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1918: How the Allies Floated to Victory on a Wave of Oil

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Global Research, May 04, 2020
Global Research 15 July 2018

Region: Europe
Theme: History

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Featured image: French troops transported to the front in trucks, bas-relief on the Voie Sacrée Monument near Verdun (photo by J. Pauwels)

March 3, 1918. Germany signs the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk with revolutionary Russia, ruled by the Bolsheviks, who have come to power thanks to their pledge to pull the country out of a murderous and seemingly senseless conflict. Russia thus officially exits the Great War — but is about to fall prey to an equally terrible civil war. As far as Germany is concerned, this treaty offers the enormous advantage of no longer having to fight a war on two fronts. A huge number of German troops can now be transferred from the eastern to the western front: a total of forty-four divisions, approximately a half-million men. For the very first time since the beginning of the war, the Germans enjoy a numerical superiority on the western front. (Even the arrival of American forces does not make a significant difference, since in early 1918 there are still only a hundred thousand "Yankees" in Europe, and they are inexperienced soldiers.)

On the western front, everybody now knows that a German offensive will soon be unleashed; the only question is when. The French, British, Belgian, and Italian soldiers, who have already experienced nearly four years of hell, now fear that the worst is yet to come. Pessimism pervades their ranks as the inevitable German offensive is coming nearer and an allied victory seems less likely than ever before. The number of desertions and voluntary surrenders to the enemy increases dramatically. Convictions for attempted desertion or surrender multiply; in the Belgian army, they rise from a total of 28 in the period from 1914 to 1917 to 190 in 1918. In spite of this pessimism, the great majority of the soldiers of the Belgian and other allied armies "carry on," certainly not because of patriotic sentiments or sterling heroism, but rather of "lackluster resignation," a mixture of a sense of duty and fatalism, "stubborn peasant loyalty," and, last but certainly not least, of "solidarity with their fellow soldiers," to avoid leaving their comrades in the lurch (De Schaepdrijver, pp. 209, 211, 242). The soldiers hope that, whatever its outcome might be, the looming German offensive will bring about an end to the war, so that they can finally go home, victorious or not. The song "When This Bloody War Is Over," a musical reflection of these sentiments, is extremely popular among the British soldiers at the time:

> When this bloody war is over
>
> Oh, how happy I will be;

When I get my civvy clothes on

No more soldiering for me.

The tension also mounts on the side of the Germans, who are keenly aware that time is working against them. Every day, in fact, more Americans are arriving to join their French and British brothers in arms. Blockaded by the Royal Navy, the Reich is lacking all sorts of products, including crucially important war materiel, so that they have to make do with *Ersatz*, substitute products of poor quality. More importantly, German civilians as well as soldiers are undernourished and hungry. They are so disgruntled that it is feared that they will follow Russia's revolutionary example. Already in the beginning of the year, Berlin and other big cities were the scenes of demonstrations and riots as well as strikes. Germany's Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Ottoman allies, moreover, are increasingly displaying alarming signs of war weariness. An offensive has to be launched as soon as possible in order to achieve the victory that, like a *deus ex machina*, will cause all the problems to evaporate — or so it is hoped. But due to the Germans' extravagant demands vis-à-vis the Russians at Brest-Litovsk, which stretched out the negotiations, much valuable time has been lost. And the occupation of the vast Eastern European space that Russia has been forced to cough up requires that approximately one million men be kept there; these forces might have been very useful for the purpose of compensating for the enormous losses that the offensive on the western front is certain to cause. Finally, because of the devastation wrought by the war, the occupied regions of Eastern Europe are virtually useless to Germany as sources of raw materials and food that might have served to improve the material and mental condition of Germany's soldiers and civilians.

The famous "spring offensive," the brainchild of General Ludendorff, is codenamed "Michael," referring to the archangel who slew Lucifer. The idea is that this will be the conclusive contest in which the German, typically nicknamed "Michael," will defeat the Franco-British Lucifer. The attack is launched on the first day of the spring, on March 21, 1918, at 4:30 in the morning, after a mammoth artillery bombardment, a "storm of fire and steel," as the German front soldier Ernst Jünger will later describe it. The "theatre" is a stretch of the front of about sixty kilometres in the same area, the French province of Picardy, where the Battle of the Somme took place in 1916. The attackers manage to break through the British lines and make rapid progress. About ten days later they are already more than sixty kilometres from their starting positions. The British lose all the terrain they conquered at such high cost in 1916, and suffer huge casualties in the process, allegedly more than one hundred thousand men.

