Slide 1

THE GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVES

21 March – 17 July 1918

Slide 2 Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in tonight's seminar. Those of you who have, like me, been travelling the weary years of this war through the annual seminar series will no doubt be as relieved as I am that we are into the final year. However, to those in the front line, the opening months of 1918 looked nothing like the final year of war, far less a victorious year.

I have been asked to provide a brief overview of the events known to history as the German March Offensives or the *Kaiserschlacht* – Imperial or Emperor's Battle - and to put into context those calamitous events.

Slide 3 Put simply, and as you can deduce from the slide, the *Kaiserschlacht* was all about manpower, with subordinate themes of opportunity and timing. By March 1918, manpower was becoming a serious issue on both sides of the line. For the Allies, the loss of the Russian hordes was counterbalanced by the entry of the Americans. For the Germans, who understood this reality just as well as the French and British, America's demonstrated unpreparedness for war provided a brief 'window of opportunity' to strike a decisive blow before the Americans arrived in overwhelming numbers. Although the US had declared war on Germany in April 1917, they had only managed to send 4 infantry divisions to France by December of that year. The Russian collapse, on the other hand, had provided the Germans with over eighty capable combat-experienced divisions to shift west and outnumber the struggling old allies before the Americans arrived. It was fortunate for the Allies that inept German political and strategic decisions – the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk for example was so severe the Germans had to leave large numbers of troops in the east to ensure compliance with its terms – meant only 33 could be released to the Western Front. (A number of others had to be sent to Italy to shore up their Austro-Hungarian Allies while 52 German divisions launched a 'police action' against the defeated Russians in February 1918.) Even so, the Germans had 194 divisions, over three and a half million men, on the Western Front at the beginning of March 1918. Both sides understood the Germans would seek to exploit the opportunity provided by their new resources early, before they became irrelevant in the face of American numbers, which is why, contrary to some popular commentary, the *Kaiserschlacht* was not a strategic surprise to the Allies.

The Allies also had their own internal political issues directly affecting front line troop numbers. From January to mid-March, the Allied Armies were still restructuring and reforming after the cataclysmic struggles and losses of 1917. The French, for political reasons, sent six divisions to Italy at the end of 1917 while another three had to be broken up to bring the remainder up to strength. For the first time since 1914, the French had only 100 divisions on the Western Front and most of these could field only around 6000 infantry.

The British Army also faced a manpower crisis. The number of replacements sent to the Western Front between November 1917 and February 1918 was artificially constrained to less than half the number needed – the Government and Lloyd George in particular used to be blamed for this but recent research suggests it was a deliberate policy of the CGS and the War Office. In the face of insufficient replacements, and to keep the number of divisions constant, all British brigades were reduced by one battalion. The troops saved were then used to either supplement existing battalions or be converted to pioneers – a capability which the British seriously lacked. Other domestic issues – the need to keep industry functioning for example – and the needs of the other fronts meant over 115 battalions in divisions on the Western Front were disbanded between February and March 1918, to the detriment of overall BEF combat effectiveness.

Manpower shortages also led to other less desirable solutions, including broader-based conscription and drastically lowered enlistment standards. Slide 4 As this slide illustrates, neither side was averse to recruiting children to maintain numbers, although the Germans went about it in a more systematic manner. Slide 5

Manpower may have been the headline issue but there other factors also encouraging the Germans to launch an early offensive. The British convoy system had largely neutralised the German submarine campaign threating British national survival. The same could not be said of the Allied blockade that was slowly but surely starving the Germans into submission. Not only was Germany was running short of food, it was rapidly running out of horses, fodder, petrol, oil, rubber and, surprisingly, iron and steel. While Russia represented a potential supply source for some of these critical resources, its capacity to provide actual relief quickly was still very limited in early 1918. Even repairing and exploiting the Rumanian oilfields was not completed until August 1918. Germany was starving and her citizens had almost had enough. The German economy had been taken over by the military and there was little sympathy for the needs of the population but German High Command appeared to forget that soldiers had families and their morale was seriously affected by the domestic situation in Germany. Growing military and civil unrest was helped by a significant number of German soldiers returning from Russia "infected" by the ideas of the Communist revolutionaries. A quick German victory was needed to overcome these domestic worries.

Equally worrying was the development of an effective Allied offensive capability that looked to dominate german defensive methods. Contrary to the popular view on Passchendaele, the Germans recognised that Messines, Vimy Ridge, many of the separate battles of Passchendaele and Cambrai were evidence that the British offensive doctrine was so capable it threatened to overwhelm the Hindenburg Line defences. Slide 6 (Named after the gent in the centre with the formidable mustache!) That development, plus the fact Allied morale had survived the test of 1917 reasonably well, meant the Germans really had no option other than one last lightning strike to try and win the war.

