

1916 -- THE THIRD WAR YEAR

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The Strategic Situation

At the beginning of 1916, fighting on the Western Front had died down once again with neither side having been able to deliver a knockout blow. The stock of war materiel expended in the two prior years needed to be rebuilt, and a new contingent of troops needed to be recruited and trained to replace the high level of casualties suffered in 1914 and 1915. However, by late winter the combatants were ready to go again, and the main target chosen by the Germans was to attack the great French fortress complex surrounding the city of Verdun.

In response, the Allies attempted to support Verdun by initiating attacks designed to prevent the Germans from shifting even more troops to that area. In the northern part of France, the British forces embarked on a major push on the Somme River. Although they gained some ground, the advance was not sufficient strategically and soon petered out. On the Eastern Front, the Russians launched what turned out to be their final offensive of the war, named after their commander, General Brusilov. This, too, had some positive tactical results, but did not change the adverse strategic situation for Russia.

In 1916 for the first (and only) time in the war, the German High Seas Fleet came out of its ports for a full-scale battle with the Royal Navy in the Skagerrak off Denmark (generally known as the Battle of Jutland). The results of the battle involved a substantial number of ships being sunk on both sides. Although the Germans could claim a tactical victory by inflicting more damage than they sustained, it was a strategic defeat as they were unable to break the British blockade and came to the conclusion that it would be useless to make a further attempt to do so for the balance of the war.

Although not directly involved in the fighting, there was a large-scale "ethnic cleansing" of the Armenian people from eastern Anatolia by the Ottoman authorities that took place in 1915 and 1916. For the Armenians, it was genocide; for the Turks it was viewed as punishment for the support of the Allies by most of the Armenians, and the dispute continues to this day.

Although there was a lot of effort expended and lives squandered by both sides during the year, there was remarkably little real change in the strategic situation in the war. Both sides continued to look for some development that would provide hope for victory in the ensuing year. In the case of the Allies, Romania was induced to join in, thus draining off Austro-Hungarian troops from the Russian

front. On the other hand, the British-French invasion of the Dardanelles, which had been undertaken in the prior year in the hope of driving Turkey out of the war, had to be aborted and the troops evacuated in January 1916. Elsewhere, nothing changed significantly.

Impasse at Verdun

By 1916, the German commander, General von Falkenhayn, believed that defensive positions were so strong that it was unlikely that there could be a breakthrough on the Western Front sufficient to produce victory for either side. As a result, he elected to pursue a strategy of attrition. His plan was to attack the fortress city of Verdun on the Meuse River, which he felt would provoke strong French counterattacks that would lead to catastrophic losses in the face of massed German artillery fire. A postcard depicting the Germans bombarding Verdun is shown as **Figure 1**. In his view, the French army would likely "bleed to death" and be forced to seek an armistice.



Figure 1 (above): Picture card of a German bombardment of Verdun. **Figure 2 (below):** Reverse of Figure 1 - showing the Crown Prince. Mailed (via feldpost) one year after the 1916 battle by a soldier of the German 120th Infantry Regiment.



Unfortunately for the Germans, they did not stick to their plan. Once the battle had begun, they came to believe that success at Verdun had become a matter of national prestige,

so they shifted from their original battle plan to an attack strategy, which only succeeded in inflicting the severe bloodletting on their own men as well as the French. As a result, the official count showed a total of 714,000 casualties (about 60 percent French and 40 percent German) at the end of the 300-day battle.

The fighting at Verdun had begun on February 21, and lasted until December 16. It is generally considered the greatest single battle in world history. This was the case even though the battlefield was less than 10 square kilometers in area. For its defense, the city had 20 major forts and 40 smaller ones, with layer after layer of defensive positions, and the Germans could simply not overrun all of them no matter how great an effort was expended. It is estimated that more than 10 million shells were fired during the battle and the entire area was a wasteland when the fighting died down. The French *poilus* (infantrymen) fought bravely under trying circumstances for many months to fulfill General Nivelle's order "*Vous ne les laisserez pas passer* (They shall not pass)," and they didn't.