Later in that spring as well as in the early summer of 1918, more German attacks follow against the British in Flanders and against the French along the Aisne River in the direction of Paris, and the results are always very similar: spearheaded by elite "stormtroopers," the German attacks achieve impressive territorial gains, but the hoped-for big prize, total victory, remains tantalizingly out of reach As they make progress and carve deep pockets in the Allied lines, the front line becomes longer, requiring the Germans' resources in

manpower and materiel to be dispersed rather than concentrated, thus making their attacks less forceful and their increasingly long flanks more vulnerable to Allied counterattacks. Their progress in the direction of Paris is finally halted during the famous "Second Battle of the Marne," between mid-July and early August 1918. But it is not the presumed genius of allied commanders such as Haig or Foch, grim determination of the British and French officers, or heroism of the ordinary soldiers, that puts an end to the progress achieved by the Germans. Nor is it the fact that, beginning on March 26, 1918, all allied forces are placed under the command of one single chief, namely the French General Foch, although this clearly has its advantages.

It is more correct to say that the German progress peters out by itself. The German soldiers know that "Michael" is the offensive of the last chance. The prospects for a decisive triumph on the western front have never loomed so good since the start of the war in 1914, and they know that their commanders have committed all available resources on a bet to achieve the offensive's objectives and thus to win the war. It is all or nothing, now or never. Paradoxically, the success of the attack is also at least partly responsible for its failure. When the German soldiers overrun allied positions, they notice that these are bursting with weapons and ammunition as well as stocks of food and drink that they themselves have not seen in years. The officers often try in vain to incite their men to attack the next British or French line of trenches; the soldiers simply interrupt their advance to feast on canned meat, white bread, wine, etc. The American historian Paul Fussell describes such a situation as follows:

The successful attack ruin[ed] troops. In this way it [was] just like defeat . . . The spectacular German advance finally stopped largely for this reason: the attackers, deprived of the sight of "consumer goods" by years of efficient Allied blockade, slowed down and finally halted to get drunk, sleep it off, and peer about. The champagne cellars of the Marne proved especially tempting . . . By mid-summer it was apparent that the German army had destroyed itself by attacking successfully (Fussell, pp. 17-18; also Ferguson, pp. 350-51).

These losses of momentum of the German offensive permit the British and French to reorganize, shore up defences, and bring up reserves, many of them American soldiers, of whom more than half a million become available in the spring of 1918; starting in late March 1918, approximately a hundred thousand Yankees have been arriving in France every month. The Americans may not be the finest soldiers, but they show up wherever help is needed. That demoralizes the Germans, who get the impression that the Allies dispose of unlimited reserves not only in food, weapons, and ammunition, in all sorts of war materiel, but also in men, in "human material." In the meantime, the German attackers themselves also suffer considerable losses: 230,000 men, allegedly, during the first two weeks of the offensive, and at least half a million, and possibly as many as a million, between March and July (Ferguson, pp. 311-13, 368-73, 386-87; Piper, pp. 430-31; Miquel, pp. 414-15). These losses, which can not be compensated for, inspire a famous poem by Bertolt Brecht, "*Ballade vom toten Soldaten*," "The Ballad of the Dead Soldier," featuring these sarcastic verses:

> Und als der Krieg im vierten Lenz And when the war, in its fourth spring,
>
> Keinen Ausblick auf Frieden bot No longer offered any prospects of peace
>
> Da zog der Soldat seine Konsequenz The soldier drew the logical conclusion

How many more times do the Germans have to attack an allied position before the enemy will capitulate? How can one defeat an enemy who has such inexhaustible reserves of men and equipment? Even the sight of the prisoners they bag in huge numbers demoralizes the Germans and their allies. These men look well-fed and healthy. A Hungarian officer, fighting alongside the Germans, is very impressed when he first encounters American prisoners of war, and comments as follows:

Their amazingly good physical condition, the excellent quality of their uniforms, the heavy leather in their boots, belts and such, the confident look in their eyes even as prisoners, made me realise what four years of fighting had done to our troops (Englund, p. 474).

