

Turning Point 1917

The British Empire at War

EDITED BY
DOUGLAS E. DELANEY AND
NIKOLAS GARDNER



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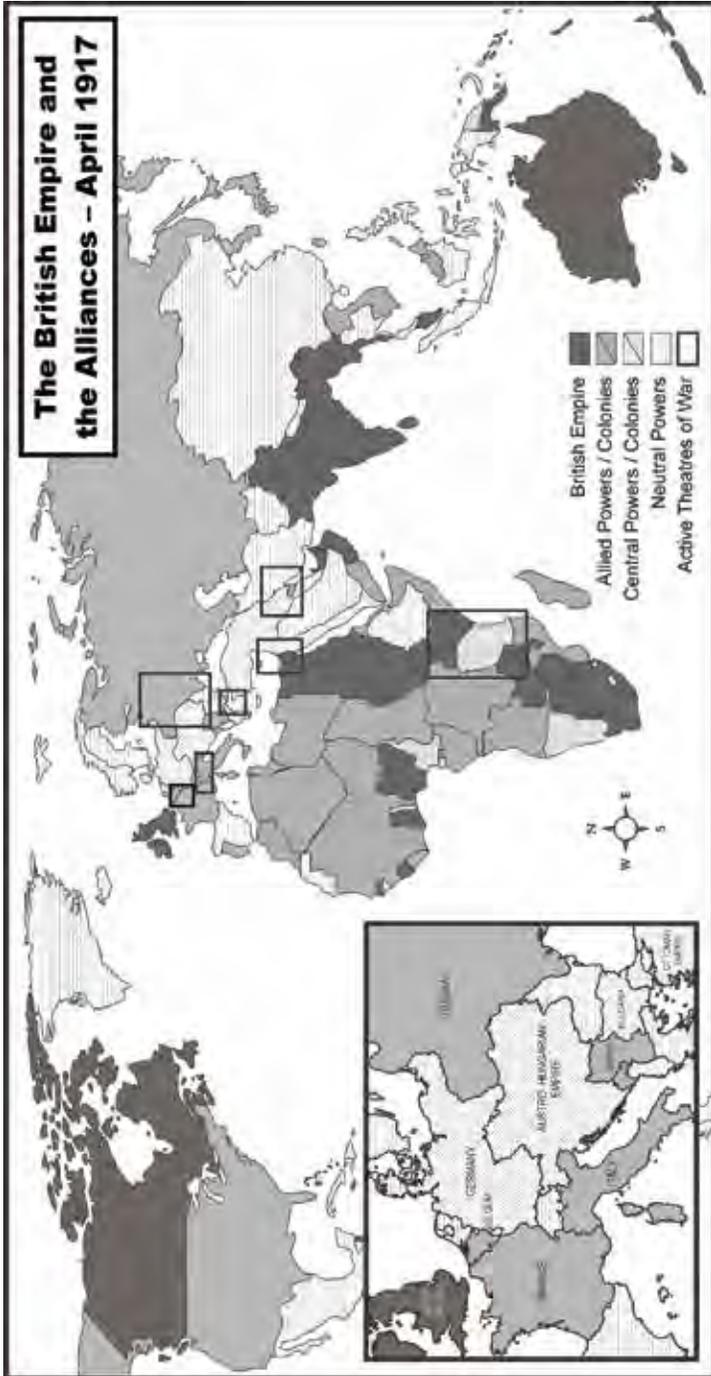
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Turning Point 1917



Introduction

Turning Points and Tapestries

DOUGLAS E. DELANEY AND NIKOLAS GARDNER

Twelve months of low points, high points, and change: that was the year 1917 for the British Empire and its allies of the Great War. It was a year of crises – the overthrow of the czar in Russia and the pending exit of his massive armies from the war, the mutinies of the battered French armies, conscription crises in Canada and Australia, German breakthroughs on the Italian Front, and an unrestricted U-boat campaign in the Atlantic. It was a year in which the armies of the empire evolved the technical and tactical means of mitigating the deadly effects of machine guns and artillery on attacking forces, but it was also a year of gut-wrenching losses. It was a year in which the United States entered the war on the Allied side, and in which the dominions, inspired by their burgeoning nationalism, began to assert themselves in the councils of imperial power. It was also a year in which the social and cultural upheavals of the war were starting to show – women had entered the workplace and were beginning to vote, divisions between ethnic communities in Canada and South Africa widened, Indian sepoys became eligible for commissions in Britain’s Indian Army, and a new and distinctive soldiers’ culture evolved in all of the belligerent armies.

