Ludendorff’s Spring Offensive and the Allied Counter Offensive

Goals of the Ludendorff Spring Offensive

With the threat of an influx of American troops, Ludendorff was fully aware of the need for Germany to ‘win’ the war before the end of 1918. Ludendorff was keen to improve the German position from which any future peace talks would take place. Strains on the German home front also suggested the need for Germany to end the war soon from a position of strength. The withdrawal of the Russians from the Eastern Front in late 1917, and the movement of 1 million Germans to the Western Front, gave Ludendorff the force he needed to launch an offensive that could break through and achieve victory.

The Spring Offensive was named ‘Kaiserschlacht’ (Kaiser’s Battle) by Ludendorff. This series of offensives at different parts of the line aimed to break through the British lines to the coast and then take Paris. At that point the Germans would have complete control of Belgium and north-eastern France. Ludendorff was not expecting a quick victory, but was confident that a massive and hard push would succeed.

First Offensive – Operation Michael: 21 March – 5 April

Operation Michael was a successful attack at various points of the front line in the area of the Somme. The intention was to cut the British from the French, then drive up towards the key ports of Boulogne and Calais. This would be achieved with the use of small, mobile units of shock troops (called stormtroopers) who were armed with flamethrowers, light machine guns and light trench mortars. Under the cover of a creeping barrage, shock troops would avoid key or heavily fortified targets and instead concentrate on infiltrating deep into British territory, affecting British communications and reinforcements. The attack was opened with very heavy artillery bombardment, including extensive use of mustard gas shells. Thick fog also provided cover for the attacking German troops on the first day. After 10 days, 90,000 Allied soldiers had been captured as prisoners of war and German forces had gained more ground than at any other time in the war. The attack was finally stopped at Villers-Bretenoux but had an enormous impact on the Allies.

Change in Allied leadership structure

The ferocity of the First Offensive (Operation Michael) had been so effective at the Somme that within days the Allies had agreed to change their leadership structure. Petain and Haig had failed to cooperate, each having his own plans for dealing with the situation. Haig wanted to stand and fight against the German Offensives, while Petain wanted to withdraw French troops to defend Paris. Petain’s plan would have split the British and French. Until this point Haig had ensured British independence in all strategic developments, yet on 26 March the situation was so dire that Haig agreed to serve under the overall command of General Foch. Foch was given authority to coordinate the operations of the British and French armies, and on 3 April he gained expanded powers to give strategic direction to the armies. On 14 April he was officially given full authority over the British,
French and Americans, and called the Allied Commander in Chief. (He was made Marshal of France in August).

Continuing Spring Offensive operations

Despite Operation Michael not achieving its full strategic goals, Ludendorff was keen to launch further offensives.

- **Second Offensive – Operation Georgette: 9-29 April**
  This offensive was launched in Flanders with the aim of taking back ground lost around Passchendaele in 1917 and to capture the town of Ypres. On the first day the Germans gained 6km and the British position looked desperate. Fierce fighting took place and the Germans were unable to secure Ypres. The offensive was called off by Ludendorff on 29 April.

- **Third Offensive – Operation Blucher-York: 27 May – 6 June**
  This offensive aimed to take French territory in the Champagne area and advance towards Paris. Heavy artillery and gas were used, taking the French by surprise. The Allies were pushed back 32km to the River Marne and Paris was threatened as it had been in 1914. US troops helped to reinforce the Allied defence. This, combined with problems for the Germans in getting reinforcements to the rapidly moving front line, led to a halt in the German offensive.

- **Fourth Offensive – Operation Gneisenau: 9 June – 12 June**
  This offensive attacked near Compiegne on the Aisne, hoping to push closer towards Paris. Although the Germans gained 12km on the first day, the French were better prepared for this offensive and quickly slowed the German attack. A French counter-attack on 12 June ended the German offensive.

- **Fifth Offensive: Operation Friedensturm: 15 July – 18 July**
  The Fifth Offensive, also called the Second Battle of the Marne, was opened with the firing of 9000 tonnes of gas. The French, however, had knowledge of the attack and kept their forces in a second line of trenches out of the reach of the gas. While the Germans made good initial gains in territory, they were soon halted. A counter-offensive launched on 18 July sent the German army into full retreat, with 20,000 Germans taken prisoner.

