

On A Second Rate War

BY X—

IN THE conflict which some still persist in calling the Great War, though it was great only in size, there was so much jumble and muddle and half-hearted experiment and so little visible military skill and ingenuity that a far-seeing and keen-thinking British colonel has declared that if the nations of the earth will only use their brains, the inevitable next war will show combat so transformed and reformed that the struggle of 1914-1918 will seem, by comparison, little more than a clash "between barbaric hordes, a saurian contest, not mediaeval but primeval, archaic, a turmoil." There were strokes of brilliancy, of course, but there was nothing to warrant the hero worship that is going on in Europe, where a person in mountainous Switzerland and an apologist in disturbed Germany devote their energies to debating which was the greater genius, Foch or Ludendorff. The answer is simple: neither was a genius at all. To many a soldier the feelings of today are well expressed by that gentleman with a fiery pen and a disenchanting manner, Mr. Montague, who writes:

Foch tells us what he thinks Napoleon might have said to the Allied commands if he could have risen in our slack times from the dead. "What cards you people have!" he would have said, "and how little you do with them! Look!" And then, Foch thinks, within a month or two he "would have rearranged everything, gone about it all in some new way, thrown out the enemy's plans and quite crushed him." That "new way" was not fated to come. The spark refused to fall, the divine accident would not happen. How could it? you ask with some reason. Had not trench warfare reached an impasse? Yes: but there is always an impasse before Genius shows a way through. Music on keyboards had reached an impasse before a person of genius thought of using his thumb as well as his fingers. Well, that was an obvious dodge, you may say, but in Flanders what way through could there have been? The dodge found by genius is always an obvious dodge, afterwards. Till it is found it can as little be stated by us common people as can the words of the poems that Keats might have written if he had lived longer. You would have to become a Keats to do that, and a Napoleon to say how Napoleon would have got through to Bruges in the Autumn that seemed so autumnal to us. All that the army knew, as it decreased in the mud, was that no such uncovenanted mercy came to transmute its casualties into the swiftly and richly fruitful ones of a Napoleon, the incidental expenses of some miraculous draught of victory.

The fact is that in the World War all important results were accomplished by weight of numbers instead of by facility of thought. It has been said that Germany was the only country really prepared for the struggle; but even Germany was not properly prepared and trained, or at least did not act as though she were. True, she

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had guns, some of which she borrowed from Austria; true, she had available reserves; and true, she had learned forty-three years before how to use railways and telegraphs in war-time. But she started out to fight France as if she were still waging the war of 1870-1871. She saw a line of forts and swept around them to the North (very wise!), but she forgot that the needs in supplies, reserves, communications and transportation of her huge and cumbersome army were not the meagre needs of Prussia four decades before. That army, in truth, moved so fast that it became hopelessly disorganized. A German commander got sick and his forces went into confusion. And the "marvelous miracle" of the Marne was actually a withdrawal; the German order to retire was given *in advance* of the French order to attack! Down go two military idols!

Then came the race to the sea, as the historians call it, each opponent trying to apply time-worn principles of enveloping on a flank until both stretched their attenuated lines over more than four hundred miles of battle front. Instantly there was such a scattering of forces that ought to have been massed and such a confusion in the rear that neither army was able to hit—to concentrate, and hit, and disorganize its opponent. Instead both settled down to the brutal method of trying to wear each other down, starve each other out, exhaust each other's resources,—to snipe off individuals one by one from carefully concealed and adroitly camouflaged hiding places in shell-holes or ruined buildings—in brief, to practice assassination instead of war.

Both experimented tentatively with attacks, but discovered that machine guns wiped out their advancing lines. They invented from time to time "pill boxes" and "distribution in depth" and "leap frog attacks" and "filtering through" and I know not how many more childish devices. The French fiddled around with cavalry and tried to train horses to jump shell-holes and to extricate themselves from barbed wire; they even used mounted men on frontal attacks against trenches in the Champagne. The Germans tried gas, but only experimentally and in a very limited part of a very limited sector; clear thinking and sound foresight would have impelled them to conserve their surprise and use it on a wide front for an important strategic objective, not against single Indian or Canadian battalions. They discovered a

new meaning in munitions, and multiplied production until they staged bombardments lasting week on week in an effort to smother and demolish all resistance, only to find that they had so torn up the ground in front of them that their own necessary transport and supplies could not go ahead, and so their troops could not go ahead either. Then came "assaults with limited objectives"—and another stalemate. The belligerents thought of tanks too late in the conflict, and used them improperly: and when they were used properly at Cambrai, other errors deprived the victors of the profits of their victory. They played about with airplanes, and of course accomplished some good with them. But the idea of individual use was predominant, and no one on either side had the vision to employ different types in combination, as a seaman employs different types of warships. The flying men even engaged in exhilarating man-to-man conflicts, wasting time and lives. If a fighting fleet of dreadnaughts is protected by destroyers, and meets far superior forces, it runs for home—if it can—and the individual destroyer commander does not stop to indulge in a little duel with another individual destroyer commander. Yet "command of the air", we grew to believe, depended upon this or that "flying circus" instead of upon numerical strength and strategical manipulation, as "command of the sea" does in the navy.

