

A New Form of Warfare?

Erich von Falkenhayn's Plan for Victory in 1916

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In both terms of time and numbers involved the battle of Verdun ranks as one of the greatest battles in history. Stretching from February to December 1916, the “Meuse Mill,” as it was called by the Germans who had the misfortune of serving there, chewed up most units of the French and the German armies. During the battle’s course, 74 French divisions (74 percent of the number in France) and 40 German divisions were rotated through the battlefield.¹ Although the casualty numbers are still disputed, in large part because it was impossible to keep accurate records in such conditions, the French army admitted to some 327,000 and the German army some 313,000 casualties.² It has also been estimated that between them the Germans and French fired close to 30 million artillery rounds in the 10 mile by 10 mile borders of the battlefield during the battle, making it one of the most intensive battles of material the world has ever seen.³ Perhaps because of its vast scale and impact on the psyche of both the French and the German people, observers have struggled to understand the purpose of what one distinguished historian has called “the most senseless episode in a war not distinguished for sense anywhere.”⁴

The battle was set in motion by the Chief of the German General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn. In the memoirs, published shortly after the war and designed to clear himself of blame for Germany’s defeat, Falkenhayn declared that his intention from the beginning of the battle had simply been the wearing down of the French army. He stated that he had never planned for the offensive to take the fortress of Verdun or to set the stage for a war-winning operation elsewhere along the Western Front. In his words, the offensive along the Meuse was designed to function as a pump that would “bleed the French army white” and thereby

¹ Mark Ferro, *The Great War 1914-1918* (London: Routledge, 1995; first published, 1969) p.77; Armeeoberkommando 5, “Bezeichnung der Kämpfe seit dem 21.2.1916,” Ia Nr. 3943, 25 October 1916, Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Freiburg (BA/MA), W10/51534.

² Figures are from Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, *Sanitätsbericht über das deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918* Band III: *Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer* (Berlin: Mittler, 1934) pp. 46-53; and État-Major de l’Armée – Service historique, *Les armées françaises dans la grande guerre* Tome IV: *Verdun et la Somme: Bataille de la Somme (fin)/Offensives françaises à Verdun (3 Septembre-fin Décembre 1916)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1935) pp. 520-523 (Hereafter, these will be cited AFGG followed by tome and volume number.) Cf. Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg* Bd. X: *Die Operationen des Jahres 1916* (Berlin: Mittler, 1936) p.405.

³ Information Division, U. S. Army Garrison, Verdun, “Battlefields of Verdun 1914-1918,” September 1962, p.13.

⁴ A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) p.94.

force the French government to conclude peace with Germany. To support his statement of his goals, the former General Staff Chief published in his memoirs the text of a memorandum he claimed to have given to Kaiser Wilhelm II “around Christmas” 1915 in which he outlined his plans for the defeat of the Entente in 1916.⁵

However, soon after the publication of Falkenhayn’s memoirs, doubt was cast on the authenticity of this so-called “Christmas Memorandum.” As the Reichsarchiv wrote the German official history of the Verdun campaign in the Interwar period, it searched in vain for Falkenhayn’s memorandum. Unable to find a copy of this document, the researchers concluded that it was a post-war fabrication by Falkenhayn, written to justify the campaign’s failure. To the writers of the German official history, themselves former staff officers imbued with the traditional German ideas of decisive, mobile battle, it was incredible that a Prussian officer could set as his sole goal the gradual wearing down of the enemy.⁶ The official historians concluded that attrition at Verdun had merely been a means to an end, rather than an end itself. They believed that Falkenhayn had really intended the attrition at Verdun to weaken the French army to such an extent that it would permit a German breakthrough in another section of the French line. Once this had been accomplished, they assumed that Falkenhayn planned to fight a classic battle of maneuver.⁷ This interpretation was further elaborated by Gerhard Foerster, himself a director of the Reichsarchiv, and has more recently been espoused by Gerd Krumeich.⁸

While other authors have not gone as far in questioning Falkenhayn’s goal of bleeding white the French army, they have expressed reservations about the plan articulated by Falkenhayn in his memoirs. Some historians have accepted that Falkenhayn intended the attrition of the French army from the outset of the battle, but argue that he never communicated this aim to the unit assigned the grisly task, the 5th Army. This viewpoint was first put forward by Hermann Wendt in 1931, but was popularized by Alistair Horne’s

⁵ Erich von Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters and Its Critical Decision, 1914-1916* (London: Hutchinson, 1919) pp. 209-218.

⁶ On the background of the Reichsarchiv writers, see Marcus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002) pp. 129ff.

⁷ Reichsarchiv, *Weltkrieg X*, pp. 671-674.

⁸ Wolfgang Foerster, “Falkenhayns Plan für 1916. Ein Beitrag zur Frage: Wie gelangt man aus dem Stellungskriege zu entscheidungsuchender Operation?” *Militär-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau* Jg.1937 pp. 304-330; and Gerd Krumeich, “‘Saigner la France’? Mythes et réalité de la stratégie allemande de la bataille de Verdun,” *Guerres mondiale et conflits contemporains* Nr.182 (April 1996) pp. 17-29. Foerster was the director of the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres when he published his article.

influential *The Price of Glory*, first published in 1962.⁹ Falkenhayn's most recent biographer, Holger Afflerbach, has also concluded that the Christmas Memorandum was written after the war.¹⁰ However, unlike the historians from the Reichsarchiv, Afflerbach accepts the General Staff Chief's assertion that the goal of the offensive was the attrition of the French army. Afflerbach, though, leaves many important questions about Falkenhayn's methods unanswered.¹¹

A number of factors have led to uncertainty about Falkenhayn's aims and methods at the battle of Verdun. First, the General Staff Chief did not put his ideas down on paper. Intent on keeping the offensive a tight secret, Falkenhayn relied upon face-to-face meetings to communicate his ideas and to develop his plans.¹² Thus, the many participants in the failed battle were each able to put forward their own viewpoints of events. The destruction of the Prussian army archives in World War II has meant that historians have had little means of testing the validity of these varied and often conflicting perspectives. Another reason Falkenhayn's plan has been misinterpreted by historians is its complicated nature. Today, we make clear distinctions between the various levels of war from the strategic to the tactical.¹³ These distinctions were not so clear in 1915/1916. In reality, Falkenhayn's plan cut across all the levels of war now recognized. While today's strategic-level commander aims to avoid interfering in the means by which his subordinates reach their intended goals, in 1916, Falkenhayn had no such compunctions. Indeed, his intention was to harness what he saw as German tactical strength to offset her strategic weakness. His plan contained tactical elements, and he actively interfered in the 5th Army's tactical conduct of the battle at different times.

This paper aims to clarify the question of both Falkenhayn's aims and methods in 1916. The Christmas Memorandum may well have been constructed after the war, but this piece will draw upon previously unavailable contemporary material and testimonies from

⁹ Hermann Wendt, *Verdun 1916: Die Angriffe Falkenhayns im Maasgebiet mit Richtung auf Verdun als strategisches Problem* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1931); and Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

¹⁰ Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996) pp. 543-545.