Successes of the Ludendorff Offensive

The initial offensives of the Germans – using the highly successful ‘shock troops’ combined with rolling barrages, poison gas and portable weapons that moved with the front line – looked like making a significant break through that would win the war in March-May 1918. Paris again felt threatened as the Third Offensive (Operation Blucher-York) reached the Marne.

Failure of the Ludendorff Spring Offensive

Foch, as the new Allied Commander in Chief, cannot take full credit for halting the Ludendorff Offensive. He was able to ensure a unified Allied approach stayed in place to resist the Germans, however there were a number of contributing factors to the failure of the Ludendorff Offensive:
While Ludendorff’s plans initially aimed to avoid strong spots, last minute alterations saw German reserves pitted against strong points of the Allied line.

The mechanical apparatus for supplying advancing troops was ineffective – this can be compared to the Allies who were continuously supplied by rail at vital points to support their defence.

The British defence was well handled, stopping a complete break through in the first and second German offensives.

New defensive strategies were developed by the Allies, keeping the bulk of defensive forces out of artillery range in new “battle zones” and “rear zones” which could more effectively resist an assault (particularly as the war became a war of movement).

German troops were exhausted and quickly tired, casualty rates remained high and there were insufficient reserves available. An outbreak of influenza (the Spanish Flu) that hit in June exacerbated the manpower problem.

Supplies to German troops were low because of the blockade, including ammunition and food—advancing German troops lost discipline as they looted food and alcohol supplies and “gorged themselves stupid”.

Germany’s high hopes of the offensive were shattered – the morale of officers and troops cracked.

Yet Foch can be given credit for coordinating the Allied response which capitalised on the problems experienced by the Germans.

The Allies plan for the offensive (Hamel)

As the German offensive began to lose momentum, a number of Allied commanders began to return to thinking from an offensive position. Large numbers of American troops had now arrived on the Western Front and the opportunity for a counter offensive arose.

Australian Lieutenant General John Monash sought permission for a small but meticulously planned offensive at Hamel. With the support of 1,000 Americans in action for the first time, and 60 new Mark V tanks, the Australians took the heavily fortified town of Hamel on 4 July 1918 in a 93 minute attack. They captured over 1500 prisoners, two field guns and 171 machine guns, losing only 1000 casualties themselves. The tactics used at Hamel showed the advances of battle strategy and how they could be combined to achieve effective outcomes with fewer casualties. These included:

- Large use of artillery to outgun the other side, but more accurate shooting that could take the enemy by surprise;
- Better reconnaissance of the ground and enemy positions, using aerial observation, sound ranging and flash spotting, which enabled the gunners to target effectively.
- Smoke shells used in a creeping barrage to protect infantry and tanks and keep element of surprise.
- Aircraft used to bomb German trenches and fly low to help drown out sound of approaching tanks.
- More modern tanks that were more reliable (only 3 did not reach their target).
• Tanks carrying supplies (eg, ammunition, water, barbed wire, grenades, corrugated iron) – four supply tanks did the work of 1200 men.
• Aircraft also used to drop supplies to advancing troops by parachute.
• Cease of the offensive once the target was achieved to consolidate position and ‘bite and hold’ securely before next offensive is planned.

Allied Counter Offensive

On 18 July, the Allied Counter Offensive officially began. Under the leadership of Foch, the Allies mounted a series of closely-phased offensives, each with limited objectives but well planned to ensure superior Allied numbers. Foch ensured movement of reserves and supplies to vital points at vital times. With the strength of numbers provided by the Americans, and continuing supplies of ammunition and new technology from the home fronts, the Allies now had the advantage. Over the next four months they out-fought the Germans strategically and tactically.

The Counter Offensive commenced at the Marne on 18 July (ending 4 August), retaking the Marne salient where the Germans had not properly prepared their defensives. This was followed by the Battle of Amiens on 8-11 August, which made significant gains in the first four days then ground to a halt.