Although the struggle in the West continued for nearly two more years, neither the French nor the German army ever fully recovered from the magnitude of their losses at Verdun. General von Falkenhayn was held responsible for the failure to take the city and was replaced as Chief of the General Staff by Field Marshal von Hindenburg

The British on the Somme

In an effort to prevent the Germans from shifting even more troops to the Verdun front, it was decided that a major British-French attack would start on the Somme River on July 1. The first event was the heaviest artillery barrage ever unleashed by the British army. Over a front of some 25,000 yards, a thousand field pieces and howitzers pounded away. However, the Germans were well entrenched and not blown away as expected. Thus, when the infantry attack began, the machine guns appeared and cut down swaths of the advancing men. On the first day of the battle, 20,000 British soldiers were killed, amounting to 60 percent of the officers and 40 percent of the men engaged.

The battle on the Somme continued fiercely for five months, with a noteworthy aspect being the first use of tanks by the British in November. Eventually running through what had been a vast inventory of artillery shells, the Allied effort finally died out by late November. At most, the German front line had been pushed back by five miles, with no change in the strategic situation.

Action on the Eastern Front

In June 1916, the Russians mounted what was to be their final major action, known as the Brusilov offensive. However, this campaign only lasted for three months as logistical support failed. A particularly vulnerable portion

of the Eastern Front was near the Romanian border manned by unprepared Austro-Hungarians. These were mostly recruits from the Slavic parts of the Dual Monarchy, who saw little virtue in fighting hard against the Russians for the benefit of the Germans. As a result, they gave way until strengthened by some German troops shifted from the west. In the end, the Russians gained some ground, about 20 miles on average, but failed to reach their primary objectives, the cities of Lublin and Lemberg. As a result, a second stalemate developed on this front at the end of the year.

Elsewhere in the region, the Germans solidified their hold on Lithuania (**Figure 3**) and southern Latvia and attacked Russian positions in the Baltic, including bombarding the Riga naval base (**Figure 5**). Farther south, the Russians were able to advance against the Turks in eastern Anatolia, capturing the fortress of Erzeroum (**Figure 6**).



Figure 3 (above): Picture card of an armored train defending Vilnius (Lithuania). **Figure 4 (below):** Field Marshal von Hindenburg decorated the reverse of the Figure 3 postcard, having been routed through Feldpost # 171 in December 1916.



Romania Joins In

The Romanians had long coveted certain territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially Bukovina, Transylvania and the Banat. As a result, the Allies were able to make a tempting offer to transfer these areas to Romania after the war as an inducement to bring that country



Figure 5: Postcard showing German navy shelling Riga.



Figure 6: Postcard of Russian occupation of Erzeroum (Anatolia).

into the fighting in the meantime. The bait was taken and Romania declared war on August 27, 1916. Shortly thereafter, a modest offensive was initiated northwestward across the Hungarian border. See **Figure 7** for a registered fieldpost cover from a soldier in the Romanian 5th Division to Switzerland. However, although the Romanians had more troops in the area, they were not logistically prepared to carry out a major campaign and their advance was soon brought to a halt. With the Austrians being reinforced by German troops from farther north and the Bulgarians attacking into the Dobrudja from the south, momentum soon shifted to the Central Powers. By the end of September, the Romanians were essentially back to where they started and more trouble would lie ahead in 1917.

Occupation of Montenegro & Albania

Following up on the occupation of Serbia, the Austro-Hungarian forces advanced down the Adriatic Coast and took over the small Kingdom of Montenegro in January 1916. Only two stamps were specially issued for this area (**Figure 9**), with Austrian “Feldpost” stamps being the primary method of paying postage during the occupation. King Nicholas went into exile in France, never to return to



Figure 7: Censored, registered Romanian fieldpost cover to Switzerland.



Figure 8: Austrians relaxing in Montenegro.

