



German soldiers move through trenches

Inverting Clausewitz

Lessons in Strategic Leadership from the 1918 Ludendorff Offensives

By BRAD CLARK

As the United States approaches the end of its 12th year of conflict in Afghanistan, much of the history of the war has already been written. Although magisterial works setting the U.S. intervention in the context of the broad sweep of Central Asian history, or into the somewhat narrower sweep of America's wars, may have to wait until the war has a perceptible end, studies of specific characteristics of the conflict, of the key events, and of the politics surrounding the war have been in publication almost since the first U.S. air strike in 2001. In particular, recent literature has focused on the development and implementation of the Afghan counterinsurgency "surge" strategy by the Obama administration over the course of 2009.

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The Afghan surge is nearly as fertile a topic as the Afghan War itself. Popular writing has focused on such issues as the bureaucratic process that led to the surge, the personalities involved, or on alleged mistakes made in implementing the strategy.¹ Specialist literature has honed in on U.S. counterinsurgency strategy itself, either as applied to Afghanistan or as an operational concept generally.² But discussions of the administration's internal debate over the surge tend to overlook the importance of the very fact of this debate, a controversy over ends and means, or over the acceptability and feasibility of a proposed strategy, as an exemplar of strategic leadership. Whether President Barack Obama and his team arrived at the correct strategy obscures the more important point that they were, critically, holding the correct debate. History is replete with cautionary examples of what happens when leaders fail to conduct this fundamental strategic calculus. Means are elevated over

ends and strategies are divorced from realistic objectives, and the result is disastrous, as Imperial Germany learned in 1918.

Ludendorff's Flawed Strategic Vision

On March 21, 1918, the German army attacked the British army along a front 40 miles wide with a force of 37 divisions in what Winston Churchill termed "the greatest onslaught of the history of the world."³ The attack was the first of six major offensives against both the British and French that lasted nearly four months. Despite "impressive territorial gains," nothing of strategic significance was accomplished and the German army took over a million casualties,⁴ which it could not replace. Conceived as a war-winning effort to achieve a decisive victory, these offensives hastened Germany's defeat. At the end of this offensive, the "German Army no longer crouched but sprawled."⁵

The architect of these offensives was General Erich Ludendorff. As chief of staff



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Soldiers go over wall in assault against German infantry

to Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Ludendorff was the creative brains of the duo and developed the German strategy for von Hindenburg's approval.⁶ From their brilliant victory against the Russians at Tannenberg in 1914 through the introduction of their new defensive tactics on the Western Front in 1917, they had been everywhere successful. That changed in 1918. Ludendorff ultimately failed as a strategic leader because of a fundamentally flawed vision of strategy in which means became ends, and Clausewitz's great dictum—that war is a continuation of politics by other means—was turned on its head.⁷

Checked at the Marne in 1914, the German army remained on the strategic defensive on the Western Front while British and French armies periodically attempted to push the Germans out of France.⁸ Both sides were locked in a war of attrition along a “continuous line of trenches, 475 miles long,”⁹ from the Flemish coast to the Swiss border. After over 3 years of sanguinary stalemate, 1918 dawned with new risks and opportunities for the German Supreme Command owing to three significant events in the previous year: the entry of the United States into the war as a result of the 1917 German unrestricted submarine campaign, increasing hardship in Germany as a result of the British naval blockade, and Russia's exit from the war as a result of the Bolshevik coup d'état.¹⁰

The first two of these events increased pressure on Germany to bring the conflict

to a rapid end. The blockade was strangling Germany and undermining morale on the home front, as reflected in a violently suppressed labor strike in January 1918.¹¹ The United States provided the Allies with an untapped source of manpower that Germany could not hope to match. Against these challenges, the collapse of Russia freed resources from the Eastern Front, permitting Germany to bring new strength—over 50 first class divisions—to bear in the West. Berlin could eclipse Allied strength, if only slightly, and only until American forces began arriving.¹²

There was one other development that more than anything else drove Ludendorff's strategic calculus in 1918: the development of new infantry “storm” tactics. Tested in the East at Riga in 1917, these tactics relied on speedy infiltration of enemy positions by bypassing centers of resistance to achieve deep penetrations for follow-on exploitation while leaving strong points for mop-up by subsequent waves of infantry.¹³ These tactics were Ludendorff's solution to cracking the Allied front, reintroducing a war of movement and compelling a decisive battle on the Western Front.