The first day of the Battle of Amiens – 8 August – was referred to by Ludendorff as “the black day of the German army”. The British had advanced 4-5km, but it was the collapse of the German formations which led Ludendorff to consider the day such a significant defeat.

Both of these initial offensives made use of a coordinated attack of artillery, tanks and aircraft. They found that the German troops in these sectors were weak – most of the shock troops had been injured or killed, and poor morale was affecting the Germans. Large numbers of prisoners were taken. Yet German reserves had been fed into the lines to bring the Allied offensives to a halt. Rather than continuing the offensives into a battle of attrition, the Allied commanders broke off the offensives.

The French took up the offensive on 10 August, making large gains to take Montdidier to the south of the Somme and on the 20 August taking 8000 German prisoners at Noyon. The British continued the offensive through northern France until on 2 September they were able to break open the Hindenburg Line in one sector.

In the meantime, on 12 September the Americans commenced an offensive on the eastern sector of the Western Front, breaking through at St Mihiel.

From these improved positions along the front, a key break through action was planned for 26 September. It involved:

• The Americans attacking in the Argonne (26 September);
• British attacking north of Arras (27 September);
• British, French and Belgian forces attacking in Flanders (28 September);
• British advancing on the Somme (29 September).
The British made a significant break through of the Hindenburg Line.

**Impact of the Counter Offensive**

From the Battle of Amiens, the German command became concerned about an imminent defeat on the Western Front. Ludendorff recommended returning to an attrition approach, retaining its gains in France and Belgium and intending to wear the Allies down in an attempt to get them to come to the peace negotiation table. Yet there continued to be heavy losses on both sides. (The Germans had suffered a million casualties during the Spring Offensive. The British suffered 350,000 casualties during the 96 days of the Final Offensive, losing more per day than they had during the Battle of the Somme or Passchendaele.) While the influx of American troops assisted the Allies, the Germans were unable to replace these lost troops with the required recruits from home.

As the Allied Counter Offensive continued, the situation of the German army became more problematic. The successful use of tanks by the Allies had a significant impact on the morale of the Germans. On 28 September, the day after the Hindenburg Line had been breached near Cambrai, Ludendorff suffered a seizure and collapsed. The following day German military authorities demanded that an approach for an armistice be made immediately. Ludendorff himself explained the dire circumstances to the German Reichstag on 2 October. A formal request for an armistice was made to President Woodrow Wilson on 3 October.

**Continuing the Counter Offensive**

While negotiations began in October, the fighting continued on the Western Front. While there were increasing numbers of German desertions and surrenders, fighting continued to be fierce. The Allies continued through the Hindenburg Line into territory that had not seen fighting since mid-1914.

In the last three months of fighting, the Allies captured 363,000 prisoners and 6,400 guns. The German line did not, however, rupture at any point. The fighting saw a constant erosion of the German position, with the Allies retaking key Belgian ports and most of northern France by November.

**Negotiations and capitulations**

The Germans were not the only Central Powers to be suffering at this time. On 28 September Bulgaria was invaded and sought an armistice. Turkey suffered extensive losses in 1918 and surrendered on 30 October. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had fallen apart, with the Czechoslovaks and Yugoslavs declaring independence in October and Austria seeking a separate armistice on 30 October.

Negotiations over the Armistice on the Western Front continued through October. Wilson facilitated the negotiations. It was made clear that peace negotiations would not be conducted with the existing military and imperial authorities in Germany. It was also required that Germany withdraw all
of its troops from France and Belgium before peace negotiations would commence. Ludendorff and Hindenburg rejected these peace terms, but were forced to resign in late October in order for the negotiations to proceed.

As the German Home Front became aware of the German government’s peace negotiations, unrest broke out. This was accompanied by widespread mutiny in the army. On 9 November, a revolution in Berlin led to the abdication of the Kaiser himself, and the socialist leader Ebert became Chancellor as a new republican government was declared.

At this time, a German delegation was completing the armistice negotiation. This was finalised at 5.10am on 11 November. Fighting continued until the official cease fire, which commenced at 11am on 11 November.