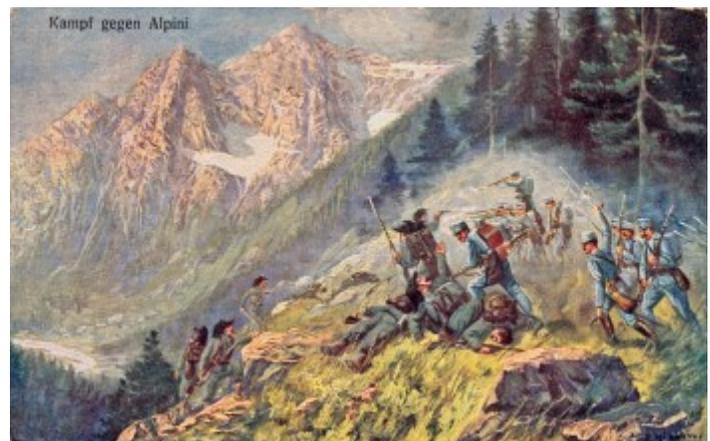


Figure 9: Cover franked with Austrian stamps overprinted “Montenegro.”

his own country as it was absorbed into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats & Slovenians (later named Yugoslavia) at the end of the war.

In a further follow-up move, the Austrians advanced into Albania in February 1916, taking control of the northern and central parts of the country before being blocked by French and Italian troops in the south. **Figures 10 & 11** show a postal card sent from Scutari in Austrian-occupied Albania to Vienna.

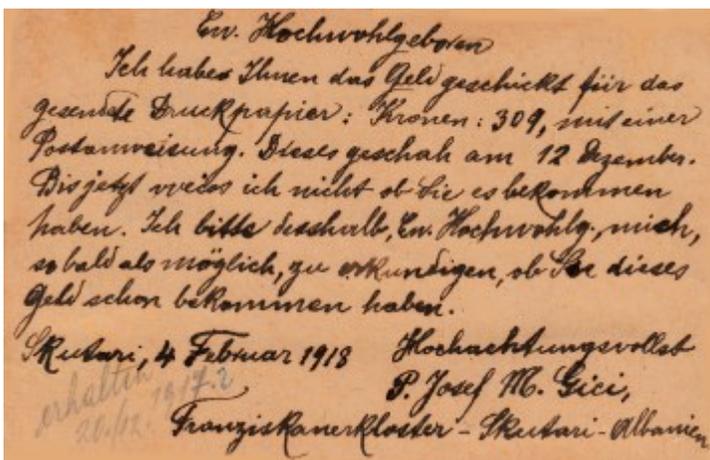
Figures 12 and 13: The particularly difficult Alpine terrain along the Italian border is shown in this card sent by a member of Landsturm Battalion # 29. A crude attempt at censorship was applied to the field cancel of feldpost # 222 in September 1916.



Figures 10 and 11: Austro-Hungarian military feldpost postal card, registered (and handstamped) in Scutari, Albania and sent to Vienna on February 5, 1918.



Figure 14: Gunner Mundell's mail was routed through the India Office on April 11, 1916, but proved undeliverable to the unit in the face of overwhelming Turkish Ottoman forces at Kut, Mesopotamia. The reverse is shown on the next page.

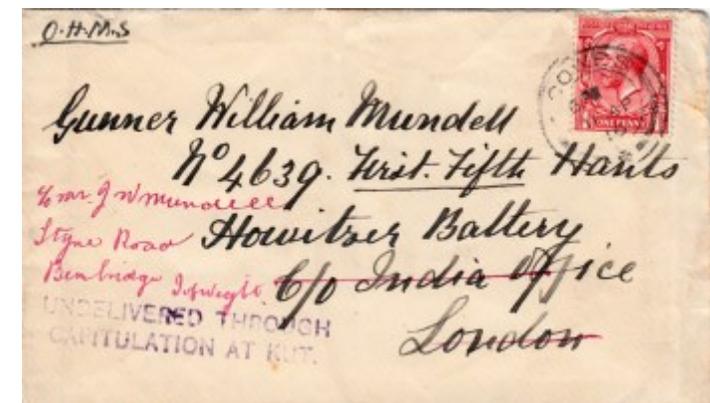


Quiet on the Italian Front

The fighting between the Austrians and Italians in the Alpine border region was relatively modest during 1916. There was a lot of patrol activity (**Figure 12**), but the terrain was sufficiently difficult that there were neither significant battles nor territorial changes.

