Tactically, the battle is inconclusive; since the Germans retire, the battle is a strategic victory for Jellicoe. The next task of the High Seas Fleet will be the mutiny at Kiel that topples the Kaiser.

(a) Ship for ship and pound for pound, the German ships were superior, and that in turn reflects technological superior of German industry over an aging British steel industry.

d. The War in the East

i. The Brusilov offensive


2. Brusilov uses these tactics against the Austrians, and cracks the front open, and threatens the Carpathians.

(a) As he advances, his communications become even worse, and he received no effective help from other Russian armies, whose commanders were jealous of him. The Germans switch troops to shore up the Austrians, and Brusilov’s men are stopped by exhaustion. The battle drags on in a standard meatgrinder. Both sides lose a million men.

(3) With this million casualties just before the winter, the Russian Army is finished. Ironically, its greatest success of the war seals its fate.

ii. The Entry and Fall of Romania
Desiring Transylvania from Hungary, and believing Brusilov's offensive would get it for them, Romania declares war on Austria. They wait too long, and they attack in the wrong direction (instead of south into Bulgaria to link up with the Allied enclave at Salonika, they attack west into Transylvania).

Von Falkenhayn, fresh from being fired, takes command of this section, and crushes the Romanians.

3. 1917

a. The Western Front

i. The **Nivelle Offensive (Chemin des Dames)** April 16th

1. Gen. Robert Nivelle is named head of the French armies, and promises an offensive that will win the war in a single stroke.

2. The Germans, quite independently, decide to concentrate on the Eastern Front, and therefore build a defensive line behind their front, the **Hindenburg Line**, in order to shorten the front and free troops up.

3. Nivelle's security is so unbelievably lax that the Germans were as well informed as the French.

4. Behind the powerful Hindenburg Line, well-prepared for the attack, the Germans massacre the poilus, who struggle for weeks, believing that this last sacrifice would win the war.

5. By May 5, 120,00 French have been lost and divisions moving to the front begin baa-ing like sheep.

6. By May 15, the poilus mutiny. They refuse to attack. The French Army has been broken.

7. Henri Pétain replaced Nivelle, and acts to restore order. In large part, this requires giving some attention to the material needs of the troops, who were certainly the worst treated by their own government.

8. The men will defend the trenches, but they refuse to attack. It will be a year before the French take the offensive, and no longer will they or could they bear the brunt of the fighting. The doctrine of *L'attaquee à outrance* has broken the sword of France.

9. Amazingly, the Germans never learn of the mutiny! This in itself indicates that the men were not lacking in patriotism.

ii. **Third Ypres (Passchendaele)**

1. Sir Douglas Haig, confident of victory, now prepares his breakthrough (he was careful to keep large bodies of cavalry--as in sabers and horses--behind the lines to exploit the breakthrough in truly Napoleonic fashion.

2. The bombardment began July 18. The offensive began July
31. In the meantime, the bombardment turned the battlefield into a bottomless pit of mud.

(3) Ypres is below sea level. It is kept dry only by elaborate dikes and drainage systems, all of which had been blown to hell long ago.

(4) Summer is a rainy time in Flanders. It began to rain very heavily August 1.

(5) The mud of Flanders is bottomless, clinging, and indescribable. It is not possible to move across the muddy fields unless one puts down duckboards.

(6) Flanders is flat. What little heights existed were in German hands.

(7) Flanders is probably the worst place in Europe to launch an attack, maybe the worst place in the world. Conditions are truly hideous and all advantages lie with the defender.

(8) A British staff officer, upon actually getting within five miles of the front, burst into tears and said "My God, did we send men to advance in that?"

iii. "The Love Battles":

"This Western-front business couldn't be done again, not for a long time. The young men think they could do it again, but they couldn't. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. . . . Why this was a love-battle--there was a century of middle-class love spent here . . . . All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself here with a great gust of high explosive love . . . ."

F. Scott Fitzgerald  Tender is the Night 57

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

(1) "Verdun and the Somme and Passchendaele were 'love battles,' and that the only people who could fight them were those who possessed a sublime faith in their countries, their institutions, and their own unquestioned value systems. Only that kind of security, that kind of unthinking confidence, armored men sufficiently to endure the hell of such battles. Now those men were gone."

(Stokesbury 243)

b. America's Entry into the War

i. The sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915 had outraged US public opinion as well as Woodrow Wilson (despite the fact that the ship was carrying both military supplies and personnel).

ii. The sinking of the Arabic in August brought about a real threat of a US declaration of war. The Germans back down, and pledged to follow international law in submarine attacks. They also reduced submarine operations.

iii. By 1916, the British blockade is beginning to have a serious effect, and pressure builds within German military circles to resume unrestricted are.

iv. In March, 1916, the cross-Channel steamer Sussex was torpedoed, costing some American lives. Wilson threatens to sever diplomatic relations. Germany again backs down, and the Sussex pledge commits Germany to pre-war rules, which eliminates submarines as a commerce raider.