However, yet another factor plays the most important, and almost certainly decisive, role in the failure of the German offensive in the spring and summer of 1918. If again and again the Allies succeed in bringing up the reserves in men and materiel that are needed to slow down and eventually stop the German juggernaut, it is because they dispose of thousands of trucks to do the job. The French — who already made good use of motorized vehicles earlier, for example taxis to transport troops to the battlefield of the Marne in 1914 and trucks to supply Verdun along the *voie sacrée*, the "sacred way," in 1916 — pose of massive numbers of excellent trucks, mostly models designed and built by Renault, a manufacturer who will end up producing more than nine thousand of them for the French army during the Great War. The British, who started the war without a single truck, have fifty-six thousand of them in 1918. On the other hand, as in 1914, the Germans still transport their troops mostly by train, but many sectors of the front, for example the Somme battlefields, are hard to reach that way. (In northern France, the railway lines run mostly north-south, towards Paris, and not east-west, towards the coast of the English Channel, which is the German army's major line of advance.) In any event, in the immediate vicinity of the front, both sides will continue until the very end of the war to rely heavily on horse-drawn carts to transport equipment. But in this respect too, the Germans are disadvantaged, as they suffer from a serious shortage of draft horses as well as fodder, while the Allies are able to import large numbers of horses and robust mules from overseas, especially from the US (Münkler, p. 682; Breverton, p. 113).

The greater mobility of the Allies undoubtedly constitutes a major factor in their success. Ludendorff will later declare that the triumph of his adversaries in 1918 came down to a victory of French trucks over German trains. This triumph can also be similarly described as a victory of the rubber tires of the Allies' vehicles, produced by firms such as Michelin and Dunlop, over the steel wheels of German trains, produced by Krupp. Thus it can also be said that the victory of the Entente against the Central Powers is a victory of the economic system, and particularly the industry, of the Allies, against the economic system of Germany and Austria-Hungary, an economic system that finds itself starved of crucially important raw materials because of the British blockade. "The military and political defeat of Germany," writes the French historian Frédéric Rousseau, "is inseparable from its economic failure" (Rousseau, p. 85).

The economic superiority of the Allies clearly has a lot to do with the fact that the British and French — and even the Belgians and Italians — have colonies where they can fetch whatever is needed to win a modern, industrial war, especially rubber, oil, and other "strategic" raw materials. The Great War happens to be a war between imperialist rivals, in

which the great prizes to be won are territories bursting with raw materials and cheap labour, the kind of things that benefit a country's "national economy," more specifically its industry, and thus make that country more powerful and more competitive. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that the war is ultimately won by the countries that have been most richly endowed in this respect, namely the great industrial powers with the most colonies; in other words, that the biggest "imperialisms" — those of the British, the French, and the Americans — defeated a competing imperialism, that of Germany, admittedly an industrial superpower, but underprivileged with respect to colonial possessions. In view of this, it is even amazing that it took four long years before Germany's defeat was a fait accompli.

On the other hand, it is also obvious that the advantages of having colonies and therefore access to unlimited supplies of food for soldiers and civilians as well as rubber, petroleum, and similar raw materials, was only able to reveal themselves *in the long run.* The main reason for this is that in 1914 the war started as a continental kind of Napoleonic campaign that was to morph — imperceptibly, but inexorably — into a worldwide contest of industrial titans. Its opening stages typically conjure up images of cavalry, more specifically *paintings* of German *uhlans* and French *cuirassiers,* sporting fur hats or shiny helmets and armed with sabre or lance, appearing proudly on the scene as vanguards of armies trudging through open fields. In the *photos* taken on the battlefields in 1918, however, the men on horseback are absent and we see infantrymen being transported to the front in trucks or advancing behind tanks, armed with machine guns and flame-throwers, while airplanes circle overhead. The symbolic halfway point of this dramatic metamorphosis was July 1, 1916, the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. There and then, General Haig oversaw the biggest artillery bombardment in history, but also kept a huge number of horsemen ready in the hope that, as in Napoleon's time, the cavalry might deal the decisive blow to the enemy.