At first glance, it is difficult to see 1917 as a turning point in the First World War. For Great Britain, its dominions, and its colonies, 1917 was a year of continuing hardships and disappointments, with few bright spots. The preceding twelve months had seen several setbacks in the Middle East as well as heavy losses for relatively small gains on the Western Front.

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Nevertheless, the new year did start on an optimistic note. David Lloyd George had only recently replaced Herbert Asquith as prime minister of Great Britain, with a promise to hit the Germans with a “knock-out blow,”¹ and deliberate German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in late February gave the impression that it just might be possible to do so. Despite two years of virtual stalemate in France and Belgium, French commander-in-chief Robert Nivelle promised to “rupture” the enemy defences with his April offensive in Champagne. At the same time, the capture of Baghdad by an Anglo-Indian force under Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude in March seemed to redeem the military forces of the British Empire after the humiliating surrender of Kut-al-Amara ten months earlier. It was a clear demonstration of growing British material and logistical superiority over the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. And, many British observers looked forward to the replacement of a fragile czarist regime in Russia with a more representative government, one better equipped to mobilize the country’s massive resources in support of the war effort and launch a major offensive on the Eastern Front in June.²

But events soon dampened the optimistic mood. Despite the initial success of the carefully orchestrated Canadian Corps supporting attack at Vimy on 9 April, the British offensive in Arras ground out disappointingly over the next three weeks. When it concluded in May, British and dominion casualties totalled approximately 158,600, whereas the Germans suffered close to 120,000.³ The much anticipated French offensive in the south failed to achieve any kind of breakthrough, let alone the long-promised “rupture” of German defences in the west. Quite the opposite; the results were disastrous. Thousands of French soldiers, who had been ordered to continue attacking formidable enemy defensive positions, collectively went “on strike,” refusing to batter themselves further in hopeless frontal assaults.⁴ On the second day of the offensive, sixty-eight divisions, fully two-thirds of the French Army, began to report acts of collective indiscipline, most of which extended into the summer. Whereas soldiers objected primarily to the suicidal tactics of the Nivelle offensive, their demands included higher pay, better rations, and more generous leave. They got some of what they wanted. When Philippe Pétain succeeded Nivelle as commander-in-chief in mid-May, he used a combination of concessions and coercion to bring the situation under control. But the French Army mutinies caused considerable consternation for British soldiers and statesmen, who wondered what kind of support they could expect from their ally.⁵

Allies seemed to be faltering everywhere. Italian forces advanced across the Isonzo River into Austro-Hungarian territory during the summer, but

in October the Italian First and Second Armies collapsed in the face of an enemy counteroffensive at Caporetto. German forces sent to support their Austro-Hungarian allies ripped through the Italian defences, driving the defenders seventy miles to the Piave River, capturing nearly 300,000 prisoners of war, and provoking widespread desertion by Italian soldiers. The offensive eventually lost momentum, hampered as it was by a lack of logistical support and the absence of any real German–Austro-Hungarian joint command structure. And the Italians eventually regained their composure, but not before concerns about the failure of the Italian Army and possible revolution in Italy led to the transfer of six French and five British divisions from the Western Front to northern Italy.⁶ The situation in Russia was even more serious. The Provisional Government that took control after the czar's abdication in March was weak. It may have been led by a coalition of liberals and moderate socialists, but in reality, the new Russian government had far less popular support than the Petrograd Soviet, a revolutionary organization that demanded a negotiated peace with the Central Powers. Worse, the Russian Kerensky offensive in July, after making progress against Austro-Hungarian forces early on, wavered badly in the face of German counterattacks. With its morale and discipline disintegrating, the Russian Army embarked on a prolonged retreat from which it never recovered. Soldiers deserted en masse to join the revolution, with as many as 900,000 “self-demobilizing” between January and September 1917.⁷ By November, the situation was ripe for a Bolshevik seizure of power, and an armistice with Germany followed within a month. Rumania, left isolated by Russia's collapse, sought a ceasefire as well. With the Eastern Front effectively closed, the Kaiser's Army was free to shift resources westward. And it did. Between November 1917 and March 1918, the Germans transferred some forty-eight divisions from Italy and eastern Europe to the Western Front.⁸ Although a German offensive in the west was not a certainty, the conclusion of fighting in the east left the enemy better able to withstand any Allied offensive in France or Belgium for the foreseeable future. Moreover, with American reinforcements still months away from joining the European fight in any great numbers, it seemed to the Western Allies that things could very well get worse before they got better.