v. By the end of 1916, the blockade is causing very severe problems in Germany--1916-17 is Germany's Turnip Winter. The potato
crop that harvest was half pre-war levels. With an official normal intake of 2,250 calories, rationing provided only 1,350 calories in early 1916, and only 1,000 calories during the Turnip Winter—a starvation diet for those who could not afford the black market. An estimated 750,000 Germans starved to death. In addition, the surviving population was weakened for the influenza epidemic of 1918, which killed more people than the war itself—6,000,000 in India alone. The epidemic moved from east to west, and struck Germany before it reached the Allies. (Holborn 460, Stokesbury 278)

vi. Germany had constructed 100 new submarines. German naval planners estimated that they could sink 600,000 tons per month, enough to starve Britain into submission by August of 1917. (Holborn 458, Liddell Hart 141)

vii. Hindenburg and Ludendorff are now the de facto rulers of Germany.

(1) Bethmann-Hollweg strenuously opposed the resumption of submarine war since it would certainly lead to the entry of the United States into the war.

(2) Hindenburg and Ludendorff brush the objections aside.

(a) They viewed US potential military strength with complete disdain. They did not believe that the US could raise, train, or deploy significant forces in Europe. They ignored the US Navy, which the second largest in the world and growing.

(b) US industrial capacity, adaptability and energy, as well as US financial resources meant absolutely nothing to these military technicians.

viii. Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917. The US severs diplomatic relations on February 3.

ix. The Zimmermann Telegram, offering Mexico Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona in exchange for Mexican assistance. The British intercepted the note, and presented the text of this incredibly stupid telegram to Wilson February 24.

x. By April, German torpedos has ended Wilson's reluctance to ask Congress for a declaration of war. The US declares war on April 6.

xi. US entry dooms Germany. Without the US, Germany might have won in 1917. With the US in the war, Germany had no chance whatsoever of winning in 1918.

(1) US financial resources made an immediate and dramatic impact on Britain's and France's ability to continue to fight.

(2) The US Navy plays a decisive role in the anti-submarine campaign. In April, 1917, 25% of all ships sailing from Britain were sunk. When US Admiral Sims was shown the
figures, he exclaimed "This means we are losing the war!" His British counterpart replied "That's right--and there is nothing we can do about it." (Stokesbury 222) Sims insists on the introduction of the **convoy system**. This, and the addition of large numbers of swiftly constructed US destroyers, broke the back of the submarine campaign by September.

xii. The German decision was made out of "hubris and ignorance." (Holborn 458) The military, to whom Germans looked for leadership, had utterly failed them. When the inevitable collapse comes, both Hindenburg and (especially) Ludendorff will be very careful to renounce all responsibility for their disastrous policies and blame defeat on someone else.

(1) Ludendorff is the author of the **"stab in the back theory."**

c. **Caporetto** October 24

i. The Germans had been perfecting a new tactical system, developed by **Hans von Seeckt** and **Oscar von Hutier**. It involves the use of picked troops (**Sturmtruppen** or storm troops, or **Stoßtruppen** or shock troops), short, intense bombardments, surprise, infiltration, and reinforcement of success. Such an attack oozes through a front, causing panic by getting behind strong points. Brusilov had developed the same ideas without fully understanding them. These tactics require a high level of training, morale, and motivation of the individual soldier. These units required not only special training but different discipline. Within the storm troops, enlisted men used the 2nd person familiar (du) to their officers. Modern infantry tactics are based on this system.

ii. With relatively small forces, the Germans surprise the Italians, and break the front wide open. The Italians collapse and stream backwards. The only reason the Germans did not knock Italy out of the war is that (1) they did not expect so much success and did not devote enough resources to it (2) they outran their logistical support.

(1) The **internal combustion engine** combined with the **caterpillar tread** will solve the problem of transportation problem. **Blitzkrieg** will wed the **tank** with **shock troop tactics**.

iii. Italy stabilizes the line at the Piave, at the cost of 600,000 men. They are done for the year.

d. **The Collapse of the Romanov Empire**

i. By 1917, there is hardly any support for the Romanov dynasty is Russia.

ii. The end begins on March 8 in Petrograd with food riots.

iii. The Russian Revolution will be dealt with in detail in a later unit.

iv. Nicholas abdicates on March 15, and a provisional government is
v. The provisional government made the mistake of attempting to continue the war when the vast bulk of the Russian people wanted an end to it.

vi. Lenin, for purely ideological reasons, wanted to end the war. This is his most important lever in seizing control for the Bolsheviks.

vii. The Germans apply massive pressure with an offensive deep into Russia. Despite fierce opposition, Lenin insists that the revolution has no choice but to make peace, or the Germans would shoot them all. Lenin was certainly correct in his assessment.

viii. **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** (signed March 3, 1918)

   (1) Independence for Finland, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldavia, Galicia, and Armenia

   (2) All of these nations would fall under a German political and economic sphere of influence.

   (3) Not unlike Friedrich List in the 19th century or Hitler's Lebensraum a quarter century later.

   (4) Brest-Litovsk was considered harsh even by the chief German negotiator, was signed by Trotsky only by dire necessity, and proved to the Western Allies what kind of peace Germany would impose if she won.