¹¹ Afflerbach devotes a disappointing nine pages to Falkenhayn's plans for the battle of Verdun out of his 586-page biography of the general. Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, pp. 351-359; and idem, "Planning for Total War? Falkenhayn and the Battle of Verdun, 1916," in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Washington: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 113-131.

¹² Even the Reichsarchiv found reconstructing Falkenhayn's plan difficult due to the lack of written documents. Reichsarchiv to Tappen, 23 January 1934, BA/MA, N56/5 and Reichsarchiv to Groener, 17 December 1934, U.S. National Archives (USNA), Wilhelm Groener Papers (M137), Roll 8.

¹³ For today's definitions of the levels of war, see Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02: DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington: GPO, 2003).

participants to show that it was in fact a true representation of Falkenhayn's ideas in late 1915 and early 1916.¹⁴ Further, it will demonstrate that the General Staff Chief communicated his ideas to the 5th Army and others clearly in 1916. Initially, these were not fully accepted by the 5th Army's commanders. However, as the battle ground to a bloody stalemate, they embraced Falkenhayn's goals, if not his methods, while at the same time, Falkenhayn drew closer to the 5th Army's initial goals. Finally, it will show that, far from being a "complete disjuncture between strategy, battle design and tactics,"¹⁵ Falkenhayn's plan was ultimately a sophisticated, if gruesome, attempt to use tactical methods to achieve a strategic effect.

Background

As he drew up his plans for victory in 1916, Erich von Falkenhayn faced a challenging strategic situation. Since the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914, the German army had faced overwhelmingly superior enemies on many fronts. The events of 1914 had convinced Falkenhayn that a traditional victory brought about by a "decisive" battle in the field was beyond the strength of the German army.¹⁶ In November 1914, the General Staff Chief reported to the Imperial Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that Germany's enemies were too numerous and too strong and that the German army just did not have the manpower required to win the war in the manner expected by pre-war doctrine. Instead, Falkenhayn hoped to use limited military success as a springboard for political success. He wanted the Chancellor to take advantage of what battlefield victories the German army could supply to convince at least one of Germany's enemies to conclude a separate peace.¹⁷

¹⁴ This article is largely based on research conducted in the files of the Kriegsgeschichtliche Anstalt des Heeres, the organization responsible for the writing of the German official history of the First World War. These files were captured by the Soviets in 1945 and only recently returned to Germany. They are now held in the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Freiburg. Uwe Löbel, "Neue Forschungsmöglichkeiten zur preußisch-deutschen Heeresgeschichte: Zur Rückgabe von Akten des Potsdamer Heeresarchiv durch die Sowjetunion," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 51 (1992) pp. 142-149; and Helmut Otto, "Der Bestand Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres im Bundesarchiv-, Militärisches Zwischenarchiv Potsdam," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 51 (1992) pp. 429-441.

¹⁵ Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," in Peter Paret, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) p.536.

¹⁶ On the pre-war German emphasis on 'decisive' battle, see Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport: Greenwood, 1986) and Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 56-81.

¹⁷ See Bethmann's précis of Falkenhayn's beliefs in a letter to Arthur Zimmermann, 18 November 1914, *Der Weltkrieg (geheim)* Bd. 2, Public Record Office, Kew (PRO), German Foreign Ministry Files (GFM) 34/2156. Partially reprinted in Paul R. Sweet, "Leaders and Policies: Germany in the Winter of 1914-1915," *Journal of Central European Affairs* Vol.XVI Nr.3 (1956) p.232f.

For Falkenhayn, the main contest was in the west. First, coming from a Junker family with estates in the east, the General Staff Chief was naturally a Russophile.¹⁸ He did not believe that there existed deep divisions between Russia and Germany. Consequently, he believed peace between the two countries could be easily negotiated once the Russians were shown the hopelessness of their cause. Also, Falkenhayn believed that the Russian army could withdraw into the expanse of its country, and he was reluctant to allow the German army to get drawn deep into Russia as Napoleon's *Grand Armée* had 1812. On the other hand, he was convinced of Britain's deep hatred of Germany, and saw Britain as Germany's main enemy. Additionally, he believed that the British were propping up a greatly weakened France. Thus, Falkenhayn wanted to concentrate his efforts in the west in an effort to divide the two western allies. If France could be convinced to negotiate a peace with Germany, than Russia would soon follow suit, leaving Germany free to focus of her real enemy, Great Britain.¹⁹

Not everyone in the German army shared Falkenhayn's beliefs, however. In early 1915, the leaders of the German army on the Eastern Front, Paul von Hindenburg and his chief of staff, Erich Ludendorff, challenged Falkenhayn's conclusions. In contrast to him, the "duo" from the east believed that the German army was capable of winning the war without diplomatic assistance. They felt that, with minor reinforcement, they would be able to defeat completely the Russian army in the field, which would allow Germany to dictate peace on her terms to a defenseless Russia. Given their success in the battle of Tannenberg (26-30 August 1914) and Falkenhayn's failure in the first battle of Ypres (19 October – 22 November 1914), Hindenburg and Ludendorff had considerably more influence within the army than Falkenhayn.²⁰ Moreover, their beliefs about how the war should be fought reinforced long-held opinions within the German officer corps. This difference of opinion over both Germany's strategic direction and the German army's method of fighting almost ripped the army apart in early 1915, as Hindenburg and Ludendorff worked hard for Falkenhayn's replacement as Chief of the General Staff.²¹

¹⁸ See Hans von Zühl, *Erich von Falkenhayn: Eine biographische Studie* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1926) p.15f.; and Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, p.10f.

¹⁹ Falkenhayn to OberOst, 18 November 1914, BA/MA, N56/4; Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

²⁰ Indeed, Hindenburg's popularity made him a real rival to the Kaiser, see Holger Afflerbach, "Wilhelm II as Supreme Warlord in the First World War," *War in History* Vol. 5, Nr. 4 (1998) pp. 442-446. See also Jesko von Hoegen, *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos* (Cologne: Boehlau Verlag, 2007).

²¹ Karl-Heinz Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General: Die Führungskrise um Bethmann Hollweg und Falkenhayn 1914-1916* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1967); and Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, pp. 211-232.