II

Down in Mesopotamia, England sent inadequate forces to do a big job, and paid the penalty by the surrender of Kut and Townshend. Down in East Africa, a few Germans marshalled a motley collection of natives against the combined expeditions of England, Portugal and Belgium, and kept the field almost until Armistice Day. Down in Egypt, the British tried to protect the Suez Canal by sitting down safely and placidly on the western side of the waterway and watching the Turks float mines out to endanger passing ships, until someone in London woke up at last, and Allenby and Murray demonstrated that the best defense is an attack: a fact obvious in all the records of past wars. Down at the Dardanelles, the British Navy planned to lose a certain number of ships as the cost of conquest, lost almost that number, and then withdrew just at the moment the Turks were ready to quit and the government was fleeing with its national treasure from Constantinople into Anatolia. Then,

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having given warning, the British held back their landing forces just long enough to enable the waxing Crescent to mobilize sufficient troops to render Ian Hamilton impotent. In Serbia, the help came too late, and the force there assembled sat in idleness for two years, inadequately supported from home. The Italian *debacle* of 1917 was accomplished by sound but also perfectly obvious methods, all of which might have been foreseen, yet it happened. The Rumanian collapse was due to the Rumanians' over-eager desire to invade Hungary, and to a commonplace appreciation by German commanders of the shaky position into which they had thus put themselves. The French offensive into Alsace-Lorraine in the opening days of the war was a glorious gesture, but it was based upon political, not upon strategic motives, and it collapsed with colossal losses. The German submarine campaign and the German's persistent flouting of American interests and demands were political gambles, not military strategy. Indeed, most of the strategic errors of the war were caused by political motives. But no one has yet charged Napoleon with being regardless of politics and political effects. His strategy included a comprehension of such things in his time, and it would have included the same in the Twentieth Century.

There was much bravery in the World War, and much hardy endurance, but very little strategic genius. The Allies won, and deserve the credit for it, such as it is. But they won on man-power and not on brain-power. They experimented and muddled and fussed. The British started out with a volunteer army, but soon found that they would have to adopt conscription, yet they did so only after some of their best officer material had been wasted in battle. They thought they needed every man at the front, but after sending them there they discovered that the war was actually a war of manufactures. By this time, alas, multitudes of their most skilled mechanics had fallen in the field! The Americans had no army at the start and began by accepting volunteers. Then they adopted the draft—but still, for a long time, they continued taking volunteers, and so confused the two systems intolerably. If there was any consistency of plan in the war on either side or any continuous and broad appreciation of the struggle as a whole, military historians have so far failed to bring it out. If there was any Napoleon, he prob-

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ably died at Mons, maybe even as a corporal in the ranks. Do not misunderstand these references to Napoleon. He startled the world by forced marches and surprises that were possible and effective in his day, but, as the Rheims attempt of the Germans showed, surprise maneuvers in the field have been practically prevented in our own day by aerial reconnaissance. The all-seeing aviator, the telephone and telegraph, and rapid motor and rail concentration of troops operate, in the Twentieth Century, to prevent surprises by rapid marching and solid massing. I am not saying, therefore, that the old Napoleon, had he arisen from the Invalides, could have repeated his historic tricks. Others, in fact, tried to do so by his formulae, and failed. I am merely saying that there was no *new* Napoleonic mind to meet the *new* conditions with something of the old divine spark. There was no "new way", as Mr. Montague has pointed out. The brains of the armies reached an impasse and settled down to a struggle of physical strength alone. The affair of the day was all engrossing, and troops were raised as they were needed, or not until after they were needed, and new implements and weapons were devised and tried as they also were needed, or after it was too late for them to be effective. Mentally and physically, the nations of the world were unprepared for a great war, although they did fight a big war. There is a difference between quantitative and qualitative measurement!

The war was won. Who won it? What won it? Listen to the words of General Maurice, of the British General Staff:

With greater experience the American infantry would have learned to overcome the German machine guns with less loss of life, and the services of supply would have worked more smoothly . . . America placed the pick of her splendid manhood in the field, and that manhood went ahead at the job in front of it without counting the cost. By doing its job it gave us victory in 1918.

The pick of our manhood went over to fight, among the remnants of shattered European armies, against the war-weary Germans. The pick of our manhood, with only six months training on this side and only two months on the other side—on the average—went ahead at the job without counting the cost. In 1918 three leading commanders met, agreed, and signed a statement insisting that more men should be sent, as many more as possible and as promptly as possible, even though—these men said—they understood that many would have to be included who had not

had sufficient training. The additional Yankees went over. American moral and physical strength was thrown into the balance, and the scales tipped. It was brute force that won the war.

Untrained troops, their casualties were unnecessarily large by 50%. In 1917 we knew nothing of war. In spite of the confusion among the volunteers "hastily assembled without organization or training" for the War of 1812, in spite of the lessons of the Mexican War, so strenuously taught by Taylor, in spite of Bull Run, and Chickamauga Park and Tampa, in spite of the glaring evils of the Mexican border mobilization in 1916—in spite of all, we had as a nation refused to learn anything about war or to adopt a sound military policy. Leaders might talk; a few enthusiasts might attend a Plattsburg camp; but the people thought of the forefathers who stalked redcoats along the Cambridge road in 1775 and believed that military training would descend as a sudden dispensation from heaven upon raw volunteers in a righteous cause. So we were unprepared. After Congress had passed its pretty resolutions, the Americans had to wait five months before they could even use their training camps. They had to wait a year before they staged an offensive action, and that a small and not satisfactory one. They had to waste billions on cost-plus contracts. They had to waste lives on the banks of the Marne, beside the hill city of St. Mihiel, and amid the tangles of the Argonne Forest. Surely it is to no one's credit to be able to boast like Falstaff: "I have lead my ragamuffins where they were well pepper'd. There's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive."

Of course there was much good work done. Soldier and subaltern went to work with a will and learned a great deal, although the first of their learning was, in many instances, with rifles whittled out of wood and cannon carved out of logs. Civilians cooperated and made sacrifices. All united in a fervent and feverish attempt to overcome the handicap of unpreparedness. Yet the fact remains that the United States, as usual, had to send men into battle insufficiently trained. With such troops as Winder had at Bladensburg, and many an American commander in France, or McDowell at Manassas, not Napoleon himself could have demonstrated a tangible gift of genius.