The classic characteristic of what is commonly known as "*blitzkrieg*" is a highly mobile form of infantry and armour, working in combined arms. (German armed forces, June 1942)

In 1914, then, Germany still had a chance to win the war, especially since it had excellent railways to ferry its armies to the western and eastern fronts, which is how a big victory is achieved against the Russians at Tannenberg. However, by 1918 that chance is long gone. Hitler and his generals will draw the conclusion that Germany, in order to win a second edition of the Great War – or, as some historians see it, part two of the "Thirty Years' War of the 20th Century" – will have to win it quickly. Which is why they will develop the concept of *Blitzkrieg*, "lightning-fast war," to be followed by *Blitzsieg*, "lightning-fast victory." This formula will work against Poland and France in 1939–1940, but the spectacular failure of the *Blitzkrieg* in the Soviet Union in 1941 will doom Germany to fight once again a long, drawn-out war, a war which, lacking sufficient raw materials such as oil and rubber, it will find impossible to win. (Pauwels)

Rubber is not the only strategic type of raw material that the Allies have in abundance while the Germans lack it. Another one is petroleum, for which the increasingly motorized land armies — and rapidly expanding air forces — are developing a gargantuan appetite. During their final offensive, in the fall of 1918, the Allies will consume 12,000 barrels (of 159 litres each) of oil daily. During a victory dinner on November 21, the British minister of foreign affairs, Lord Curzon, will declare, not without reason, that "the allied cause floated to victory upon a wave of oil," and a French senator will proclaim that "oil had been the blood of

victory." A considerable quantity of this oil has come from the United States. It has been supplied by Standard Oil, a firm belonging to the Rockefellers, who make a lot of money in this type of business, just as Renault does by producing the gas-guzzling trucks. (Of all the oil imported by France in 1917, the United States furnishes 82.6 per cent and Standard Oil alone 47 per cent; in 1918, the United States furnishes 89.4 per cent of the oil imported by the French.) It is therefore only logical that the Allies — swimming in oil, so to speak — have acquired all sorts of modern, motorized, and oil-consuming war materiel. In 1918, the French not only dispose of phenomenal quantities of trucks, but also of a big fleet of airplanes. And in that same year, the French as well as the British also have a considerable number of automobiles equipped with machine guns or cannons, pioneered by the Belgian army in 1914, as well as tanks. The latter are no longer the lumbering, ineffective monsters that first showed up at the front in 1916, but machines of excellent quality such as the light and mobile Renault FT "baby-tank," considered the "first modern tank in history." On the side of the Germans — whose supposedly brilliant commander-in-chief, Ludendorff, does not believe in the usefulness of tanks — the appearance of these monsters often provokes panic. If the Germans themselves have only very few trucks or tanks, it is because they do not have sufficient oil for such vehicles — or for their planes; only comparatively small quantities of Romanian oil are available to them (Engdahl, pp. 46-48).

The British blockade has been strangling Germany slowly but surely, and Ludendorff's spring offensive is for the Reich the very last opportunity to win the war. But despite spectacular initial successes, the Germans cannot overcome the Allies. Sooner or later, the offensive is bound to run out of steam, and this happens in the summer of 1918, more specifically in early August. The Second Battle of the Marne finishes at that time with a victory of the French, who arguably benefit from considerable American aid. Symbolically, however, the day the tide turns is August 8. On that day, the French, British, Canadians, and Americans launch a major counterattack and the Germans troops are henceforth pushed back systematically and inexorably. Ludendorff will later describe August 8 as the blackest day in the history of the German army.

In the summer of 1918, Germany's military situation becomes critical, not only because of the failure of Ludendorff's great offensive, but also because at that time the Reich's allies are likewise experiencing major difficulties. The Austrians, for example, launch an offensive against the Italians along the Piave River. But because of the British blockade they suffer from the same problems as the Germans, namely shortages of food, raw materials, and even horses. In the case of their offensive too, initial progress soon grinds to a halt. The Italians reorganize, counterattack, and the Battle of the Piave, fought between June 15 and 23, 1918, ends with a withdrawal of the Austrians to the positions from which they had started their offensive. They have lost 150,000 men. Desertions begin to multiply, and soldiers of the Czech, Croat, and other minorities of the Empire, in particular, increasingly refuse to obey orders. The Austro-Hungarian army is barely able to continue the war. And so it is hardly a surprise that it will suffer a catastrophic defeat when, on October 24, 1918, the Italians attack, achieving a major victory at Vittorio Veneto. This battle ends on November 3 with the capitulation of the Austro-Hungarians at Villa Giusti, near Padua. As far as Germany is concerned, the collapse of its principal ally contributes strongly to its own decision to throw in the towel. Another German ally, Bulgaria, already gave up earlier, capitulating on September 29 in Thessaloniki (Newman, p. 144).