Home fronts were strained as well. The German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare at the beginning of February had serious consequences. Losses to merchant shipping destined for Britain increased dramatically during the spring. This contributed to food shortages that in turn fuelled popular discontent that had been simmering since the imposition of conscription in 1916.⁹ Organized labour became particularly

restless in Britain, with some 200,000 workers striking during the same period that shipping losses reached their peak.¹⁰ Although the dominions did not face the same material shortages as Britain, Canada and Australia in particular experienced serious internal divisions over the issue of conscription. By late 1916, voluntary enlistment rates had dwindled in Canada, leaving Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden unable to honour his pledge to provide 500,000 men for service overseas.¹¹ Borden's spring 1917 decision to introduce compulsory military service met with fierce opposition among French Canadians, very few of whom were recent immigrants with close ties to Europe. Farmers, who resented the possibility of losing farm labour, were equally unhappy.¹² Elections held later in the year served as a referendum on Borden's Military Service Act, which the Canadian Parliament passed in August 1917. Borden's Unionist government won the December 1917 election, due in part to the enfranchisement of women who had relatives serving overseas, but the election and the subsequent imposition of conscription entrenched divisions between French and English Canada. In Australia, opposition to conscription actually increased as 1917 wore on. Voters had narrowly rejected the introduction of compulsory military service in an October 1916 plebiscite, precipitating a split in the ruling Labor Party, with Prime Minister Billy Hughes breaking away to lead the newly formed Nationalist Party. But, when Hughes tried to bring a watered-down form of conscription to the Commonwealth in December 1917, Australians rejected it again – and by a larger margin.¹³

Responding to this seemingly unending series of crises and threats often meant changing how things were done, creating new organizations, and reforming existing ones to mobilize resources more quickly and with greater efficiency. In the aftermath of the Caporetto and Kerensky defeats, France, Britain, and Italy formed the Supreme War Council in an effort to integrate their resources and strategy. Within the British Empire coalition, the government of David Lloyd George established the Imperial War Cabinet in the spring of 1917 as a means of co-ordinating the material and human resources of the empire. This appealed to the dominions, especially Canada and Australia, both of which looked forward to the prospect of greater say in imperial strategy. Individual states also took measures to manage their agricultural production in response to growing food shortages. In Britain, for example, 1917 saw the implementation of the Corn Production Act, which guaranteed minimum prices for staples such as wheat and potatoes as a means of encouraging farmers to grow them. In Canada, the Board of Grain Supervisors capped the price of wheat to control inflation driven by wartime demand.

Still, as the year progressed, setbacks seemed to trump successes. The French Army recovered from the malaise that followed the Nivelle offensive, even conducting a four-corps offensive operation at Verdun before the end of August. But concerns about French morale led British and dominion forces to shoulder more of the burden on the Western Front. As the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge had demonstrated, senior British and dominion commanders had learned their lessons over three years of war, combining meticulous planning with innovative tactics and new technology to achieve battlefield successes. Even so, British offensive operations in the summer and fall of 1917 followed a similar and frustrating pattern, with initial success followed by loss of momentum, stalemate, and heavy losses. On the morning of 7 June, for example, the British Second Army exploded nineteen massive mines underneath German positions at Messines in Belgium, taking the enemy by surprise and enabling British, Australian, and New Zealand infantry to capture their initial objectives with relatively light losses. Yet, subsequent attacks bogged down in the face of German defences that were now designed to be “elastic” – with strong points and indirect fire to break up British attacks, followed by counterattacks to seal off penetrations and recover lost ground. The Messines attack also cued the Germans to strengthen their defences in Flanders, the site of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig’s principal offensive in the late summer and early autumn of 1917.

The pattern of initial success followed by frustration continued into the second half of the year. The Third Battle of Ypres, initiated on 31 July, aimed to break through German defences in Flanders and reach the Belgian coast. Although British forces achieved some success on the first day, poor weather throughout the month of August turned the ground to slop, rendering forward progress nearly impossible. Drier weather in September brought limited successes, which encouraged Haig. But the commander-in-chief’s high hopes, combined with the return of persistent rain in October, led to repeated attacks in appalling conditions. When the offensive finally concluded in early November, the Germans had not collapsed as Haig had envisioned. British and imperial forces had suffered an estimated 275,000 casualties at Messines and Third Ypres, probably exceeding those they inflicted on the enemy, whose defences, while strained, were still intact.¹⁴ Ten days after the end of the Flanders offensive, two British corps, supported by nearly four hundred tanks and a thousand-gun artillery bombardment, attacked at Cambrai. By the end of the first day on 20 November, the infantry had advanced up to four miles, capturing over four thousand prisoners and a hundred enemy guns. But again, the

momentum of the attacks ground out, this time as a result of British tank losses and the rapid arrival of German reinforcements. To make matters worse, the enemy launched a counteroffensive on 30 November that caught British commanders completely by surprise. When active operations ended on 7 December, the British had suffered approximately forty thousand casualties, while inflicting a similar number on the enemy but gaining little ground in the process. The limited successes of repeated British offensives, it seemed, simply piled up British and dominion casualties and sapped morale. They also exacerbated divisions between senior British political and military leaders, and generated opposition from the increasingly assertive leaders of the dominions.¹⁵

