

ALLIED COUNTER OFFENSIVES, AUG-NOV 1918

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

CONTENTS

Overview.....p.1
General Sources.....p.3
<u>Specific Battles/Places</u>
Aisne Marnep.4
-Villers-Cotterêts (18 Jul)....p.5
-Soissons (18-21 Aug).....p.5
Somme (Amiens)p.6
-Arras....p.7
-Amiens (8 Aug).....p.8
-Cayeux Wood (10 Aug).....p.9
-Montdidier (10 Aug).....p.9
-Péronne/St. Quentin (31 Aug).....p.9
-Quéant (2 Sep).....p.10
-Canal du Nord (27 Sep-1 Oct).....p.11
-Bois des EcLusettes (19 Oct).....p.11
Oise-Aisnep.11
Ypres-Lysp.12
St. Mihielsee separate bibliography
Meuse-Argonnesee separate bibliography
Hindenburg Linep.13
-Epehy (18 Sep).....p.14
-Villers-Plouich.....p.14

OVERVIEW

The final battles of the Western Front bear different names, depending on the national perspective of the writer. For purposes of this finding aid, primarily American designations for the offensives are utilized. The reader should be aware that many sources will interchangeably refer to these actions by other terminology, particularly “Hundred Days Offensive,” “Allied Hundred Days Offensive,” or “Canada’s Hundred Days.” Generically, following the initial German retreat from the first Allied counter-thrusts of the Champagne-Marne Campaign, several different Allied thrusts into the heart of the German defenses were made.

By Jul 1918, one million U.S. troops were on the continent. Through the five German offensives, Pershing had adamantly resisted deploying his growing forces in any piecemeal fashion. For the early part of the summer, he continued to support the other allies with divisions and parts of divisions, but by autumn, the Americans had proven themselves worthy of handling offensive operations independently.

Aisne-Marne Offensive (18 Jul-6 Aug): As the Champagne-Marne offensive was contained, the time was right for an Allied Counteroffensive. Four French Armies made the 18 Jul counter-attack; the left-most army, the Tenth, was spearheaded by the American 1st and 2nd Divisions. Six other American Divisions were spread through the other three French commands. Ludendorff had ordered a complete withdrawal from the Marne Salient, and his troops began to re-cross the Marne the night the counterattack began. Germans who had occupied the salient successfully withdrew, although both sides sustained heavy losses. The threat to Paris over, Pétain called off the offensive on 6 August at the Vesle and Aisne River lines.

Somme (Amiens) Offensive (8 Aug-11 Nov): As the French offensive on the Marne came to a halt, Haig proposed a collaborative attack in the Somme sector. He assumed command of the French First Army while Foch took Rawlinson's British Fourth Army (which was reinforced by 54,000 American Troops of the 27th and 33rd Divisions). On 8 Aug, Canadian and ANZAC troops led the British advance, and to their right French forces rolled over German lines to the east of Amiens and along the Somme. On 22 Aug, when both armies attacked the center of the German line, Ludendorff ordered withdrawal from both Amiens and Lys in Flanders east to the "Hindenburg Line." On 3 Sep, Foch ordered a general attack on the entire Western Front, and on 8 Sep Ludendorff ordered the evacuation of the St. Mihiel Salient.

Oise/Aisne Offensive (18 Aug-11 Nov): In coordination with the British on the Somme and Americans to the East, French Armies began a series of assaults along a 90-mile front. So successful were the five French armies in creating a breach in German lines that the enemy fell back from the Vesle River. As they fell back, the American III Corps (28th and 77th Divisions, and the 370th Infantry Regiment, 93rd Division, all operating under command of Sixth French Army), assisted with pursuit operations until they were re-assigned to American command.

Ypres-Lys Offensive (19 Aug-11 Nov): A composite force of Belgian, British and French troops held the northern end of the front. In late August and early September the III U.S. Corps (27th and 30th Divisions) attacked under British command, to clear the Lys Salient. Belgians then attacked as the Germans began to retire to shorten their lines. In mid-October, Pershing sent the 37th and 91st Divisions to the French Army of Belgium to exploit the German withdrawal and cross the Scheldt Estuary.

Hindenburg Line: The relative success of each of these offensive actions forced the Germans back to this initial line of departure for their Spring 1918 offensives against the Allies. It was sub-divided into five areas (Stellungen) named from north-to-south Wotan, Siegfried, Alberich, Brunhilde, and Kriemhilde. The line consisted of concrete bunkers, machine gun emplacements, tunnels for mobility, dugouts and command posts, and had been constructed from Lens to Soissons in the winter of 1916-17; withdrawing to these heavy fortifications actually shortened the German front from 160 to 130 kilometers (100 to 70 miles). A scorched earth policy devastated lands they abandoned as they moved back.

Although the German high command considered the line impregnable, it had been breached in the 1917 battle at Cambrai. In Sep 1918 German salients east and west of the Hindenburg Line were crushed at Havrincourt and St. Mihiel (12 Sep) and at Epehy and Canal du Nord (18 Sep). Other successes among the above offensives, in combination with the AEF's Meuse-Argonne Offensive eroded the German capacity to resist and by November it became evident that their cause was lost.

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p.12

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