With the Russians clearly defeated, Ludendorff had begun planning an offensive using these released reserves as early as August 1917. It was refined as the Passchendaele campaign was winding down in late 1917 and the final decision to launch the attack was made on 21 January

1918. The return of their eastern divisions gave the Germans, for the first time since 1916, sufficient divisions to both hold the full length of the line and create an assault formation with sufficient mass to mount a major attack. Experiments with new tactics, such as the so-called storm-trooper infiltration method, had been positive when tried in Italy in late 1917. Slide 7 The Germans reclassified their Western Front divisions into two classes – the poorer, less capable ones were designated Trench Divisions and were responsible for defending fixed portions of the line while the better ones, designated attack divisions, were pulled from the line, rested, reinforced with best troops available, issued new equipment, including the revolutionary new MP18 Bergmann submachine-gun and man-portable flame throwers, Slide 8 and put through a rigorous new training regime. They were trained to infiltrate, bypass strong points and keep pushing through into the rear areas. Their aim was the disruption of command and control and cutting off tactical supply to the front-line defenders.

Ludendorff had developed multiple options for his assault but, on 21 January, put to Hindenberg the three most compelling: Slide 9 Operation George, a mass attack through Flanders; Operation Mars, an assault in the Vimy/Arras area and Operation Michael – a thrust through the old Somme battlefields. All of these were aimed at the British army, as Ludendorff judged them to be the more vulnerable of the two Allied armies as a result of Passchendaele and Cambrai losses. German High Command initially opted for Michael – a strike against the British Third and Fifth Armies. It had the added attraction of including within its objectives the major rail hub of Amiens. After penetrating the British line, the Germans were to swing north-west and cut the British off from their major supply source and from the French.

However, as the map shows, additional German offensives were launched (often, eg Op Georgette, these were variations of one of Ludendorff's original concepts) when preceding ones were either bogging down or failing outright. Failing to maintain the original aim was one of the ritical contributors to the overall failure of the *Kaiserschlacht*. In addition, new ideas began to subtly alter the plan, such as Hindenberg's desire to shut down the Allied rail network to prevent lateral reinforcement. This in part underpinned both Operation Georgette and Operation Blücher.

As well as new infantry tactics, the legendary German master artillerist, Colonel Georg Bruchmüller was directed to devise new methods to support the new techniques – he increased significantly the use of gas, especially against dispersed targets like artillery - while the German Air Service devoted much planning to achieving temporary air control of the skies over the battlefield. Even Germany's limited, and distrusted, embryonic tank corps were brought into the plan.

Slide 10 Op Michael began at 4.40 am on 21 March 1918 with a five hour shattering barrage from 6473 guns and 3532 mortars. Five hours later, assisted by a thick fog, 43 divisions of the German Second and Eighteenth Armies attacked the 19 divisions of General Gough's British Fifth Army while a further 19 Divisions from the Seventeenth Army attacked General Byng's British Third Army. German artillery had thrown British communications into chaos while German gas had neutralised the bulk of the defending British artillery. By emphasising gas, the Germans had avoided cratering the forward zone which allowed their infantry to move much

more quickly and easily. The forward defence lines vanished and the Fifth Army rout began. Slide 11 I do not have time to analyse in any depth just why the Germans were so successful – happy to do so in questions – but the common view that the British high command simply dropped the ball is both erroneous and defamatory. However, there also is no question that confusion and some panic in the senior command chain, plus loss of situational awareness across the whole battlefield, played to the German's strengths. On the first day, they drove the British back nearly 20 kilometres. Although German losses were high – they consistently exceeded British losses – they pressed on with Michael until it was held by desperate defence at Villers Bretonneux on 4 and 5 April. While the performances of the Australian 9th Brigade and the British 14th and 18th Divisions in stopping the advancing Germans cannot be underestimated, it is clear that Op Michael had run out of puff by then. The infantry were exhausted, the artillery and transport was left far to the rear Slide 12 while the medical system had failed. Many German troops had stopped to gorge on the contents of Allied supply dumps and many more succumbed to the temptation of stocked bars and wine cellars. Michael was essentially finished before the Australians and British stopped them outside Amiens.

While this would be the logical point to pass on the next speaker, there is more to the Kaiserschlacht than simply Op Michael. And while Michael itself was successful initially, many of the fringe battles fought during it were lost by the Germans, thereby exposing their extending flanks to attack from the rapidly recovering British and the arriving French forces. Ludendorff added to the problem by making significant changes to the plan while the battle was in progress, adding new objectives and directing troops away from a single line of advance. Slide 13 Inevitably, the German progress slowed and eventually halted, forcing Ludendorff to divert troops away from sustaining Michael and to initiate new attacks to try and maintain the operational initiative. Even before formally halting Michael, he launched a revised version of George – Operation Georgette – in the Lys River areas south of Armentieres which committed an already overstretched German army to another massive mobile operation and then, on April 28, he launched Operation Mars against Arras. The latter was an immediate and costly failure. Other massive offensives were launched later against the French and the Americans further south, including one operation, Operation Blücher that, by threatening Paris, galvanised an already aggressive French army into major actions. Indeed, the French and American repulse of German attacks in the Soissons area in July, with the associated ferocious counterattacks, is arguably the true start of the final collapse of the German Army rather than Amiens battle in August.

All these new offensives merely served to increase the number of enemy the Germans were facing, dilute the strength of the main attack, relieve pressure on the retreating British and eventually allowed the Allies to avoid the decisive defeat Ludendorff was seeking. Despite inflicting 178000 casualties on the British and 70000 on the French, Operation Michael alone had cost the Germans around 250000, mainly among their elite troops. The Allies could afford to lose them. The Germans could not.