Slowly, very slowly, pieces of good news pierced the gloom that had settled over the imperial war effort. The German U-boat threat diminished, due largely to the adoption of the convoy system to protect shipping, the use of signals intelligence to direct convoys away from submarines, and the introduction of new technologies such as hydrophones and depth charges. This not only alleviated worsening shortages of food and other resources in Britain, it also enabled the Allies to transport soldiers, labourers, and materiel to Europe and elsewhere. British fortunes in the Middle East also improved. After the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) under Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Murray had twice failed to capture the town of Gaza in the spring, the EEF, now under General Sir Edmund Allenby won a string of victories over Ottoman forces. Those culminated in the capture of Jerusalem on 9 December.¹⁶ This was not simply the result of Allenby's skill as a commander, although that was certainly part of it. The improved situation in the Middle East also reflected improvements in the productive capacity of the British Empire and an increased ability to deploy resources around the globe. Enlarged productivity and reduced shortages also eased war weariness and dissipated the dissent of organized labour. British and Canadian munitions factories, their shop floors full of women workers, were spitting out shells at an astounding rate, enabling the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to fire more munitions from January to October 1918 than it had during all of the preceding three years combined.¹⁷ And all across the BEF, formations assimilated lessons from three years of fighting, integrated replacements, conducted training, and made preparations that would eventually pay dividends in the offensives of 1918. The economies of the Central Powers, on the other hand, were lurching toward collapse by the autumn of 1917, with only Germany in possession of sufficient stocks of weapons and ammunition to support offensive operations in the coming year.

The collective impact of these developments was not easy to discern at the time. David Lloyd George was sufficiently doubtful about Allied prospects for victory in the autumn of 1917 to consider acquiescing to German territorial demands in Russia. According to a recent biography of Douglas Haig, even the British commander-in-chief was amenable to a compromise peace with Germany at the end of 1917.¹⁸ British leaders believed that the Central Powers would ultimately be defeated but not until 1919, at the earliest. In reality, the British Empire was turning a corner, although that was hardly apparent to senior soldiers and statesmen caught up in a year of crises.

Nor is it easy to see nearly a century later. The factors that led to a turnaround are both many and complex. Popular histories have long repeated simple and increasingly hackneyed narratives regarding various aspects of the war in 1917 – the “birth of a Canadian nation” on Vimy Ridge, the callous sacrifice of thousands of lives by donkey generals in the mud of Passchendaele, and the Americans swooping in to save the day, to name just a few.¹⁹ But myths and mantras do not explain much, and they certainly do not offer new insights. How can we analyze an imperial war effort that was assembled like some hastily stitched tapestry? We can start with unravelling the tapestry. To understand how the tapestry came together – and it was still taking shape in 1917 – it may be helpful to pull apart and examine the individual threads from which it was created. What are their colours and characteristics? Where do they fit in the overall design? And how were they woven into the pattern? The present volume takes this approach in seeking to understand how the British Empire worked at war in 1917. It draws on the expertise of internationally renowned scholars in the fields of British military, diplomatic, and cultural history, as well as leading historians of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and colonial Africa. Each chapter focuses on a specific thread. They do not amount to a comprehensive account of the imperial war effort in 1917, even if taken collectively. But they do demonstrate how particular campaigns, strategies, command arrangements, home fronts, and political developments fit into the imperial war effort or were affected by it. All indicate that 1917 was a year of change, but one in which a specific turning point is difficult to distinguish. There was, after all, no decisive battle or campaign that can be identified as a watershed in the First World War. There were no Sedans or Stalingrads. Rather, 1917 saw a series of turning points – events, trends, and developments that strengthened the position of the British Empire relative to its enemies and laid the groundwork for victory, while at the

same time accommodating the increasingly divergent interests and identities of the dominions.

