



Some remarks and lessons on the 1918 campaign in the East

PART 2/5: ON THE DECISIVE CHARACTER OF THE CAMPAIGN

Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE

Published on 08/12/2018

Histoire & stratégie

ON THE DECISIVE CHARACTER OF THE CAMPAIGN

In order to get a fair idea of the place of the Macedonian victory in the outcome of the war, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the summer of 1918 in front of a general map of Europe, a generally confused chronology. ⁽¹⁾

After the attack of 15 July against the Massif de la Montagne de Reims, the last of the great spring offensives that could make the German command believe that victory was within reach, the German momentum came to a halt on the Marne. On 18 July, Foch launched a major counter-offensive on the western front which culminated on 8 August, the German army's "day of mourning". Ludendorff and the Grand Headquarters now know that Germany can no longer win the war: they have lost nearly a million men since the beginning of the March offensive, while the Americans are coming at the rate of 200,000 a month: there are 1,145,000 at the end of July, two American armies are in line.

The German armies are exhausted, there are many signs of the plague. The German armies are exhausted, many signs of a decline in morale are perceptible, the revolution is already smouldering. Moreover the forces are dispersed between two fronts, the allies uncertain (Bulgaria is on the verge of collapse, Austria-Hungary ready to ask for peace). Ludendorff can hardly draw on forces in the East without calling into question the advantages gained against Russia and Germany's geopolitical goals in the East.

While demanding that the government initiate peace talks, the Supreme Headquarters nevertheless refused any "ignominious" peace: It wants to keep Alsace-Lorraine and the German territories of Poland and the Baltic Sea, the control was keen to keep Alsace-Lorraine and the German territories of Poland and the Baltic, German control over Belgium and the territories acquired at Brest-Litovsk; above all, it refused to recognise itself defeated, to capitulate and to see Germany totally disarmed.

The intellectual reconstructions that allow us today to consider that Germany was defeated in the Second Battle of the Marne are not known to anyone. As Pierre Miquel

points out, "the French army was unaware in September that Germany was thinking of making peace. ». And until the American note of 23 October, the Germans could hope to obtain advantageous conditions from the Americans. "...two and a half months of war, new offensives will be necessary before success; thousands of lives will be wasted before an agreement is reached.

Wilson and Ludendorff's long waltz extends the ball. (2)"By November 11th, not a single Allied soldier will set foot in Germany... And again in early November, "...Foch didn't believe it. He was making his campaign plans for 1919. He did not expect any decisive results from the Lorraine offensive prepared by Pétain, which was to begin on November 14. (3)»

On 15 September 1918, in spite of their bad reputation, the Eastern Allied armies take the German command in Macedonia by surprise and break the German-Bulgarian front. On 25 September, the Bulgarian high command sent the first parliamentarian to request an armistice, which was signed on the 29th, the same day as the capture of Uskub (Skopje) by the French cavalry. In the meantime, the Allenby Army took Tiberias on 19 September and marched on Damascus, routing three Turkish armies, while on 26 September, Foch launched a great offensive on 70 kilometres of front between the Mounts of Champagne and the Meuse: The crisis provoked by this offensive led the Quartermaster General to demand that Chancellor Max de Bade send a "peace note" to President Wilson to "save [his] army," after the war. The crisis provoked by this offensive prompted the Quartier Maître Général to demand that Chancellor Max de Bade send a "peace note" to President Wilson to "save [his] army" after the spokesman of the Grand Quartier Général had explained the military situation to the Reichstag deputies on 2 October in terms that shed a harsh light on the effects of the evolution of the situation in the East: "The military situation has changed completely in a matter of days.