Action in the Near East

Fighting continued in Mesopotamia where the British tried to advance on Baghdad. However, they managed to outrun their supply lines at Kut-al-Amara, where some members of the Indian Expeditionary Force in the town were cut off and subjected to a siege that forced them to surrender. Mail addressed to British troops there could not be delivered and had to be returned to the sender, receiving the special marking shown in **Figures 14 & 15**.



Activity in East Africa

Having occupied all but the last of the former German colonies in Africa and the Pacific in the first two years of the war, the Allies decided that 1916 should be the year



Figure 15: The reverse of Figure 14, showing the alternative marking applied on August 31, 1918 in Exeter before return of the letter to the Mundells. The blue label may have had something to do with undeliverable casualty/pow mail.



Figure 16: Overprinted British stamp on cover sent within occupied German East Africa.. Registered in Mwanza, on the shores of Lake Victoria.

in which they would take control of German East Africa. The primary British push took place from Kenya into the area around Moshi in the northeastern part of the colony. See **Figure 16** for a registered cover franked by an adhesive of British East Africa overprinted "G.E.A." and used within the colony from Mwanza to Dar-es-Salaam.

Striking from the west, Belgian troops invaded out of the Congo, crossing Lake Tanganyika and taking Tabora in September (see picture card of the latter action shown as **Figure 17**). The Nyasaland Field Force moved up from the south and a small Portuguese force crossed the Rovuma River and took Kionga in the southeast. The Germans were unable to provide a conventional defense against all of the invaders, so they shifted over to guerilla warfare in the bush rather than contesting the cities and towns. Nevertheless, this action continued to tie down a substantial number of Allied soldiers in chasing the defenders around the countryside.



Figure 17: Picture card of Belgian troops entering Tabora in East Africa.

War on the High Seas

The year 1916 was also noteworthy for when the German High Seas Fleet decided to challenge the British Navy. The first and only full scale naval battle of the war took place on May 31 in the Skagerrak off Denmark (and thus is known as the Battle of Jutland). It was the first head-to-head clash between battleships since Tsushima in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, as well as the last such encounter between such ships in history since aircraft carriers had replaced battleships as the main offensive naval weapons during World War II. **Figure 18** shows a German battleship firing a full salvo of shells at Jutland.

The German plan was to lure out a portion of the British Grand Fleet to be attacked by their entire High Seas Fleet. This strategy did not work as the British learned from signal intercepts that a major operation was planned and sent out the whole fleet, so that there were 151 British combat ships involved (including 28 battleships and 9 battle



Figure 18. Picture card of German battleship unleashing a salvo at Jutland.

cruisers) versus 99 German (including 16 battleships and 5 battle cruisers). The battle went on through the afternoon and evening of 31 May, with first one side on the

attack and then the other, involving two major engagements (See **Figure 19** for a plan of the battle). In overall results, fourteen British and eleven German ships were sunk, with tonnage lost of 113,000 versus 62,000 and 6,000 sailors killed versus 2,500.

Although the Germans could claim a tactical victory by inflicting more damage than they sustained, the battle was a strategic defeat as they were unable to break the British blockade, and they elected not to try again for the balance of the war. Based on the outcome of Jutland, the German naval strategy shifted to unrestricted submarine warfare involving the destruction of neutral shipping as well as Allied, eventually providing the rationale for America's entry into the war in April 1917.