The majority of the German soldiers on the western front realize that the war is lost. They want to get it over and done with and go home. They do not hide their contempt for the

political and military leaders who unleashed the conflict and thus caused so much misery, and they are not willing to lose their lives for a lost cause. The German army begins to disintegrate, discipline breaks down, and the number of desertions and mass surrenders skyrockets. Between mid-July 1918 and the armistice of November 11 of that year, 340,000 Germans surrender or run over to the enemy. In September 1918, a British soldier witnesses how German POWs laugh and applaud each time a new contingent of prisoners is brought in. Even elite soldiers capitulate in large numbers. Of the casualties Germany suffers at this time, prisoners represent an unprecedented 70 per cent. The German soldiers now use all kinds of tricks to avoid going to the front, a practice that becomes known as *Drückebergerei*, "shirking." Many men who are transferred from Eastern Europe to the western front cross into the neutral Netherlands to await there the end of the war as internees. No less than 750,000 German soldiers allegedly desert at that time; and just about as many are simply reported as "absent" from their unit. The number of deserters hanging around in the capital, Berlin, is estimated by the police to be in the tens of thousands. The epidemic of desertions, mass surrenders, and shirking mushrooms during August and September 1918, so much so that this state of affairs will be described as a *Kampfstreik*, an "undeclared military strike" (Münkler, p. 204). And that is certainly how the German soldiers themselves see things. The men who are leaving the front often insult those who are marching in the opposite direction, calling them "strike breakers" and *Kriegsverlängerer*, "war prolongers"! The influence of the Russian Revolution in all this becomes obvious when, in October, the sailors stationed in the port of Kiel mutiny (Münkler, pp. 704-07; Ferguson, p. 352; Hochschild, pp. 330-31, 338; Rousseau, pp. 74-75; Piper, p. 432; Knightley, pp. 110-11).

The German army is running out of gas, literally as well as figuratively speaking, and it is also running out of soldiers who are willing to fight. Yet another factor that contributes to the decision to throw in the towel is the fact that he situation on the home front is simply catastrophic. Because of the British naval blockade, not enough food has been reaching Germany, so the civilians are starving, and malnutrition causes diseases and high mortality rates, especially among children, older people, and women. It is estimated that during the Great War no less than 762,000 Germans will die of malnutrition and associated diseases. The most infamous and deadliest of these disorders is the "Spanish flu," originally called the "Flemish flu" because it was brought to Germany by soldiers coming home from the front in Flanders. This epidemic is believed to have caused the death of four hundred thousand Germans in 1918 (Englund, p.471; Mueller and Mueller, pp. 43–53).

This macabre context of misery and death witnesses an intensification of the polarization op public opinion that emerged by 1917, at the latest, namely the one between pacifists with mostly democratic, radical, and even revolutionary aspirations, and "hawks" who are generally loyal to the established imperial order and cherish traditional conservative, authoritarian, and militarist values. By the fall of 1918, the former gain the upper hand, as the great majority of the people desperately want peace at any price (Kolko, pp. 146–48). As in Russia one year earlier, the combination of war-weariness and desire for radical political and social change among soldiers as well as civilians causes the war to grind to a halt amidst revolutionary upheaval. In the context of the fiasco of the Ludendorff offensive and the allied counter-offensive, revolutionary fires start to smoulder all over Germany, flaring up at the end of October and in early November, when sailors mutiny in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel and revolutionary soldiers' "councils" (*Räte*), modelled after the Russian soviets, are installed in many cities, including Berlin, Munich, and Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace, soon to be restored to France. Ludendorff – figurehead par excellence of militarism,

authoritarianism, and conservatism – is more or less forced to resign and flees abroad. The Kaiser himself abdicates and departs ingloriously on November 10 for exile in the Netherlands. A government consisting of liberal and social-democratic politicians takes over and immediately sues for peace. The following day, an unconditional German capitulation is signed in the railway carriage that serves as headquarters to the allied commander-in-chief, General Foch, stationed deep in the Compiègne Forest, on the territory of the village of Rethondes.