Despite the opposition he faced from Hindenburg and Ludendorff, as well as a substantial portion of the officer corps, Falkenhayn stuck the conclusions he had reached in November 1914. He remained convinced that the traditional methods by which the German army won its wars would have to be altered. The armies facing Germany were simply too large to be defeated in one or two great battles, as pre-war thinking dictated. This led him to conclude that Germany would not be in a position to dictate peace terms to her enemies, but would have to find a means by which one or more of them could be induced to come to a separate peace with Germany. However, while Falkenhayn may not have changed his conclusions and, though he ultimately survived the challenge to his leadership, the experience had a large impact on his tenure as Chief of the General Staff. The conflict weakened his authority within the army, and the experience made him reluctant to share his radical strategic ideas with his subordinates for fear of provoking another such feud. Both of these factors made an already reticent Falkenhayn all the more secretive when it came to articulating his plans as the war progressed.²²

Throughout 1915, Falkenhayn struggled to devise an operational approach to match his new strategic vision, always hampered by his inability to generate a dialogue with his subordinates. Despite believing that the war would be won or lost in the west, in early 1915, the General Staff Chief was forced by the near-collapse of Germany's Austro-Hungarian allies to send substantial forces to the Eastern Front.²³ There, Falkenhayn attempted to put his new ideas into practice. Convinced that battles could no longer be decisive in and of themselves, he aimed to use battlefield success to influence Russian politics. Falkenhayn needed to threaten something that the Russian government held dear, the loss of which would be unbearable. Traditionally, German strategists had attempted to destroy an enemy's army. Knowing the famed Russian contempt for life, the General Staff Chief recognized that punishing the Russian army alone would not be sufficient to force the government to negotiate. Instead of concentrating on the Russian army, Falkenhayn focused on threatening territory. He believed that if the Russian government were faced with the prospect of losing Congress Poland they would be compelled to come to the negotiating table. Thus, the

²² Robert T. Foley, "East or West? Erich von Falkenhayn and German Strategy, 1914/1915," in Matthew Seligmann and Matthew Hughes, ed., *Leadership in Conflict 1914-1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 2000) pp. 117-137.

²³ Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg* Bd. VII: *Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Winter und Frühjahr* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1931) pp. 346-367; August von Cramon, *Unser Oesterreichisch-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1922), pp. 9-15.

strategic effect of his offensive in the east in 1915 would come not from destroying the Russian army, but from occupying or threatening to occupy Russian territory.²⁴

However, for Falkenhayn's plan to work, he would need the cooperation of the Germany's diplomatic leadership, and this was not forthcoming. The Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, did not have faith in Falkenhayn's abilities and had actively worked for his replacement as Chief of the General Staff. Moreover, for Falkenhayn's strategy to succeed, German peace terms would have to be mild.²⁵ By 1915, Bethmann was under increasing pressure from powerful interest groups within Germany that called for annexation of vast amounts of enemy territory. Thus, the Chancellor was unwilling from the start to support Falkenhayn's plans. Despite the great achievements of the Austro-German offensive in the east during the summer and early fall, including some 3 million Russian casualties and the capture of all of Congress Poland, German diplomats did not translate this battlefield success into political gain.²⁶ This lack of support from the political leadership would have important implications for Falkenhayn's plans for 1916.

Although Falkenhayn was unable to knock Russia out of the war in 1915, the offensive in the east did stabilize the situation there. In April 1915, the Austro-Hungarian front was close to collapsing. By September, the Austro-German had advanced deep into Russia and the Russian army was seriously weakened. Indeed, the German high command believed that the Russian army would be incapable of offensive action for the foreseeable future.²⁷ While Russia had not left the war, it was much less of a threat. With a shorter front to hold and with a decreased threat, Falkenhayn was able to transfer forces to the west for an

²⁴ Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, "Kriegstagebuch," 1 November 1915, BA/MA, Wild Nachlass, N44/2; Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5; Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, p.300. Foley, *German Strategy*, pp. 127-155.

²⁵ Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Sceptre* Vol. III: *The Tragedy of Statesmanship – Bethmann-Hollweg as War Chancellor (1914-1917)* (London: Allen Lane, 1972) p.68. Falkenhayn's desire for a moderate peace with Russia was shared others within the Kaiser's entourage. The Kaiser's chief adjutant wrote, "We must come to peace with Russia. Therefore, no great annexations." Hans von Plessen, "Tagebuch," 10 July 1915, BA/MA, W10/50676.

²⁶ On the Chancellor's half-hearted attempts to conclude peace with Russia, see For an overview of the attempts at peace in the east in 1915, see L.L. Farrar, *Divide and Conquer: German Efforts To Conclude a Separate Peace, 1914-1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) pp. 13-34; Ritter, *Sword and Scepter* III, pp. 66-74; and Rudolph Stadelmann, "Friedensversuche im ersten Jahre des Weltkriegs," *Historische Zeitschrift* 156 (1937) p.525.

²⁷ Reports even came in to OHL that Russian units were using women and children in the front line. Gerhard Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 29 August 1915, BA/MA, N56/1. See also Plessen, "Tagebuch," 26 August 1915. In January 1916, Falkenhayn informed Bethmann that the Russian army was incapable of any "large-scale offensives" for the immediate future. Bethmann, diary entry for 7 January 1916, quoted in Janßen, *Kanzler und General*, p.288. Cf. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p.209. The Western allies also felt that the Russian army was no longer capable of offensive action, see the British military attaché, Lt.Col. A. Knox, 12 October 1915, PRO, War Office Files (WO), 106/1067.

offensive in 1916 that he hoped would split the allies and end the war. The pressing question for the General Staff Chief was how to accomplish this.

Planning for Victory in 1916

The situation on the Western Front was very different from the Eastern. In Flanders and eastern France, the German army faced a large French army and a growing British. The front line was densely occupied by these well-equipped enemies. Entente breakthrough attempts in 1915 had shown how difficult it would be to pierce the trench line. Moreover, once this first line had been broken through, it would be extremely difficult to defeat the large Entente armies. Despite the successes in the east in 1915, Falkenhayn was able to build a reserve of only 25 divisions in the west; nowhere near enough to produce a “decisive” battlefield victory. The General Staff Chief was more than ever convinced that he would have to come up with a unique approach if victory was to be gained. However, the lack of cooperation from Bethmann in 1915 had convinced him that he could not look for assistance from the Reich’s political leadership. A purely military solution would have to be found to Germany’s strategic position, despite the evident difficulties. The plan he would come up with drew upon the lessons he had gained in the war to date, and the result would be, in the words of one of Falkenhayn’s subordinates, an operational approach with “no analogue in history.”²⁸

The first choice facing the General Staff Chief was which enemy on the Western Front to attack. In common with many of his contemporaries, Falkenhayn saw Britain as Germany’s main enemy.²⁹ However, as he indicated in his Christmas Memorandum, Britain would be the most difficult enemy to defeat.³⁰ First, having played a relatively minor role in the war to date, her army was in good shape and still growing. German intelligence put the strength of the British army on the Western Front at 42 ½ divisions by early 1916, but indicated that eventually it could grow to some 70 divisions. Moreover, German intelligence believed that the morale of the British army was high, even if the army was inexperienced.

²⁸ Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523

²⁹ As early as November 1914, Falkenhayn wrote, “...our most dangerous enemy is not in the east, but rather is England...” Falkenhayn to Hindenburg, 18 November 1914, BA/MA, N56/4. On the anti-British feeling in Germany, see Matthew Stibbe, *German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, pp. 210-216.