No previous study has attempted a multidimensional and multinational examination of the imperial war effort during a single year. Judith M. Brown and William Roger Louis edited an excellent volume on twentieth-century imperial history for the Oxford History of the British Empire series, but only two of the volume's thirty-one essays deal with the world wars – one for each war.²⁰ Greg Kennedy's collection, *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order, 1856–1956*, probes a number of issues related to the defence of empire – naval planning, the role of the British Army, propaganda, and the part played by the colonial empire, for example – but the scopes of the analyses span centuries or half-centuries.²¹ John Gooch's collection of his own in-depth essays, *The Prospect of War: Studies in British Defence Policy, 1847–1942*, examines a diverse range of issues from the defence of Canada to the Curragh Incident in Ireland, but as the title suggests, it does so from a decidedly British perspective.²² Ian Beckett's very fine volume, *1917: Beyond the Western Front*, focuses on the twelve months of 1917, but the emphasis is on the principal belligerents, not the empire. It also specifically excludes events on the Western Front, the principal theatre of war for Britain and most of the dominions and colonies.²³ Keith Jeffery's *1916: A Global History* is similar to this collection in that it considers a single year as a "turning point," but its scope is global rather than imperial. Moreover, Jeffery considers the longer-term implications of the events of 1916 beyond the conclusion of the First World War.²⁴ The collection that is closest in scope and content to the present volume is *1911: Preliminary Moves*, edited by Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey.²⁵ It contains fourteen essays by eminent historians from across the Commonwealth, Europe, and the United States, including John Gooch, William Mulligan, James Wood, Keith Jeffrey, John Crawford, and Michael Neiberg. Nine of the chapters deal specifically with imperial issues – from Canadian perspectives on compulsory military training in Australia to the Committee of Imperial Defence and the Imperial Conference of 1911.

The present volume focuses on the military coalition of the British Empire during one of the most difficult and pivotal years of the First World War. It does not cover every aspect of the imperial war effort in 1917. Instead, the nine chapters that follow address three main themes. First and foremost, several authors consider the ways in which 1917 constituted a military turning point in the struggle against the Central Powers. In

Chapter 2, Keith Neilson demonstrates how America's entry into the war, along with the collapse of Russia, enabled more vigorous enforcement of the British naval blockade against the Central Powers and remaining neutral states. In Chapter 5, Jeffrey Grey examines the war in Palestine, explaining the factors that led to military victory for British and imperial forces over the Ottoman Army by the end of 1917, despite repeated failures earlier in the year. In Chapter 7, Tim Stapleton considers the "Africanization" of the British campaign in East Africa, showing how the employment of increasing numbers of African personnel contributed to the defeat of German forces in East Africa, while thwarting the German aim of diverting British and imperial resources away from Europe. More broadly in Chapter 1, William Philpott acknowledges the military setbacks and domestic upheavals of 1917 but also argues that the year saw Britain and the dominions develop the political and administrative structures necessary to win the war the following year.

Several chapters consider a different kind of turning point – home front tensions that increased in 1917, just as developments on the battle front seemed to be rebounding. In Chapter 6, John Crawford documents growing resistance in New Zealand to continued British demands for reinforcements, demonstrating the extent to which New Zealanders had reached their limits after years of sacrifice. In Chapter 8, Serge Durflinger, through the lens of civil unrest in Montreal during the summer of 1917, offers new insights into how conscription affected Canadian society. And in Chapter 9, Mark Connelly examines the use of the media in Britain to mobilize flagging popular support for the war, which had reached a low point in 1917.

A third and related theme is that of growing tension between Britain's strategic objectives and the political, economic, and nationalistic goals of the dominions. Although the establishment of the Imperial War Cabinet brought the newly christened Commonwealth closer together, 1917 also saw an increasing assertiveness on the part of the dominions and colonies in pursuit of their own interests and identities. Stapleton notes the attempts of the South African government to maximize the participation of its citizens in the East African campaign to gain influence over any post-war settlement in the region. Connelly documents the emergence of distinct Australian and Canadian narratives in the British media, much of which acted as a distraction from government propaganda aimed at British civilians. In Chapter 3, Chris Madsen and Michael Moir examine how the dramatic wartime expansion of shipbuilding in Canada led to ambitious

plans for a post-war shipbuilding industry that would compete with British shipyards. In Chapter 4, Ian Beckett shows how Australian and Canadian insistence on national chains of command and unique organizational structures for their forces on the Western Front complicated the planning and conduct of military operations in 1917. Beckett's chapter also highlights the extent to which General Headquarters was able to accommodate increasingly uncomfortable dominion demands and still make the BEF work.

The chapters that follow do not gloss over the complexity of the war in 1917. If anything, they place it in sharper relief. As a whole, they illustrate a series of turning points that left Britain, its dominions, and its colonies stronger and better organized for the task of defeating the Central Powers. At the same time, these collected works reveal much about the transformation of the empire into something resembling a modern military coalition. Britain, its dominions, and its colonies remained committed to the common objective of defeating Germany and its allies, but there were voices in all corners of the empire that questioned the price that should be paid to achieve that goal. Tensions strained the tapestry of the imperial war effort. That should surprise no one. What should elicit some sense of wonder is that the tapestry held up so well.

