

ALLIED SPRING OFFENSIVES, 1917

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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German troops occupied large sectors of the Western Front at the beginning of 1917. Small but deadly actions accentuated the early months of the year, as war-weary home fronts coped with rising casualties from the stalemated lines. Britons retained confidence in their military leaders as Douglas Haig, architect of the deadly Somme Offensive, was promoted to Field Marshal. The civil government, however, fell and was replaced by a new coalition government under David Lloyd George in Dec 1916.

The French populace lost confidence in both its civil and military leadership. Long-frustrated with Marshal Joffre, Premier Aristide Briand replaced him with Robert Nivelle, but the Briand government fell in March. His replacement, Alexandre Ribot disputed Nivelle's proposal for an Alternative Allied strategy. Instead of attrition and defense, Nivelle advocated smaller, simultaneous attacks, followed by immediate exploitation of success to prevent commitment of enemy reserves.

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NIVELLE OFFENSIVE

After “deceptive” artillery preparations forced Germans to reveal their own gun positions, Nivelle proposed that British troops would make preparatory attacks on the northern and southern ends of the 1916 Somme Battlefield (at Bapaume, and Arras with Cambrai as the objective) to draw out German Reserves. French troops would make a concurrent assault north of the Aisne in the Champagne region.

Having faced Nivelle’s successful tactics at Verdun the previous year, Erich Ludendorff reconfigured the German defenses, particularly in Champagne, where a defense-in-depth put a third line of troops out of range of Nivelle’s “deceptive artillery.” German air superiority that spring prevented Allied reconnaissance planes from detecting the development of this “Hindenberg Line,” which extended from Arras to Reims west of Cambrai, and Saint-Quentin to Anizy between Soissons and Laon.

Nivelle had 1.2 million men at his disposal. As the attack progressed according to his plan, Ludendorff pulled his troops back, initially as a deception, then fully evacuating Bapaume, Péronne, Noyon, and other towns, halting at the heavily-fortified Hindenburg Line. Nivelle was perplexed, but ordered a British attack at Arras on 9 Apr. Canadian troops took Vimy Ridge at the northern edge of the front. His own attack in the Champagne region was delayed until 16 Apr, allowing German reserves to shift behind the Hindenburg Line. French troops were unsuccessful in their attempt to gain control of the Chemin des Dames, terrain that dominated their sector.

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MESSINES/WYTSCHAETE RIDGE

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