Finally, the British army could merely withdraw across the English Channel to avoid a major defeat.³¹

On the other hand, reports from the front indicated to Falkenhayn that the French army was weakening. In November 1915, the Intelligence Section of the German High Command drew up an assessment of the French army, which concluded that the French arm was 400,000 men weaker than it had been in 1914, despite the fact that the 1916 class of recruits had been called to the colors early. The French birth rate had been declining since the mid-19th century, and it was now clear that France simply did not have the manpower reserves to make good her wartime losses. German intelligence expected the French to be forced to call up the 1917 and 1918 Classes of recruits by June 1916.³² Moreover, the repeated failures of the French to break through the German front seemed to be sapping the morale of the field army. Thus, the intelligence officer of the German 6th Army reported: “The morale of the troops, with few exceptions, can be characterized as bad. Some soldiers believe it will not get better, but only worse as a result of the failure in September and the high losses....It will be difficult to get the soldiers to attack.”³³

At the political level, Falkenhayn also believed that the French will was weakening. Throughout his time as Chief of the General Staff, Falkenhayn had been receiving regular reports from a highly placed German intelligence agent in Paris, an Austrian named August Schluga Freiherr von Rastenberg. Schluga had been a German agent since 1866, first based in Austria and later in France. He had managed to supply German intelligence with the deployment plans of the Austrian army in 1866 and the French army in 1870 and again in August 1914. Despite these important successes on the military side of intelligence, Schluga’s specialty was political intelligence. He was well connected with members of the French government and Ministry of War. Falkenhayn trusted Schluga’s reports so much that he personally read them as soon as they arrived in the OHL without waiting for analysis by the Intelligence Section.³⁴ As failures and casualties mounted during 1915 for the French, the trusted German agent detected a growing crisis within French politics.³⁵

³¹ “Die Beurteilung der Kampfkraft der englischen Armee durch die deutsche OHL. Ende 1915,” BA/MA, W10/51521. The Germans believed that the Kitchener divisions had such a limited combat capability that “generals had to lead assaults personally.” Falkenhayn lost a friend from China in this way. Bethmann to Jagow, 4 October 1915, AS5157, *Der Weltkrieg geh.* Bd. 23, PRO, GFM 34/2587.

³² Nachrichtenabteilung West, Report dated 14 November 1915, printed in “Die Beurteilung der Kampfkraft der französischen Armee durch die deutsche OHL zwischen dem 1.1. und 29.8.16,” BA/MA, W10/51521, p.4.

³³ Nachrichten Offizier, Armeeoberkommando 6, “Nachrichten von der französischen Front im Abschnitt Angres-Ransart,” 23 December 1915, BA/MA, PH3/607.

³⁴ On Schluga’s career and his influence, see Friedrich Gempp, “Geheimer Nachrichtendienst und Spionageabwehr des Heeres. Band VIII: Die Ergebnisse des Nachrichtendienstes der mobilen Abteilung IIIb im

Indeed, Falkenhayn increasingly believed that the French were reaching the end of their limits in terms of manpower and political willpower. To the Prussian general, France's democratic political system was a weakness. As the government was answerable to the people, its weakness was the people. Indeed, French politics before the war, with its frequent changes of government, seemed to support this view.³⁶ In the summer of 1915, Falkenhayn sent a memorandum to Bethmann and the Foreign Office outlining his assessment of the French. In its conclusion, he wrote:

France's victims in this war are so many that the government can bear the responsibility for them neither before the people of France nor someday before history. Soon [the French government] will be faced with the question of whether, despite all outside help, the ending of resistance is a more fitting path for the future of the nation than the continuation of this hopeless war.³⁷

Further, there were numerous reports of a growing distrust between the French and the British. Schluga's reports spoke of this tension frequently, including the fear that Britain was attempting to annex Calais.³⁸ Other agents reported a growing resentment towards the British, driven by what the French saw as the reluctance of the British to make sacrifices in the war on the Continent.³⁹ As a result of this growing resentment, the *schadenfreude* felt by the French at the British failure at Gallipoli was marked.⁴⁰ This opinion was also shared by the troops in the field. On the basis of prisoner debriefs, the intelligence officer of the 6th Army wrote in December 1915: "the opinion that France is merely obeying the orders of England is increasingly spreading."⁴¹

Westen vom Frühjahr 1915 bis Ende 1916. Abschnitt A: Vom Frühjahr bis Ende 1915," unpublished manuscript in USNA, RG242, T77/1440, pp. 80-82.

³⁵ See, in particular, his report of 13 June 1915, "Beitrag zur Beurteilung der Psyche bei den Feinden," in Gempp, *Geheimer Nachrichtendienst VIII/A*, Anlage 13. These reports were supported by those of another trusted agent, Rittmeister a.D. Freiherr von Kleist, a Swiss industrialist with connections to Poincaré. See his reports in *ibid.*, pp. 171-194.

³⁶ Before the war, the General Staff had frequently commented on what they saw as the weak French political system. For examples, see Grosser Generalstab, 3. Abteilung, "Jahresberichte 1909," "Jahresberichte 1910," and "Jahresberichte 1911," BA/MA, PH3/654. See also, Mark Hewitson, "Images of the Enemy: German Depictions of the French Military, 1890-1914," *War in History* Vol. 11, Nr. 1 (2004) pp. 4-33; and Robert T. Foley, "Easy Target or Invincible Enemy? German Intelligence Assessments of France before the Great War," *Journal of Intelligence History* 5 (Winter 2005) pp. 1-24.

³⁷ Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg* Bd.VIII: *Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen im Frühjahr und Sommer, im Osten vom Frühjahr bis zum Jahresschluss* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1932), p.609f. Cf. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p.217.

³⁸ Gempp, "Geheimer Nachrichtendienst" VIII, p.93.

³⁹ See report from Meldesammelstelle Süd-Lörrach, 11 June 1915, in *ibid.*, p.134f.

⁴⁰ See report by Gottlieb von Jagow, AS 536, 15 February 1916, *Der Weltkrieg (geh.)* Bd. 27, PRO, GFM 34/2588.

⁴¹ Nachrichten Offizier, Armeeoberkommando 6, "Nachrichten von der französischen Front im Abschnitt Angres-Ransart," 23 December 1915, BA/MA, PH3/607.