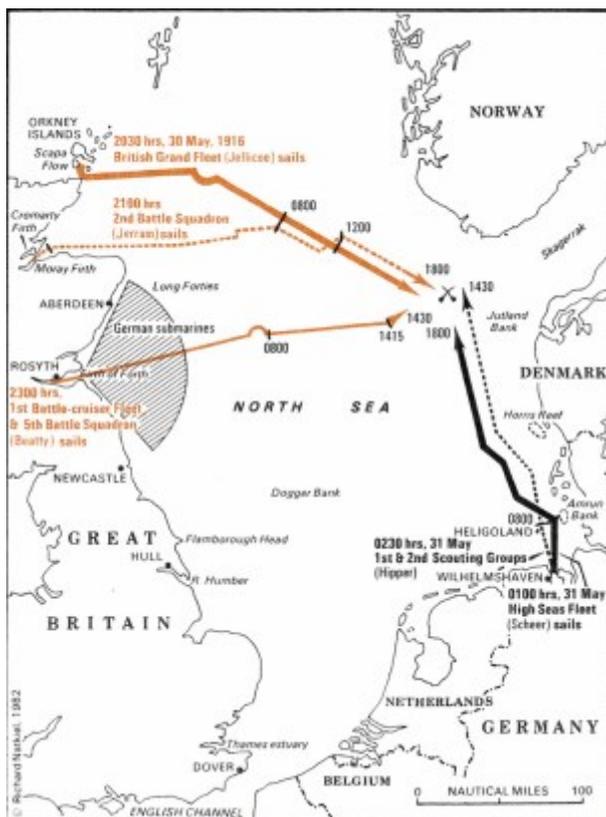


Figure 19: Battle Plan for Jutland.

The Armenian Tragedy

Closely associated with the war in the Near East was the Turkish effort to purge its territory of the estimated two million Armenian Christian minority out of a total of 28 million persons living in the Ottoman Empire in 1914. Ancient Armenia came under Turkish rule under Sultan Salim in the sixteenth century. While the Armenians were subsequently permitted to live in their traditional territory, they were treated as second-class members of the empire without many of the rights of the Muslim subjects. Views as to what happened during the war vary widely, with the events being considered as genocide by Armenians and

many others but viewed by the Turks as punishment through the deportation of people considered supporters of the Allies against the Ottoman war effort, especially during the Russian invasion of Eastern Anatolia in 1915 and 1916.



Figure 20: French remembrance card honoring Armenia.

The first overt action occurred in February 1915 when Armenian members of the Turkish army were forced to turn in their weapons and serve in labor battalions digging trenches and similar work. (These men subsequently disappeared and were presumed murdered.) Later, the same apparently happened to many male Armenian civilians in various parts of the empire. Finally, large numbers of women, children and the elderly were forced on death marches to the south from Anatolia to concentration camps near Deir-el-Zor in the Syrian desert, where many perished from lack of food, water and shelter, and others from disease and massacre. **Figure 20** shows a French propaganda remembrance card for Armenia published as part of a series entitled "The Martyred Nations."

Even a century later the differing views persist. However, the deaths have been estimated at between a million and a million and a half. Whatever the arguments, it is clear that a very thorough "ethnic cleansing" had taken place, with very few Armenians remaining alive in Turkey at the end of the war. Most of the survivors from Anatolia were those who left with the Russian army when it retreated in 1917, and subsequently lived in the Soviet Union. Others managed to emigrate to Europe and the United States.

Winston Churchill is said to have described the

situation as an “administrative holocaust” and stated that “the clearance of the race from Asia Minor was about as complete as such an act, on a scale so great, could be. There is no reasonable doubt that this crime was planned and executed for political reasons.” In the United States, the *New York Times* reported almost daily on the mass murder of Armenians, at various times describing the process as “systematic,” “authorized,” and “organized by the government.” Former President Theodore Roosevelt characterized the events as “the greatest crime of the war.”

Summary

By the end of 1916, none of the various strategies employed by the Allies or the Central Powers had worked in bringing the war closer to an end. Vast numbers of men had been killed or maimed without providing any significant positive offsets. Nor were there any obvious answers to what would happen in the next year. As a result, frustrations must have been built to a high level. One might speculate that both sides might have been willing to go back to the *status quo ante* if only that were possible but, of course, that wasn't going to happen. However, two major developments would lie ahead in 1917: Russia leaving the war and America entering, but they couldn't be known at this time.

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