NOTES

- 1 William Philpott, *War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (New York: Overlook, 2014), 251.
- 2 Keith Jeffery, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186.
- 3 Jonathon Nicholls, *Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras, 1917* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2005), 210–11.
- 4 Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 224.
- 5 Michael Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 244–48; Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War: 1914–1918* (London: Longman, 2001), 223.
- 6 Holger Herwig, “The German Victories, 1917–1918,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 258.
- 7 Beckett, *The Great War*, 376.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 387.
- 9 Brock Millman, “A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917–1918,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, 2 (April 2001): 250–51.
- 10 David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic, 2004), 286.

- 11 J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 22–59.
- 12 The Military Service Act initially excluded farmers from compulsory military service when it was passed in August 1917, but an Order-in-Council of 20 April 1918 removed all exemptions.
- 13 Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 112–14.
- 14 Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 195.
- 15 J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 382.
- 16 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014), 110–12.
- 17 Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 369.
- 18 Harris, *Douglas Haig*, 421.
- 19 On Vimy, see, for example, Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); and Pierre Berton, *Marching as to War: Canada's Turbulent Years, 1899-1953* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), 125–224. On the “donkey thesis,” see Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1961); and John Laffin, *Butchers and Bunglers of World War One* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 2003). For the most recent articulation of the view that the entry of the United States was decisive, see John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War I* (New York: Harper, 2002).
- 20 Judith M. Brown and William Roger Louis, eds., *The Twentieth Century*, The Oxford History of the British Empire vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 21 Greg Kennedy, ed., *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order, 1856-1956* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 22 John Gooch, *The Prospect of War: Studies in British Defence Policy, 1847-1942* (London: Frank Cass, 1981).
- 23 Ian F.W. Beckett, ed., *1917: Beyond the Western Front* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
- 24 Keith Jeffery, *1916: A Global History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- 25 Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, eds., *1911: Preliminary Moves: 2011 Chief of Army History Conference* (Melbourne: Big Sky, 2011).

1

Never Over by Christmas

Meeting the Challenges of Interminable War

WILLIAM PHILPOTT

On 19 December 1916, Britain's new prime minister, David Lloyd George, addressed a packed House of Commons. Although he had managed to convince his ministerial colleagues and enough Members of Parliament that his predecessor Herbert Asquith was mis-managing the war, he was not able to offer his audience any great hope for the immediate future:

What is the urgent task in front of the Government? To complete and make even more effective the mobilisation of all our national resources, a mobilisation which has been going on since the commencement of the War, so as to enable the nation to bear the strain, however prolonged, and to march through to victory, however lengthy, and however exhausting may be the journey.¹

The refrain, “it will be all over by Christmas” had been common when the empire went to war in 1914, but by the time the third Christmas of hostilities approached, the reality of attritional warfare had sunk in. By then, everyone wanted it to end (no one more so than the new prime minister), but no one was prepared to speculate regarding which Christmas would see its conclusion.² Effort, strain, sacrifice, domestic disruption, and political and social change were the defining features of mass war, and there was no end in sight. Moreover, after two-and-a-half years of “the most gigantic War in which the country has ever been engaged – a war

upon the event of which its destiny depends,"³ that effort had to be justified, to be validated by a final victory. Yet the prime minister could offer nothing other than intensified effort and further sacrifice.⁴ More working hours, more resources, more ships, more money, more freedoms, and many more lives would have to be used up if the nation and empire were to survive, and whatever the outcome the consequences for the state and the people would be profound. Moreover, during 1917, for the first time the nature of victory – war aims and peace terms – became a matter of public concern and debate. Why was the war being fought and fought on, who would be the winners and losers, and what sort of post-war world was envisaged? If the nation were to press on to victory, that victory had to be concrete and worthwhile. This was the uncertain future into which Lloyd George led his nation and empire in 1917. So, although Christmas 1916 was marked by confidence in ultimate victory, this was tempered by the inability to see how and when such a victory could be achieved and by anxiety about the price that would have to be paid for it.