Thus, France appeared the weaker of the two enemies in the west. Not only had her army suffered heavily in the war so far, but she suffered from political weaknesses as well. Moreover, French resentment of the British seemed to offer an opportunity to divide the two Western allies. Falkenhayn returned to an idea he had tried in the east in 1915. He hoped to find a means of using battlefield success to apply political pressure upon the French government and compel them to negotiate a peace with Germany. While in the east the Russians cared little for human life, the situation was different in France. Since the end of the Franco-German War in 1871, France had become increasingly aware of her decline in strength relative to Germany. A mature society, her birth rate was declining in the years before 1914. As agent reports indicated, French society felt the heavy losses of the war keenly, and Falkenhayn hoped to capitalize on this weakness. By threatening French manpower, he would place pressure on the French home front directly. This, Falkenhayn hoped, would force the French voters to pressure their elected leaders to the peace table.⁴²

The next question Falkenhayn faced was how to do this. The experiences of 1915 had shown that the General Staff Chief could not count on Bethmann for political and diplomatic support for his strategy. Therefore, despite his earlier reservations, a purely military approach would have to be found. Fortunately for Falkenhayn, the experience of 1915 also offered some ideas for a new operational approach to match his novel strategy. During the eastern offensive, the German 11th Army had conducted a series of methodical attacks with limited objectives to seize Russian territory. German heavy artillery would pound a sector of the enemy line and the infantry would make small advances.⁴³ This process not only gained a great deal of territory during 1915, but it also inflicted huge casualties on the Russians. The Western Front also offered operational lessons. In the spring and fall of 1915, the French had attacked the German lines with overwhelming numbers of troops. In September on one sector in the Champagne region, 27 French divisions backed by 2,100 artillery pieces attacked 8 German divisions supported by only 600 artillery pieces. Not only did the German divisions hold without significant reinforcement, but they also shattered the French attack and inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking French infantry.⁴⁴

⁴² Robert T. Foley, "What's in a Name? The Development of Strategies of Attrition on the Western Front, 1914-1918," *Historian* Vol.68, Nr.4 (2006) pp. 722-746.

⁴³ The operational method employed by the German 11th Army has not been well examined. See Foley, *German Strategy*, pp. 133-151; and Richard L. DiNardo, *Breakthrough: The Gorlice-Tarnow Campaign, 1915* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2010).

⁴⁴ Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg* Bd. IX: *Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen und auf dem Balkan vom Sommer bis zum Jahresschluss* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1933), pp. 42-107; Arndt von Kirchbach, *Kämpfe in der Champagne (Winter 1914-Herbst 1915)* (*Der große Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen* H. 11)

These experiences indicated that limited offensives supported by heavy artillery could seize small sections of the front and inflict considerable casualties.⁴⁵ Once in good defensive positions, the experience of the defensive battles on the Western Front suggested that the German army could inflict a disproportionate number of casualties on the French.⁴⁶ If the French could be compelled to attack a strong German position, their army would be punished badly. In early December, Falkenhayn briefed Kaiser Wilhelm about his nascent plans for 1916, during which he used, for the first time, the gruesome phrase ‘bleed white’ to describe his aims.⁴⁷ *Generaloberst* Hans von Plessen, the Kaiser’s chief adjutant and commander of the Imperial Headquarters, recorded the meeting in his diary:

General von Falkenhayn rolled out for His Majesty a serious picture of the situation with the conclusion that to carry the war to its end, an attack in the *west*, where *all* available strength has already been collected, must be conducted....It is to be then that the Entente will attack us in the west and thereby bleed themselves white [*sich dabei verblutet*].⁴⁸

The question for Falkenhayn then was how to force the French to do this. In the end, he concluded that he would have to take, or at least threaten to take, an object for which the French High Command would be compelled to fight.

Initially, the General Staff Chief considered an offensive against the French fortress of Belfort near the Swiss border.⁴⁹ However, the quest for a suitable site to try Falkenhayn’s new strategic and operational methods soon focused on the fortress of Verdun. This fortress seemed to meet all of Falkenhayn’s criteria. First, it had great sentimental value to the French. Moreover, as a powerful fortress, it was one of the lynchpins of the French defensive

(Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1919); *Armeeoberkommando 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht 1915* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1916).

⁴⁵ Independently of Falkenhayn, leading Entente generals were coming to similar conclusions. The British general, Sir Henry Rawlinson, was perhaps closest to Falkenhayn’s ideas with his ‘bite-and-hold’ tactics. Ferdinand Foch’s ideas for the offensive on the Somme were also similar. See Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, “The ‘Step-by-Step’ Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method, 1915-1917,” *War in History* 15/1 (2008) pp. 17-42; William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century* (London: Little Brown, 2009), pp. 145-147, and Groupe du Armée du Nord, “La Bataille Offensive,” 20 April 1916, AFGG IV/2, annex 2

⁴⁶ The OHL believed that the French had suffered some 200,000 casualties during the *Herbstschlacht* compared to only 97,000 German. Tappen, “Kriegstagebuch,” 2 October 1915.

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Solger, “Die OHL in der Führung der Westoperationen Ende 1915 bis Ende August 1916: I. Vom 3.XII.15 – 8.I.16. Die Entstehung des Operationsplanes,” unpublished manuscript, BA/MA, W10/51318, p.7. (Hereafter, Solger, “Entstehung.”) See also Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, p.364. Cf. Krumeich, “Saigner la France,” p.22, which ignores Falkenhayn’s use of the phrase “to bleed white.”

⁴⁸ Plessen, “Tagebuch,” 3 December 1915. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Gerhard Tappen, “Besprechung mit dem Generalleutnant a.D. Tappen im Reichsarchiv am 6.IX.1932,” BA/MA, N56/5, p.5. (Hereafter, Tappen, “Besprechung”)

system. Its capture would undermine this system and make it more difficult for the French to maintain their front.⁵⁰ Thus, the French would have to fight to keep the fortress. On the operational level, the fortress was vulnerable to a German attack. It sat in the center of a large salient in the French line and could be dominated by German heavy artillery from three sides. As Adolph Wild von Hohenborn, the Prussian Minister of War, declared, "... the [French] positions will be so diminished [by German artillery] that not even a mouse can live in them."⁵¹ Logistically, as well, the Germans had an advantage over the French at Verdun. The area behind the German front was well supported by rail lines. On the French side, German artillery could cut the rail lines easily, leaving only a narrow road through which the French front could be supplied.

From early December, Falkenhayn worked with the chief of staff of the 5th Army, *Generalleutnant* Constantin Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, on the details of his plan. Knobelsdorf arrived in Berlin on 14 December with a plan to attack the French salient at Verdun and to take the fortress. The 5th Army envisioned an attack against the fortress from the north, northwest, and northeast along both banks of the Meuse River. They hoped to put the 5th Army in a position to dominate the fortress of Verdun with heavy artillery, making it unusable by the French.⁵² They wrote:

The decision to capture the fortress of Verdun through accelerated attack methods rests on the proven effects of the heavy and heaviest artillery....He who possesses the hills of the eastern bank (heights reaching up to 400m) and has captured the fortifications on these heights, is also in possession of the fortress....Indeed, even if the forts on the western bank are not occupied at first, the fortress will have lost its value for France when the eastern bank has been taken by us.⁵³

However, while Falkenhayn generally agreed with the goals of the 5th Army's plan, he believed it would require too much strength (23 divisions). Instead, he asked Knobelsdorf to develop a more limited plan of operations, one that focused on one axis of advance rather than three.⁵⁴ Although the General Staff Chief believed that Knobelsdorf's initial plan required too much strength, Falkenhayn ordered preparation for the offensive against Verdun

⁵⁰ Grosser Generalstab, 4. Abteilung, "Denkschrift über die Festung Verdun," 1910, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv—Kriegsarchiv, Munich, Generalstab 181.