Until that very day, the Germans have somehow continued to put up an ordered and relatively effective resistance. They have had to withdraw, and have done so, but slowly and in good order. Until the bitter end, the Great War has thus remained the murderous enterprise it has been from the start. During the last five weeks of the war, half a million men are killed or wounded. Even the very last day sees heavy casualties inflicted on both sides. Some soldiers "fall" only minutes before the armistice goes into effect on November 11 at 11 a.m.

On November 10, British and Canadian troops arrive on the outskirts of the Belgian town of Mons, where in August 1914 the British forces had first faced the Germans in a battle. Late at night, a message reaches the local commanders. In General Foch's headquarters, an agreement has been reached with German emissaries to lay down the arms later that same day, namely at 11 a.m. The British poet May Wedderburn Cannan will salute this long-awaited announcement in a poem entitled "The Armistice":

> The news came through over the telephone:
>
> All the terms had been signed:
>
> the war was won
>
> And all the fighting and the agony,
>
> And all the labour of the years were done.[23]

At Mons, however, the fighting and agony are not done yet. The men could have enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and wait until 11 before sauntering into the town; however, the Canadian commander, General Arthur Currie, gives the order to take Mons early in the morning, knowing very well that the Germans will resist, causing more blood to flow.

> "It was a proud thing," he will explain later, "that we were able to finish the war there where we began it, and that we, the young [Canadian] whelps of the old [British] lion, were able to take the ground lost in 1914."

But his subordinates see things quite differently. Two Canadian historians describe their reaction:

[They] openly questioned the need to advance any further . . . None of [them] wanted any part of the Mons show. They were all grumbling to beat hell. They knew the war was coming to an end and there was going to be an armistice. 'What the hell do we have to go any further for?' they grumbled . . . At the end of the day the men were furious about the losses.

These losses include George Ellison and George Price, respectively the last Tommy and the last Canadian to "fall" in the Great War; they are killed within minutes before the arms are laid down. They rest in the British-German war cemetery of Saint-Symphorien, a few kilometres outside of Mons, together with John Parr, the very first British soldier to lose his life in the Great War — in August 1914. Hundreds of other British, Germans, and Canadians perish in and around Mons in that war's final minutes. The very last soldier to be killed in the Great War is an American of German origin, named Henry Gunther; he falls in the French village of Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, situated to the north of Verdun, just one minute before the end (Hochschild, p. 337, 341; de Schaepdrijver, pp. 251-52; Breverton, p. 250; Persico, pp. 348-50; Black and Boileau, pp. 371-76).

On the last day of the Great War, November 11, 1918, all armies combined suffer 10,944 casualties on the western front, including 2,738 men killed. This is approximately twice the daily average of killed and wounded during 1914–1918. (It is also about 10 per cent more than the total casualties that will be suffered on D-Day, the first day of the landings in Normandy, in June 1944.) This bloodshed could have been avoided if the French and allied commander-in-chief, Marshal Foch, had not refused to accept the German negotiators' request to declare a ceasefire as soon as the capitulation was signed in the night, rather than to wait until 11 a.m.

With respect to the final minutes of the Great War, a quaint anecdote deserves to be mentioned, even though it may be apocryphal. Shortly before 11 a.m, somewhere on the western front, a German soldier starts to fire his machine gun furiously. At precisely 11:00 he stops, stands up, takes off his helmet, takes a bow, and walks quietly to the rear (Persico, p. 378; Black and Boileau, pp. 374-76; Fussell, p. 196).

Postscript: The Black Gold of Mesopotamia

The First World War was a contest between two blocs of imperialist powers, whereby a major goal was the acquisition, preservation, and/or aggrandizement of territories – in Europe and worldwide – considered to be of vital importance for the national economy of these powers, mostly because they contained raw materials such as petroleum. We have seen that this conflict was ultimately won by those powers that were already most richly endowed with such possessions in 1914: the members of the Triple Entente plus the United States. Uncle Sam admittedly became a belligerent only in 1917, but his oil was available from the very start to the Entente and remained beyond the reach of the Germans and Austrian-Hungarians throughout the war because of the British naval blockade. Let us take a brief look at the role played by Britain in this struggle of imperialist titans.