The collapse of the Bulgarian front threw our dispositions down. The connection with Constantinople is threatened, as well as the Danube route, which is indispensable for our supplies. In order not to leave Entente's hands free in the Balkans and not to abandon Romania and the Black Sea, we were forced to engage there German and Austro-Hungarian divisions destined for the Western Front... " (4)

This assessment was relayed in unequivocal terms on October 3rd by Marshal von Hindenburg in a letter to the Chancellor confirming the demand for an immediate peace offer: "As a result of the collapse of the Macedonian front and the consequent reduction of reserves on the Western Front... there remains no hope, as far as a human mind can judge, of forcing the enemy to make peace..." (5)

The Chancellor reluctantly executes himself on the night of October 3-4. On the same day, Bulgarian units of the 62nd "German" Corps surrendered at Uskub while the 1st Army the Serb 1st Army attacked Vranje, on the Morava River, defended by the remnants of the 61st German Corps and the newly arrived 9th Austrian ID.

On the western front, however, the Allied offensive stalled after a few days, reassuring Ludendorff who, finally, did not believe the Allies were capable of relaunching a serious attack on this front before November 15. The entire German political class supported the chancellor and the general staff in their rejection of a dishonourable peace. President Wilson's first two notes of 8 and 14 October encourage the Germans, while the "associated governments", which were not consulted, are worried or ulcerated. The

Germans tried to haggle, but Wilson's third note, on 23 October, demanding surrender, put an end to their illusions, provoking Ludendorff's resignation.

While the western front remained relatively stable, the central and eastern fronts collapsed like dominoes: The Turks, caught between Allenby in Syria and Milne, whose divisions are marching on Constantinople, deal at Mudros on October 30 with a captured British general, delivering the Straits, the tunnels of the Taurus and the oil of Baku;

Austria-Hungary explodes, while its army vanishes with the massive desertion of soldiers of "oppressed" nationalities and Hungary separates from Vienna, pushing the chief of staff to On the 22nd, Hungary asked the Council of Ministers for an armistice (an armistice by which it would hand over its railways to the CAA); on the 26th and 27th, the Piave front was broken by the Italians, who obtained a crushing victory at Vittorio Veneto on the 30th. On 3 November, the day the first Serbian and French units entered Hungary after taking Belgrade on the 1st, Austria signed the armistice at Villa Giusti, giving the passage to the armies of the Entente. The nationalities successively proclaim their independence or unity: the Empire of Austria has ceased to exist and the road to Munich and Berlin is brutally opened.

From this chronology it is clear that, while the Western Front saw a relatively modest and costly advance by the Allied forces and the Middle Eastern Front saw the collapse of the Turks, the Balkan Front is the only one where a continuous front could be broken through and where the in-depth exploitation of this breakthrough was able to achieve strategic results. In reality, the campaign in Palestine and Syria had only a peripheral effect on the outcome of the world conflict because a defeat of Turkey, occurring after the cessation of hostilities with Russia, did not fundamentally threaten the balance of the German system. The Balkan campaign, on the other hand, literally blew up the balloon of the forces of the central empires, which were split between three fronts. When the Germans agreed to sign an armistice on 11 November, it was under the pressure of the revolution which broke out at the beginning of the month and to avoid at all costs the invasion of their territory, a threat which did not come from the Western Front but from Hungary as a result of the collapse of the entire German system in Central Europe : The detonator of this crisis was the exoneration of Bulgaria. It was thus finally, and against the expectations of both cabinets and staffs, on a forgotten and despised secondary front that the Allies obtained the strategic decision.

End of Part 2...

(1) For a more detailed synthesis of the military and political events that led to peace, see Pierre Miquel, *La Grande Guerre*, Fayard, Paris, 1983, pp. 574-591.

(2) Miquel, op cit, pp. 581,582.

(3) Miquel, op cit, p. 585.

(4) Quoted by General Paul Azan, Franchet d'Esperey, Flammarion, Paris, 1949. Reproduced in Louis Cordier, *Victoire éclair en Orient*, Editions USHA, Aurillac, 1968, pp. 249, 250. It should be added that these punctures were made in pure loss, the German command having never managed to reconstitute a front in the face of the Franco-Serb push.

(5) Cordier, Op cit, p.250.

Title : Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE

Author (s) : Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE

Release date 30/01/2018