⁵¹ Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915, BA/MA, Wild Nachlass, N44/2. See also Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 8 December 1915. Cf. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p.218.

⁵² The 5th Army had developed this plan in October. Marginal comment by Knobelsdorf to Solger, "Entstehung," p.23.

⁵³ Quoted in Wendt, *Verdun*, p.46.

⁵⁴ AOK 5, "Kriegstagebuch," 16 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/51318.

to continue.⁵⁵ Falkenhayn promised Knobelsdorf five divisions for the operation and set the start date for the “beginning of February.” However, against the advice of the 5th Army, he restricted the initial attack to the east bank of the Meuse only.⁵⁶

After the war, the command team of the 5th Army distanced themselves from Falkenhayn’s attritional objectives. Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, for instance, wrote that had he known Falkenhayn’s goal of wearing down the French army he never would have agreed to the offensive.⁵⁷ In his *Price of Glory*, Alistair Horne indicated that Crown Prince Wilhelm also did not know Falkenhayn’s true intentions from the battle’s start, writing “seldom in the history of war can the commander of a great army have been so cynically deceived as was the German Crown Prince by Falkenhayn.”⁵⁸ This ambiguity has been used by historians to support the argument that attrition of the French only became a goal later in the battle after the initial failure of the 5th Army to seize the fortress and break through the French defensive line.⁵⁹

However, it is clear from contemporary evidence that Falkenhayn communicated his attritional goals to the army. The General Staff Chief first raised the issue during his discussion with the Kaiser in early December. It is plain from Plessen’s diary entry that he articulated his aim of “bleeding the French white” to the Kaiser and his entourage and that they understood him. It is also clear that the command team of the 5th Army understood Falkenhayn’s aims. An examination of Crown Prince Wilhelm’s memoirs in the original German gives a different picture than that painted in Horne’s work. Wilhelm wrote:

What disturbed me was the *frequently expressed* idea of the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army that the point [of the offensive] was to bring about the ‘bleeding white’ of France’s army regardless of whether or not the fortress fell in the process.⁶⁰

Crown Prince Wilhelm’s statement is supported by another of the officers on the 5th Army’s staff, who recalled clearly that Falkenhayn often expressed his grisly aim before the start of

⁵⁵ The exact date on which the Kaiser was informed of the change of plans has never been clear. Based on the Kaiser’s post-war testimony, the Reichsarchiv concluded that Falkenhayn had informed the Kaiser of his changing plans between 10 and 12 December, i.e. before Falkenhayn’s meeting with Knobelsdorf. However, it is clear that the Kaiser was well informed about Falkenhayn’s intentions, even if he never read a “Christmas Memorandum.” *Der Weltkrieg X*, p.25. See also Alfred Niemann, “Bericht über den Vortrag, den S.M. der Kaiser am 25. Februar 1934 von mir entgegengenommen hat,” BA/MA, W10/51523, p.2. (Hereafter, Niemann, “Kaiser Vortrag”); Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, p.365.

⁵⁶ AOK 5, “Kriegstagebuch,” 16 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/51318.

⁵⁷ Knobelsdorf to Ziese-Beringer, 6 March 1933, in Ziese-Beringer, *Feldherr II*, p.200 and Knobelsdorf to Reichsarchiv, 6 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/50705

⁵⁸ Horne, *Price of Glory*, p.40.

⁵⁹ Foerster, “Falkenhayns Plan,” p. 313; Krumeich, “Saigner la France,” p.25f.

⁶⁰ Kronprinz Wilhelm, *Erinnerungen*, p.160

the battle.⁶¹ Moreover, it is clear that the 5th Army passed on Falkenhayn's attritional objective to their troops, even if they did not fully agree with it and even if they pursued their own goal of seizing the fortress.⁶²

Indeed, despite strenuous attempts at maintaining secrecy, the broad outlines of the General Staff Chief's plan were openly discussed within the German military establishment. In early December, Dutch intelligence passed a report to the Western allies that bares a striking similarity to Falkenhayn's Christmas Memorandum. It began: "The German General Staff is said to have delivered itself as follows regarding the present position of affairs on the WESTERN front:-" The report marked Britain as Germany's main enemy, saying that it would "...remain our firmly uttered oath that ENGLAND shall be punished,"⁶³ and declared: "On the EASTERN front all danger has vanished, as RUSSIA'S strength is broken."⁶⁴ Accordingly, the Germans intended to launch an attack on the Western Front in 1916, when sufficient men and material could be accumulated. However, it reported that Falkenhayn did not believe Germany possessed the numbers of troops necessary to carry out a meaningful breakthrough.⁶⁵ Instead, the General Staff Chief planned to "adopt an enormous Artillery Offensive." This artillery offensive was not intended to pave the way for an infantry attack, but was itself to be decisive. Falkenhayn hoped that the losses caused by such an offensive would have a political effect. He anticipated that the effects of the fire of the superior German artillery would "destroy ... all the enemy's hopes."⁶⁶

However, it is also clear that Falkenhayn himself was not certain exactly how the attrition of the French army would occur. In a meeting with the chiefs of staff of the armies on the Western Front on 11 February, he indicated a number of potential French reactions to the offensive at Verdun. The chief of staff of the German 7th Army (Oberst von Borries) recorded in his unit's war diary how Falkenhayn viewed the situation:

- 1) They [the French high command] believe Verdun to be so well defended that they leave it alone. Very good for us, therefore unlikely.
- 2) They send all available forces to the fortress...

⁶¹ Heymann to Ernst Kabisch, 28 August 1935, BA/MA, W10/51523. During the battle of Verdun, Heymann was on the staff of the 5th Army.

⁶² Berthold Deimling, *Aus der alten in die neue Zeit* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1930) p.208. Deimling commanded one of the attacking army corps.

⁶³ Cf. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, pp. 210ff.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.209.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.212f.

⁶⁶ Intelligence Report, Rotterdam, 7 December 1915, Archives du Service Historique de l'Armée de la Terre, Vincennes (SHAT), 7 N 1018. (My thanks to James Beach for a copy of this document.) Cf. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p.217f.

