The English Review: July, 1920
-the first of five pages-

The Two Great War Failures

By "Ex-Bearskin"

We have now two authentic statements on the two historical failures of the war, written by the two respective leaders; both of which would, if successful, have had decisive results, both of which failed for much the same reason —the want of real intelligence of the military mind. The one is General von Kluck's work *The March on Paris* (Arnold), the other is by Sir Ian Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary* (Arnold), this latter a brilliant book which, with von Kluck's, will be historic.

The story of the German onrush and its memorable check can now be pieced together with accuracy. It tallies with the account of General Sir Frederick Maurice. We now know that the Germans failed through want of General Staff control, through inadequate "intelligence," above all, through striking at two fronts at the same time.

As we can now see it, the story is this: All went well, astonishingly, devastatingly, well, until the supreme moment of the French great counter-attack, when, quite suddenly, the entire German position was reversed. The reasons are clear from von Kluck's published orders. First, the First Army or wing was placed under the command of the Second Army—von Bülow—thereby hampering von Kluck's initiative and leading to the inevitable distrust which found expression in von Kluck's disobedience, he at the crucial moment getting in front of the Second Army instead of "in echelon behind it," as ordered. He seems also to have been ignorant of the fact that the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh Armies were all held up east of the Moselle, thus allowing the French freedom of manœuvre; he also lost touch with the Second Army. His intelligence broke down, for he claims to have been ignorant of the advance of the French Sixth Army on his flank. Then the decisive blow was struck by General Manoury, and the Second Army was defeated and began to retire, thus creating a gap which actually amounted to forty miles.

THE TWO GREAT WAR FAILURES

-the second of five pages-

He was then ordered to break off the attack he was conducting and to fall back in a general retreat, the Second Army being compelled to retire behind the Marne. The position was curious, for had von Kluck's attack on Manoury's extreme left wing matured, anything might have happened, but he was given no choice. He had to break off his attack and retire. Thus the German plan—to drive the French south-east of Paris—failed at the very moment that an attack of the First Army might have led to stupendous results, the Germans in turn being in danger of being out-flanked.

Von Kluck extricated his army with consummate skill and was not hard pressed. The retirement led to the fierce battles of the Aisne in September, which died away into the positional warfare, not broken until the end came in 1918. It is thus clear that the cause of the German failure was the defeat of the Second Army, which, producing a wide gap, left von Kluck "in the air," and there can be little doubt but that had General Joffre been able to follow up in force, the end might have come in much the same way as it did eventually with Marshal Foch's masterly operations in 1918.

The point of all this is the stupidity of the professional soldier. Three things stand out. First, on the eve of the critical battle in France, two corps were withdrawn from France and sent eastwards, truly a colossal blunder. Secondly, the Supreme Command were clearly not in proper control of the armies. Thirdly, their intelligence was wretched, run on stereotype lines, as we can see from von Kluck's admission of his ignorance of Gallieni's French Sixth Army. The Germans really went to war quite unprepared to carry out a crushing defeat on the West while conducting an offensive on the East; their munitions were short—they had not the men. They made no great use of aeroplanes. They quite ignored sea-power—*i.e.*, the importance to them of securing the coast, which was, of course of far greater military value than even the capture of Paris. They had not grasped the significance of machine-guns, or the power of the defensive in lines of position. They started out with no scientific equipment—thus supplies were short; they lacked motor lorries; they went to war quite in the old way, relying chiefly on (1) men, who obviously were not numerous enough for the task, and (2) speed on foot, whereas with a little science they could have doubled their speed.

History will certainly decide that the Germans chewed off more than they could cope with when they struck on both fronts. Had they remained purely passive in the East with Austria in trench lines, in place of the Austrian adventure into Serbia, they might have had another 200,000 men on the West which would have been of incalculable value to them as the wing of the invading armies; the wooden military mind had not grasped the possibilities of modern war. Science had not been requisitioned. They had not foreseen the numbers of men required, the munitions required, the speed required. They had not realised that the air was the new eye of an army. They were a great military nation without a scientific mind, steeped in old traditions—a thoroughly conservative mechanism. And in the great march they broke their foundation principle, by weakening the decisive striking force. They marched to their own fate.