Once Ludendorff was committed to an attack, the next decision was where to attack. He consulted the chiefs of staff of the army corps involved. One advocated attacking the French at Verdun while another urged attacking the British in Flanders.¹⁴ Ludendorff himself favored an attack on the British near St. Quentin, where the British and French armies joined.¹⁵ Ultimately the

first attack fell there, in accordance with Ludendorff's conviction that if the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was defeated, the French could not continue.¹⁶ Putting aside the validity of this assumption, “The fact that he remained undecided about the location of an attack that he wanted to take place within ten or twelve weeks is suggestive of a lack of strategic clarity.”¹⁷ This lack of clarity would undermine the German effort in the months ahead.

The Spring Offensive

The first attack, codenamed *Michael*, began on March 21, and was followed in succession by *Georgette*, *Mars*, *Blücher-York*, *Gneisenau*, and finally the *Friedensturm*, or Peace Offensive, on the Marne July 15–17. *Michael* and *Blücher*, and to a lesser extent *Georgette*, each achieved deep penetration of the British line but at tremendous cost—what Churchill termed “the price of the offensive”¹⁸—and to no strategic effect.¹⁹ Each attack followed a recurring pattern as casualties, exhaustion, stiffening resistance, and what Clausewitz termed “friction”²⁰ robbed it of its impetus. Each penetration weakened subsequent attacks by drawing in German reserves to defend an extended front in a newly created salient, in hastily constructed positions generally facing Allied fire from three sides.²¹

Another pattern that repeated itself in the Ludendorff offensives was emblematic of Ludendorff's weakness as a strategist. He allowed tactical developments to undermine his operational design. In the *Michael* offensive, the main effort was to be in the north, but that was where the resistance was greatest. So Ludendorff reinforced the supporting effort in the south, where more progress was made. This “tactical bias” resulted in changing the direction of the attack to exploit tactical success²² and more critically to changing the objective. The initial objective was to turn the British flank and drive northwest to the sea, but this shifted to an effort to split the British and French armies. Instead of one massive thrust, there would be three lesser thrusts (and paid for with reserves intended for what became the *Georgette* attack).²³ Ludendorff was “reacting to events, following the line of least resistance, rather than dominating and determining the outcome.”²⁴ The tactical directive became the strategic goal, and Ludendorff's lack of clarity led to a general

pressing forward by successful elements.²⁵ This begged the question, *pressing forward to what?* “The absence of an answer exposed the emptiness of the *Michael* operation after the first day’s failure on the right.”²⁶

Ludendorff fell into the same trap in the *Blücher* attack, originally intended as a diversion against the French to draw in Allied reserves preparatory to an attack against the British in Flanders.²⁷ As with *Michael*, spectacular early success (Paris beckoned) caused a shift in Ludendorff’s objective and a diversionary attack became the German main effort until it, too, stalled.²⁸ “Outwardly all seemed to be going well. Actually all had miscarried.”²⁹ Two more offenses, *Gneisenau* and *Friedensturm*, were attempted, but neither offered any real hope of victory. One German staff officer remarked after *Blücher*, “The Supreme Command renounced further plans for decisive battle, and made other diversive [*sic*] offenses in the hope of something turning up.”³⁰ Nothing did, and the butcher’s bill was more than Germany could pay. In 6 months, the German army was 900,000 men smaller, even as American forces began to swell the Allied ranks. The balance of force, and the initiative, shifted irretrievably to the Allies.

Much could be written about Ludendorff’s persistently erroneous assumptions in 1918: that Germany had the means—in the trenches of 1918—to achieve the decisive battle that eluded them in the open terrain of 1914; that the BEF, and not the French army, was the Allied center of gravity; that the defeat of the BEF in France would knock England out of the war; and so on. But analyzing these errors is beside the point; whatever his failures to test or retest the assumptions that informed his operational concepts, Ludendorff did not adhere to those concepts long enough for his assumptions to matter.

Failure to Define a Purpose

Ludendorff had deduced that “tactics had to be considered before purely strategic [*sic*] objects which it is futile to pursue unless tactical success is possible.”³¹ This is reasonable. Feasibility of any course of action is a fundamental consideration. But Ludendorff went much further—or rather, did not go anywhere at all—by substituting tactical considerations (means) for strategic objectives (ends). His “innova-

tive techniques were largely invalidated by the inability to define a purpose for the campaign.”³² If there is any validity to Clausewitz’s theory of strategy and strategic leadership,³³ then Ludendorff’s approach could not be further from the ideal.