- 3) French counter-offensive on another point [of the line]. Possibly same points as before, Artois, Champagne, Woivre, Upper Alsace. To be greeted with joy. [Falkenhayn] believes it sure that all such attacks would collapse with severe French casualties.
- 4) They attempt to hold Verdun with all available forces, while the English attempt an attack. Questionable whether it would succeed, especially as the English army is at the moment going through a great upheaval with the insertion of the Kitchener units, which are being mixed with the old units down to the battalion level.⁶⁷

According to the post-war testimony of both Tappen and Kaiser Wilhelm, Falkenhayn believed the fourth possibility to be the most likely: The attack would cause the French to send all their reserves and to strip units from their front line to support Verdun. Thus, by seizing or by threatening to seize such a vital point in the French line, the Germans could deal quickly with the entire French reserve, binding them in the Verdun salient where they would exhaust themselves in fruitless attacks against the German positions supported by powerful artillery, as had happened in the Champagne in September 1915.⁶⁸ As Tappen put it: “we were of the opinion that the enemy, who would already have suffered heavily from our attacks, would suffer extraordinarily high casualties from our powerful heavy artillery during his counterattacks.”⁶⁹ In response to this situation, the British would be forced to launch an offensive designed to relieve the French before their army was ready; thereby, like the French, wearing themselves down.⁷⁰

To Falkenhayn, it was irrelevant if the fortress of Verdun fell into German hands or not. The point was to force the French to commit their reserves to a counter-offensive against the German attack. This French counter-offensive would result in the wearing down of the French army to such an extent that the French government would feel compelled to come to the negotiating table.⁷¹ He hoped by attacking Verdun to have to face “at least half of the

⁶⁷ Armeekorpskommando 7, “Kriegstagebuch,” 11 February 1916, quoted in Wilhelm Solger, “Die OHL in der Führung der Westoperationen Ende 1915 bis Ende August 1916: II. Vom 9.1.16 – 21.II.16. Die Vorbereitung des Angriffs auf Verdun und die Weitergestaltung der damit in Verbindung stehenden Operationsgedanken,” unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51529, p.112f. (Hereafter, Solger, “Vorbereitung”) See also *Der Weltkrieg X*, p.39f.

⁶⁸ Niemann, “Kaiser Vortrag,” p.3; Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn*, p.363f.

⁶⁹ Tappen, “Besprechung,” p.13.

⁷⁰ Hermann von Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 28 October 1932, BA/MA, W10/51318; Tappen to Hermann Wendt, 9 October 1929, BA/MA, N56/4.

⁷¹ Tappen to Hermann Wendt, 19 July 1929, BA/MA, N56/4.

French army.”⁷² Although he felt that the French counter-offensive would in all probability come at Verdun, Falkenhayn was not initially certain of this. However, he was convinced that the British would also be forced to launch a counter-offensive of their own to try to take pressure off the French. Therefore, he wanted to maintain a sizable reserve of his own to meet these counter-offensives. So long as they came and so long as he had sufficient reserves to meet them, it was irrelevant to Falkenhayn whether or not the 5th Army took the fortress of Verdun.

Falkenhayn’s determination to hold back a substantial number of divisions from the Verdun offensive to serve as a reserve force has also generated a variety of historical interpretations. Hermann Wendt maintained that Falkenhayn intended to use these reserves as a means of regulating the pace of the 5th Army’s offensive. Units would be fed into the battle at the time of Falkenhayn’s choosing in order to prevent the 5th Army from getting too carried away with its offensive.⁷³ The Reichsarchiv determined that Falkenhayn hoped use these reserves to carry out a “war-winning” offensive elsewhere along the front.⁷⁴ Both of these interpretations are incorrect.

According to Tappen, Falkenhayn felt that he needed reserves to meet any Entente relief offensive. Although the Germans had successfully defended against heavy Entente attacks in September and October 1915, there had been some moments when it looked as if the front of the German 3rd Army would collapse. Fully committed in the east, the OHL had no ready reserves to reinforce the buckling 3rd Army. This experience had made a deep impression on Falkenhayn. Tappen remembered him saying that he did not want to risk depleting his reserves to such an extent again, as he “... did not want to relive a situation such as that of the fall of 1915.”⁷⁵ Thus, Falkenhayn determined to keep as many reserves in his own hand as possible to meet any eventuality.

Verdun: The Execution & Failure of Attrition

The tensions between Falkenhayn and the 5th Army were not fully resolved before the beginning of the offensive. While Falkenhayn had ordered them to limit their offensive to the east bank and had communicated his concept of attrition, the 5th Army clearly never fully bought into Falkenhayn’s new operational approach. This can be seen in their attack order

⁷² Knobelsdorf to Ziese-Beringer, 6 March 1933, printed in Hermann Ziese-Beringer, *Der einsame Feldherr: Die Wahrheit über Verdun* (2 vols.) (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1933), Vol. II, p.200f.

⁷³ Wendt, *Verdun*, pp. 32-36.

⁷⁴ *Der Weltkrieg X*, pp. 671-674.

⁷⁵ Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 8 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

issued on 27 January. This order admonished the attacking troops to press home their attacks ruthlessly: "...the entire battle for the fortress of Verdun depends upon the attack never coming to a halt, thereby preventing the French from ever having the opportunity to construct new positions in their rear and reorganizing their shattered resistance."⁷⁶ This drive would have serious repercussions shortly after the battle began.

Falkenhayn and the 5th Army, however, were in one mind about the importance of artillery and how it should be used. Although the 5th Army did not receive the numbers of guns it had originally requested, by 21 February, it had deployed 654 heavy guns (including 26 heaviest, i.e., over 320mm), as well as some 550 field guns and howitzers. When mortars are included, the 5th Army's attack was supported by more than 1,400 artillery pieces. Additionally, these guns were richly supplied with munitions – field guns were assigned 300 rounds per day, light field howitzers 400, and heavy field howitzers 180 rounds per day. All told, by 21 February, the 5th Army had assembled 2.5 million rounds for the first 5 days of the offensive.⁷⁷

The real innovation was how this assemblage of artillery was to be employed. Unlike the Entente offensives in 1915 or their offensive on the Somme later in 1916, the 5th Army concentrated its artillery in space and time. The German offensive at Verdun took place along a 14-kilometer front. With 1,400 artillery pieces, this equated to an artillery piece for every 10 meters of front. By contrast, on the Somme later in the year, the French deployed with a ratio of one gun for every 15 meters and the British one for every 20 meters. The 5th Army also planned to limit its artillery preparation before the infantry attack. Their fire plan called for an 8-hour preparatory bombardment. After this, infantry would advance to survey the damage to the French defenses and to identify new targets for the artillery.⁷⁸ The French and British, on the other hand, carried out a 144-hour artillery bombardment in preparation for the infantry assault on the Somme.⁷⁹

This highly concentrated artillery attack of very short duration was enormously successful in the opening phase of the battle. The intensive and concentrated artillery fire all but obliterated the French front line and its defenders, and in most cases, the infantry patrols sent forward to assess damage simply walked into the French positions. While the infantry

⁷⁶ Armee-Oberkommando 5, Ia Nr. 418g, "Befehl für die Angriffskorps," 27 January 1916 in BA/MA, W10/51534.