Britain strode into the twentieth century as the world's superpower, in control of an immense portfolio of colonial possessions. But that lofty standing depended on the Royal Navy ruling the waves, did it not? And a serious problem arose as the years following the turn of the century witnessed the rapid conversion from coal to petroleum as fuel for ships. Which caused Albion, richly endowed with coal but deprived of oil, to search frantically for plentiful and reliable sources of the "black gold," of which preciously little was available in its colonies. For the time being, oil had to be purchased from its biggest producer and exporter at the time, the US, a former colony of Britain, increasingly a major commercial and industrial competitor, and traditionally not a friendly power; this dependency was therefore intolerable in the long run. Some oil became available from Persia, now Iran, but not enough to solve the problem. And so, when rich oil deposits were discovered in the Mosul region of Mesopotamia, a part of the Ottoman Empire that was later to become the

state of Iraq, the ruling patriciate in London – exemplified by Churchill – decided that it was imperative to acquire exclusive control over that hitherto unimportant part of the Middle East. Such a project was not unrealistic, since the Ottoman Empire happened to be a big but very weak nation, from which the British had earlier been able to snatch sizeable pieces of real estate *ad libitum*, for example Egypt and Cyprus. But the Ottomans had recently become allies of the Germans, so the planned acquisition of Mesopotamia opened up prospects of war with both these empires. Even so, the need for petroleum was so great that military action was planned, to be implemented as soon as possible. The reason for this haste: the Germans and Ottomans had started to construct a railway that was to link Berlin via Istanbul to Baghdad, thus raising the chilling possibility that the oil of Mesopotamia might soon be shipped overland to the Reich for the benefit of a mighty German fleet that already happened to be the Royal Navy's most dangerous rival. The Baghdad Railway was scheduled to be finished in . . . 1914.

German Baghdad Railway (Source: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection via Public Domain)

It was in this context that London abandoned its long-standing friendship with Germany and joined the Reich's two mortal enemies, France and Russia, in the so-called Triple Entente, and that detailed plans for war against Germany were agreed upon with France. The idea was that the massive armies of the French and Russians would crush Germany, while the bulk of the Empire's armed forces would move from India into Mesopotamia, beat the pantaloons off the Ottomans, and grab the Mesopotamian oil fields; in return, the Royal Navy was to prevent the German fleet from attacking France, and token assistance to French action against the Reich on the continent was to be forthcoming in the shape of the comparatively Lilliputian British Expeditionary Corps. But this Macchiavellian arrangement was elaborated in secret and neither Parliament nor the public were informed.

In the months before the outbreak of war, a compromise with Germany was still possible, and was admittedly even favoured by some factions of the British political, industrial, and financial elite. However, such a compromise would have meant allowing Germany a share of Mesopotamia's oil, while Britain wanted nothing less than a monopoly. And so, in 1914, laying hands on the rich oil fields of Mesopotamia was really London's real, though unspoken, or "latent," war aim. When the war erupted, pitting Germany and its Austrian-Hungarian ally against the Franco-Russian duo as well as Serbia, there seemed to be no

obvious reason for Britain to become involved. The government faced a painful dilemma: it was honour-bound to side with France but would then have to reveal that binding promises of such assistance had been made in secret. Fortunately, the Reich violated the neutrality of Belgium and thus provided London with a perfect pretext for going to war. In reality, the British leaders did not give a fig about the fate of Belgium, at least as long as the Germans did not intend to acquire the great seaport of Antwerp, referred to by Napoleon as "a pistol aimed at the heart of England"; and during the war, Britain herself would violate the neutrality of a number of countries, e.g. China, Greece, and Persia.

Like all plans made in preparation for what was to become "the Great War," the scenario concocted in London failed to unfold as anticipated: the French and Russians did not manage to crush the Teutonic host, so the British had to send many more troops to the continent – and suffer much greater losses – than planned; and in the distant Middle East, the Ottoman army – expertly assisted by German officers – unexpectedly proved to be a tough nut to crack. In spite of these inconveniences, which caused the death of about three quarters of a million soldiers in the UK alone, all was well in the end: in 1918, the Union Jack fluttered over the oil fields of Mesopotamia. Or rather, *almost* all was well, because while the Germans had been squeezed out of the region, the British would henceforth have to tolerate the presence there of the Americans, and eventually they would have to settle for the role of junior partner of that new superpower.

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