Starting from political considerations, the strategist must “define an aim for the operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose.”³⁴ Then, in exercising leadership, the strategist with “great strength of character” and “firmness of mind” follows through steadily and is not “thrown off course by thousands of diversions.”³⁵ Put another way, strategy assigns an aim to an operation, which is nothing more than a means to obtain that aim.³⁶ With the 1918 offensives, the objective was not so much lost as never given any primacy. Ludendorff’s own summary of his concept of operations reads as a rejection of Clausewitz: “We will punch a hole. . . . For the rest, we shall see.”³⁷ This “was not strategy. It was more like an act of faith . . . a blind hope that something, somehow, would turn up.”³⁸

Churchill wrote, “That the decision was disastrous has been proved by the event. But it may also be contended that it was wrong.”³⁹ The offensives failed and the question becomes whether there was an alternative given the strategic situation in early 1918. Certainly there were voices within Germany in favor of peace. Chancellor Georg von Hertling wanted to be the “reconciliation chancellor,”⁴⁰ and elements in the Reichstag advocated outreach by making a commitment to the territorial integrity of Belgium.⁴¹ The Russian collapse and German territorial gains in the East offered potential bargaining chips.⁴² It was not to be. Ludendorff was bent on keeping German conquests in the East *and* the West, most problematically (for the peacemakers) parts of France and Belgium.⁴³

This was incredibly naïve considering Belgium was the reason England entered the war in the first place. This thinking reveals a still greater failing as a strategist: Ludendorff’s inability to understand the political object of the conflict and to subordinate his military strategy to it. Whatever Germany had gone to war for in 1914, it was not the conquest of Belgium or the annexation of the French coal fields. By 1918, the war had become about national survival, a fact Ludendorff appears to have recognized⁴⁴ but to which he appears to have applied no considered analysis.

Similarly, once begun, the offensives did not have to be all or nothing. General Max Hoffmann, formerly Ludendorff’s top staff officer in the East, noted that the “first attempt [*Michael*], undertaken with all the means at our disposal, had failed, so it was certain . . . that further attacks undertaken with diminishing resources could not hope for success. On the day Ludendorff broke off the first offensive before Amiens, it would have been his duty to draw the attention of the Government to the desirability of opening peace negotiations.”⁴⁵ But this, again, required a focus on the political objective of the conflict, which was something Ludendorff could not see in realistic terms.

At that point Germany still had some means and some hope of resistance. The blockade held, but perhaps the Eastern conquests could be organized to Germany’s economic advantage. Perhaps the lift in morale that American forces provided⁴⁶ could be blunted as the Americans bloodied themselves against a German line defended in depth by elite divisions. Perhaps, too, the enthusiasm of the Alliance to continue the war could be diminished by a political program that stated Germany had no territorial aims in the West and would “prejudice in no way the freedom and honor of other peoples.”⁴⁷ Ludendorff was blind to such alternative courses of action, which were better suited to political realities and the actual strategic context, because of his hyperfocus on the means at his disposal: innovative offensive infantry tactics and a mass of fresh divisions. They were on hand. They must be used.

Confusing Means with Ends

There is more to war than warfare and there is more to strategy than military strategy.⁴⁸ A strategist must understand context, the nature of the threat, and its relationship to the national interest.⁴⁹ Given the context of 1918, the question facing Ludendorff was *how to ensure national survival*. A “marginal-utility calculus of violence,” what Michael Geyer terms an “idealistic strategy,” would have “counseled the limitation and scaling down of goals in an increasingly desperate military situation.”⁵⁰ Ludendorff was constitutionally unable to do that. “In Ludendorff was found a hardy gambler incapable of withdrawing from the game while he still had stakes to play.”⁵¹ In his mind, “supreme hazards exercised an evident fascination.”⁵²

On a fundamental level, to Ludendorff, the war itself became the end, or what Clausewitz called a “complete, untrammled, absolute manifestation of violence” that usurped policy.⁵³ There were clear alternatives to a fight to the death, but Ludendorff could not conceive of them.

Ludendorff provides a cautionary tale for today’s strategists in two respects. Strategists must avoid confusing means with ends. This temptation remains relevant in an era of nation-building as a response to a terrorist attack, in an era of new (or renewed) concepts such as Air-Sea Battle or counterinsurgency operations. “Securing the populace,” however laudable as a humanitarian ideal, is at core a means to starve an insurgent group of indigenous support, not an end in itself. Other means to the same end may be as effective, or more effective, depending on the context. In this respect, the debate over the Afghan surge is a positive counterexample. It arguably forced a reconsideration of ends from successful application of doctrinal counterinsurgency tactics itself⁵⁴ to the underlying national security objectives these tactics were a means to address.