It is important to the world, after this stupendous drama, to realise this innate conservatism of the military mind, for what we find is a low intelligence. What this means all Europe is only now beginning to feel. The story of the German march is a terrible indictment of civilisation which trusts itself to a caste of mind which, as events have proved, is of a poor intelligence; which does not learn; which lives in tradition. If the German ambition was to crush France with a lightning stroke, they could certainly have done so with the proper appliances—had they used motor transport, had they understood the A B C of modern war, had they possessed a General Staff scientifically equipped and endowed with imagination. Thank Heaven! we may say now. Yet already we are trying to return to scarlet. Are we to learn nothing from this world tragedy? Let us turn to the other decisive failure—Gallipoli.

We had no land and water central strategy, that is the simple moral. After the Marne, the Allies had before them one clear policy—union with the Russians, who had he necessary decisive reserves in men. That should have been our central aim from the first day of war. Had we sailed into Constantinople in the first week of August,

Turkey would not have entered the war. Instead, we allowed the "Goeben" to sail through the Dardanelles. Union with Russia should have been our main objective, and had we effected that union, the war must have been over in 1915. What we did was to ignore sea-power, and then to attempt a cutting-out expedition, with ludicrously inadequate forces. That is the plain, blunt truth, and it is the reason why the Germans, with a population of 68,000,000, held up literally the world in arms for four fighting years. We deprived ourselves of the great reservoir of Russian man-power, and thus isolated our great Ally. We forgot sea-power. We only saw the war as a professional dog-fight. ("I'm a Westerner" sort of thing.)

Sir Ian Hamilton's book is certainly one of the most interesting that has yet appeared on the war. In style and manner, it is the antipode to von Kluck, who is professionally technical, whereas the Briton is splendidly individualist, the artist, a man who feels fiercely the cruel fate which made him one of the great military failures in history instead of the winner of the world-war. All this is shown up conclusively in the interview with Lord Kitchener. With characteristic English amateurishness, Hamilton was sent out with no plans, a quite inadequate force, a staff drawn from anywhere, anyhow, and when Braithwaite asked for aeroplanes, Lord Kitchener "glared."

The strange thing about this hapless expedition is that Lord Kitchener clearly recognised the stupidity of the cavalry generals who thought they could break through the German lines on the West any month, and clearly recognised the decisive significance of forcing the Dardanelles. And yet the muddle was complete. Our War Office had never worked out a plan of attack, they relied on the Greek General Staff plan, which was, of course, known to the Germans through Court influences. Lord Kitchener apparently thought the Navy would do the trick, though Admiral Fisher resigned and Sir Percy Scott would have nothing to do with it. Over the whole ghastly business the name of Winston Churchill must be written—*amateurishness*. It started as a kind of cutting-out expedition, overnight, fiercely opposed by the Generals in the West; was dispatched haphazard, without a plan, without proper maps, without the slightest preliminary staff work, just as a school-boy might start out with a dozen other boys to play Red Indians. And in consequence it was one of the greatest disasters in our military annals, and bled the flower of Australian troops. After reading the remarkable volume of Sir Ian Hamilton, one can only believe that God intended the Anglo-Saxon civilisation to survive. The book has thus a wide human interest.

-the last of five pages-

Literally, it fascinates, even as it appals. Hamilton was given an impossible task, and if ever a really able soldier was victimised on the wheel of fortune he was. History will certainly denounce as perhaps the most extraordinary blunder in the war the politicians and soldiers who maintained huge forces in Britain out of fear of a German invasion—always a ludicrous fear—while starving Hamilton's army, which could, and would, have ended the war within the year. There is nothing more to say.

And—now? That is the world's lesson of these two singularly illuminating works. Are we to return to spurs and swords for airmen, gold lace and red-tape for the War Office, and a General Staff of cavalry generals? In one sense civilisation may congratulate itself that soldiers are of a low intelligence, or we should have been wiped out in a dog-fight of four years. On the other hand we stand to be wiped out if the next time we are not scientific. All men who fought and have sons who may be called upon to fight on behalf of the militarism rampant in modern Europe should read these two astonishing books of mediocrity on the top and superb human sacrifice below.

If we go back to scarlet after Hamilton's account of how the Gallipoli expedition started, then don't let us pretend that we are anything but fatalists.

OldMagazineArticles.com