In fact, after the better organized and sustained exertion of 1916, Britain and its coalition partners had made considerable progress in their efforts to defeat the Central Powers (much more so than in 1915), and as many commentators identified, the war had reached a turning point.⁵ The "Big Push" on the Somme, costly though it was, had turned the course of the land war, even if much fighting still remained to be done; after the German surface fleet had been checked at Jutland, the economic blockade of Germany and its allies had been tightened; the home front was properly organized after mobilization of the domestic war economy; manpower was now centrally managed through the introduction of military conscription and various measures regulating the domestic labour market; further diplomatic success had brought Rumania into the war on the Allied side and was drawing the still neutral United States inexorably toward economic integration and moral sympathy with the Allies; and in 1916, collaboration with Britain's allies had become much closer. To a great extent, the preconditions for victory were established by the time Lloyd George assumed the premiership. Still, there was no end in sight. Germany and its allies were gripped but far from beaten, much remained to be done both at home and on the battlefield, and Lloyd George would not offer the prospect of a speedy victory. By this point, though trying not to sound a note of pessimism to his audience, he was certainly despairing of the attritional strategy adopted by the Allied military leadership and starting to doubt the possibility of a decisive outcome to the war.⁶

On the other hand, after the Somme offensive Douglas Haig was confident of ultimate victory, even though he was not prepared to predict when this might be achieved, and he privately expressed concerns about the staying power of Britain's allies. In the words of the commander-in-chief, "The enemy's power has not yet been broken, nor is it yet possible to form an estimate of the time the war may last before the objects for which the Allies are fighting have been attained. But the Somme battle has placed beyond doubt the ability of the Allies to gain those objects."⁷ The Allied military leaders hoped this might be achieved in the coming spring by intensifying the attrition of the German Army – "two Sommes at once," as Lieutenant General Sir Henry Wilson, Lloyd George's unofficial military adviser, described it to the unenthusiastic prime minister.⁸ In fact, it was the French who put an end to this plan, removing the commander-in-chief, General Joseph Joffre. His replacement, Robert Nivelle, got the job because the army under his command at Verdun seemed to be more effective on the battlefield – which it was not – although his strategy was essentially the same as Joffre's, to break the German Army in a huge offensive in the spring, co-ordinated with offensives by the other allies. Unfortunately, his appointment delayed the resumption of the general Allied offensive until April, just long enough to give the Germans a breathing space during which they withdrew to stronger defences in the west; to allow Russia to collapse into revolution; and to let the French government fall, introducing further delay as the new ministry carried out an inquiry into whether the offensive should go ahead in the changed circumstances. Whether its resumption in February, as Joffre had intended, would have decided the war by the summer and have avoided the *Weltanschauung* of 1917 will never be known. Instead, the British Empire, like the other belligerents, passed through a year of strain, strife, and soul searching. In this case, the nation and empire emerged stronger and more committed, whereas allies and enemies seemed to be wavering.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR was fought and won on five separate fronts: a land front on which the armies of the Allied coalition encountered and defeated those of the Central Powers; a maritime front on which navies engaged, merchant shipping was deployed to sustain war efforts, and economic blockade and counter-blockade were imposed; a home front on which manpower, industrial productivity, and finance were mobilized to support military operations; a diplomatic front, devoted to expanding coalitions and managing neutral opinion; and a "united front" – the need to keep a coalition together and improve its efficiency while undermining

the cohesion of the rival alliance.⁹ By its midpoint, the war had become an interminable struggle for survival, and 1917 was the year in which fears arose that it might be lost on the home front before it could be decided on the battlefield. In that year, the war's Clausewitzian "centre of gravity" shifted temporarily to its domestic and diplomatic fronts as civilian morale became uncertain and "peace" – which turned out to be an existential yearning rather than a concrete and negotiable outcome – became the focus of public attention. But, as William Mulligan suggests, this would result in "a presentation of the moral purpose of the war, in which the continuation of the struggle for a particular vision of future peace was the basis for the remobilization of civilian populations and armies."¹⁰ But at New Year's 1917, this remained in the future. As the war prolonged, many thought that it might be decided by popular action behind the battle fronts: the Russians were providing a worrying example of how this might turn out. But the military and maritime fronts remained active and the mood of the home front was in a close and responsive relationship to events and developments in the land and naval campaigns. Therefore, the changing fortunes of war cannot be overlooked as a factor that determined British resilience in this difficult year.

AT THE END OF 1916, peace was on the agenda for the first time. Woodrow Wilson, newly re-elected president of the United States, had called for the belligerents to state their war aims, with a view to mediating a peace settlement, which Germany quickly did after its mauling in the second half of 1916. Of course, the New Year's wish of 1917 was for peace, although there was to be no resolution. At this point, peace remained an abstract concept – the end of the war – rather than a practicable set of conditions for concluding it to anyone's satisfaction. Essentially, Wilson was offering the Allies (and their opponents) "peace without victory,"¹¹ which was unacceptable after the efforts and sacrifices of previous years – that would have made the war futile (something it would become on reflection and in popular memory only some years afterward). In his inaugural speech, Prime Minister Lloyd George was happy to endorse his French and Russian allies' rejection of those overtures – the united front seemed solid:

Any man or set of men who wantonly, or without sufficient cause, prolonged a terrible conflict like this would have on his soul a crime that oceans could not cleanse. Upon the other hand, it is equally true that any man or set of men who out of a sense of weariness and despair abandoned the struggle without achieving the high purpose for which we had entered into it being

nearly fulfilled [sic] would have been guilty of the costliest act of poltroonery ever perpetrated by any statesman.¹²

This was Lloyd George's personal dilemma, and also the empire's conundrum during 1917. What form should peace take, and how could it be achieved? Whereas an abstract sound-bite formula, "restitution, reparation, guarantee against repetition," could be deployed against the hubristic peace overtures that Germany offered in response to Wilson's initiative, beyond breaking Prussian militarism – what Lloyd George would define as "conditions of peace" rather than war aims – no concrete war aims could be laid out to the restless British population.¹³ Certainly, this was a precursor to a just peace that all could agree on, but it was an abstract war objective, not concrete peace terms. These were now demanded. There also seemed to be a gulf to bridge between statesmen's essential security objectives and ordinary people's understandable wish for an end to hostilities at a time of worsening economic conditions.¹⁴ This lack of empathy was central to Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon's famous and much mythologized personal protest in June 1917, which was a response to the lack of clarity in what the nation was fighting for. "Our peace terms remain the same, 'the destruction of Prussianism.' I don't know what aims this destruction represents," he noted shortly after issuing his letter of protest.¹⁵ Similarly, former Unionist foreign secretary Lord Lansdowne's famous "peace" letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in November demanded a clear statement of Britain's position as the precursor to a negotiated settlement.¹⁶

To some extent, Lloyd George had to balance the security and territorial objectives of two parallel conflicts: the European "balance of power" war begun in August 1914 and the imperial war in the Middle East launched in November 1914. Everyone, including Lansdowne, identified security as an essential precursor of peace, although what that entailed – extra-European imperial expansion at the expense of Britain's enemies, strengthened colonialism or self-determination, the restriction of or reconciliation with Germany, control or freedom of the seas, and an international organization for future "collective security" – were points for deliberation at home and among allies and adversaries. These were traditional national war aims, the province of statesmen and diplomats, that would determine the minutiae of peace settlements that everyone agreed could not be established until hostilities ceased. In the meantime, the conflict went on with a view to securing an advantage for when the shooting stopped and the talking started. But alongside imperial and international aims, there were social as well as democratic agendas of peace to be taken into consideration.

Although Woodrow Wilson was a year away from formulating his Fourteen Points, the essence of his liberal “peace agenda” that he brought to the negotiating table as the leader of an “associated power” of the Allies was common knowledge. On the home front, workers sought concrete political and social rewards for participating in the war effort – if these were not war aims per se, they were certainly anticipated war consequences. Finally, international socialism challenged the rights of imperialist statesmen to make peace, countering with representations for a socialist peace without annexations and financial indemnities.¹⁷ So, though 1917 was another hard year of hostilities, it was also a speculative year of “peace,” when attention started to focus on the war’s outcomes now that its conduct was more properly understood. The prevailing conclusion at year’s end was that the war must be fought and won in both Europe and the Middle East before any sort of peace was possible.

The year can be divided into three phases, in both its strategic conduct and outcomes. There would be a spring of hope, a summer of discontent, and an autumn of resolve. To a great extent, the British and imperial experience echoed that of the other belligerents in 1917, one of “remobilization.” As head of the British government, Lloyd George had the difficult role of national and imperial figurehead, which gave him considerable influence in Allied policy making. His performance remains controversial,¹⁸ but he certainly brought energy and determination to the role at a time when drift was dangerous. By the end of the year, Italy and France had found their own populist war leaders, leaving the Allies in a better position than the Central Powers to face the intensification of the conflict in 1918. By then, both sides realized there was no room for compromise. The future of nation and empire was staked on victory; the ultimate war aim became the justification of the people’s effort and sacrifice.

ALTHOUGH THE PRIME MINISTER offered only a tough year ahead, there were many positives on the balance sheet as the war entered its next phase. On the land front, the hope persisted that one final push would bring it to an end. Although skeptical of the likelihood of victory in the west, like other Allied politicians, Lloyd George allowed himself to be taken in by Nivelle’s optimistic predictions, now that the decisive “knockout blow” he advocated seemed to have been substituted for Haig and William Robertson’s policy of attrition.¹⁹ The German Army’s strategic retreat on the Western Front in late February and early March was an indication that the enemy was reeling from 1916’s blows. There were also clouds on the horizon. The German retreat compromised Nivelle’s own planning,