Perhaps more important, an examination of the Ludendorff offensives offers insights into the proper relationship between national leaders and the technical experts who advise them. “Ludendorff is an outstanding lesson in the dangers of the expert who has so concentrated on his own department that he is unable to see the part in relation to the whole.”⁵⁵ Because he could see only the military instrument, and saw politics as something that served war, Ludendorff’s war plans were not strategy but rather the inversion of strategy. They were not crafted in service of a political goal other than victory at any price, without any real thought as to what interest that victory might serve. “The first casualty of this insistence was strategy as the principled analysis of war.”⁵⁶ In strategy, means should be subordinated to ends, and war to policy. Ludendorff managed to “turn this calculus on its head.”⁵⁷

When the conduct of war is turned over to technologists or engineers, to “operationists”⁵⁸ like Ludendorff, divorced from the larger political context, from the purpose for which the instrument of war is used, there is danger. There is danger that war aims—cast adrift from political objectives—will become “radical and encompassing” with goals “subordinated to the mobilization of means,

independent of the actual military use-value of each new increment of force.”⁵⁹ In such an environment, lives are thrown away, nations are exhausted, and war progresses to the natural, maximum, unrestrained level postulated by Clausewitz. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War with the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012); Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

² See, for example, Colin S. Gray, “Concept Failure? COIN, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Theory,” *PRISM* 3, no. 3 (March 2012), 17–32; Charles A. Kupchan et al, “Pull the Plug on the Afghan Surge,” *Financial Times*, November 3, 2009, available at <www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1e98cbac-c8c6-11de-8f9d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2PEF4eSNH>; Gian P. Gentile, “COIN Is Dead: U.S. Army Must Put Strategy Over Tactics,” *World Politics Review*, November 22, 2011, available at <www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10731/coin-is-dead-u-s-army-must-put-strategy-over-tactics>.

³ Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1918* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), 769.

⁴ Williamson Murray, “Ludendorff: Tactical Genius, Strategic Fool,” *Military History* 25, no. 4, (September–October 2008), 48.

⁵ Churchill, 771.

⁶ Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memories, Vol. I* (London: Hutchinson, 1919), 12.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 69.

⁸ The limited German offensive at Verdun in 1916 could be considered an exception, but it was conceived as part of a generally defensive strategy to provoke a French response.

⁹ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 136.

¹⁰ Churchill, 763.

¹¹ G.J. Meyer, *A World Undone: The Story of the Great War, 1914–1918* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007), 520–521.

¹² Churchill, 763.

¹³ Keegan, 375–376.

¹⁴ Meyer, 528.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁸ Churchill, 771.

¹⁹ Barrie Pitt, *1918: The Last Act* (New York: Norton, 1962), 127.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 150. German soldiers, starved of all but necessities by the blockade, found British stocks and untouched French villages. The

resulting looting and drunkenness did much to hold up the advance. Here is friction.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1954), 207.

²³ Keegan, 403–404.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 404.

²⁵ Pitt, 105

²⁶ Meyer, 549.

²⁷ Keegan, 407.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Churchill, 792.

³⁰ Pitt, 178.

³¹ Liddell Hart, 205.

³² Michael Geyer, “German Strategy, 1914–1918,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret, 552 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³³ There is!

³⁴ Clausewitz, 177.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁷ Keegan, 394.

³⁸ Meyer, 549.

³⁹ Churchill, 577. Writing on the German decision to attack Verdun, Churchill’s statement applies with equal force to the Ludendorff offensives.

⁴⁰ Meyer, 519.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴² Churchill, 763.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 764; Pitt, 242.

⁴⁴ Ludendorff, 368, commenting on “the enemy’s lust for our destruction.”

⁴⁵ Pitt, 243.

⁴⁶ Churchill, 691. The “moral consequence of the United States joining the Allies was the deciding cause of the conflict.”

⁴⁷ Gordon A. Craig, “Delbruck: The Military Historian,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret, 347 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Craig is quoting the German military historian Hans Delbruck’s contemporaneous arguments.

⁴⁸ Gray, 22.

⁴⁹ *Strategic Leaders as Strategists*, Course 6200 materials, National War College.

⁵⁰ Geyer, 550.

⁵¹ Churchill, 801. When those stakes were gone, Ludendorff was of no use. His collapse before his Army and his nervous breakdown in October 1918 precipitated the German collapse. Pitt, 252. A fish rots from the head.

⁵² Churchill, 689.

⁵³ Clausewitz, 87.

⁵⁴ Gentile.

⁵⁵ Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Stratford Press, 1938), 137.

⁵⁶ Geyer, 546.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Or, perhaps, “grand tacticians.”

⁵⁹ Geyer, 550.