⁷⁷ *Weltkrieg X*, pp. 61-62; 'Kriegstagebuch der Adjutantur des Kronprinz Wilhelms,' BA/MA, W10/51519.

⁷⁸ Armee-Oberkommando 5, Ia Nr. 388g., "Befehl für die Tätigkeit der Artillerie und Minenwerfer," 27 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534. Wendt, *Verdun*, pp. 46ff.

⁷⁹ Details of the Entente artillery plans and preparations for the Somme can be found in Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, pp. 146-151; and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (London: Yale University Press, 2005) pp.40-56.

secured the first French line, their artillery pounded the second French line, under better observation now that the first line had been captured. The three attacking corps of the 5th Army continued to make rapid progress until 26 February, including the capture of Fort Douaumont, one of the key positions of the French defenses. The three French divisions initially defending the east bank had been all but wiped out by the new German offensive tactics: The 72nd Infantry Division lost 192 officers and 9,636 men; the 51st Infantry Division lost 142 officers and 6,256 men; and the 37th Infantry Divisions lost 83 officers and 4,654 men. In the first 5 days of the German offensive, the French defenders lost some 25,000 men. Given the situation, the French high command began considering surrendering the east bank completely to the Germans. One German company commander in the 117th Infantry Regiment wrote confidently home on the first evening of the offensive: “When you glimpse this letter, you will have undoubtedly already have read in the daily news the basics: Namely that we have taken the fortress of Verdun in short order.”⁸⁰

The 5th Army’s initial success, though, came at a high cost. It appeared as if the 5th Army’s plan for a rapid capture of the fortress would succeed, and certainly Falkenhayn’s goal of wearing down the French army appeared to be happening. Although the French had suffered some 25,000 casualties in the first few days of the offensive, the 5th Army’s infantry also suffered, and by 29 February the Germans had taken some 25,000 casualties.⁸¹ Indeed, the task for the attacking German infantry became more and more difficult as they advanced deeper into the French defensive system and as the French poured reinforcements into the region. On 25 February, Philippe Pétain, commander of the French 2nd Army, was given command of the defense of the fortress.⁸² Pétain, who had long recognized the importance of firepower, rationalized the French line and created a coherent defensive fire plan.⁸³ Artillery was massed on the west bank, where it could fire into the flank of the attacking German troops on the east bank. He also stiffened the faltering resolve of the defending troops. His General Order Nr.1 stated in no uncertain terms: “The mission of the 2nd Army is to stop at any price the enemy effort on the Verdun front. Every time the enemy wrests a parcel of

⁸⁰ Quoted in Wolfgang Foerster, ed. *Wir Kämpfer im Weltkrieg: Feldzugsbriefe und Kriegstagebücher von Frontkämpfern aus dem Material des Reichsarchivs* (Munich: Justin Moser, 1929) pp. 150-151.

⁸¹ AFGG IV/1, p.294; Wendt, *Verdun*, p.107.

⁸² Pétain’s important role in the First World War has been largely overshadowed by his role as leader of Vichy France in the Second World War. For his military career, see Stephen Ryan, *Pétain the Soldier* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969); and Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1970) pp. 3-88.

⁸³ Pétain’s motto had long been “*le feu tue*,” or “firepower kills.” Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun: The Devastating Story of the Stalingrad of the First World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002) p.98.

terrain from us, an immediate counter-attack will take place.”⁸⁴ The attacking German troops also increasingly struggled to advance through the tangled and broken terrain of the battlefield. Deep gullies and ravines broke up forward momentum and hid French defensive positions. The wooded area made artillery observation challenging. Infantry Regiment 20 described the ground over which they advanced on 24 February: “With its trees cut down by artillery fire, tangled branches, and shell holes, with its confusing ruins of the former French defensive positions and communication trenches filled with corpses, Herbebois Wood was a picture of devastation.”⁸⁵

Adding to the problems for the 5th Army was the change in relative strengths of the attackers and defenders. By 26 February, the French 2nd Army had 14 ½ divisions deployed to the Verdun front, and many of these had come fresh from reserve behind the front. This rose to 20 ½ by 6 March.⁸⁶ By contrast, starved of reserves by Falkenhayn, the 5th Army had nothing to hand either to exploit its initial successes or to refresh its increasingly tired eight attacking divisions. An anguished Crown Prince Wilhelm later wrote:

‘...on the evening of 24 February, the resistance of the enemy was actually broken; the path to Verdun was open!...We were so close to a complete victory! However, I lacked the reserves for an immediate and ruthless exploitation of the success we had achieved. The troops, who had been engaged in unbroken, heavy combat for 4 days, were no longer in the condition to do so. Thus, the psychological moment passed unused.’⁸⁷

The 5th Army did not receive any reinforcement from Falkenhayn until 27 February, when the General Staff Chief gave the 5th Army permission to make use of the 113th Infantry Division in the battle.⁸⁸ Thus, within a few days of the battle’s start, the sacrifices of Verdun’s defenders, the defensive efforts of Pétain and his reinforcements, and the difficult nature of the terrain halted the German advance well short of the line Falkenhayn and the 5th Army intended to reach to fight their offensive-defensive battle.

⁸⁴ Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, pp. 273-274; AFGG IV/1, pp. 314-327; Henri Philippe Pétain, *Verdun* (trans. Margaret MacVeagh) (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1930) pp. 101-102.

⁸⁵ Oberstleutnant Doerstling, *Kriegsgeschichte des Königlich Preußischen Infanterie-Regiments Graf Taubentzien v. Wittenberg* (3.Brandenb.) Nr.20 (Zeulenroda: Bernhard Sporn, 1933) p.180.

⁸⁶ Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, pp. 273-274.

⁸⁷ Wilhelm, *Erinnerungen*, p.177. The idea that an opportunity was lost on 24 February appeared in a number of German analyses of the battle after the war. For example, see F.W. Prüter, “Der 24.Februar 1916 von Verdun von französischer Seite gesehen,” *Wissen und Wehr* (1933) pp. 1-17. For a more critical view of this interpretation, see Ernst Kabisch, *Verdun: Wende des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Vorhut-Verlag Otto Schlegel, 1935) pp. 89-103.

⁸⁸ Wendt, *Verdun*, p.97; AFGG IV/1, p.335.

After not achieving their initial tactical goals, both the offensive at Verdun degenerated into a hard slogging match. The 5th Army pounded away at the French defenses on the east bank with limited gains. In early March, they convinced Falkenhayn that an offensive also needed to be launched to seize the high ground on the west bank from which the French defenders were pouring murderous artillery fire into the flank of those German units attacking on the east bank. Like the offensive on the east bank, this one failed too with heavy casualties.⁸⁹ Stung by the increasing losses, at the end of March, Falkenhayn questioned whether or not the offensive at Verdun should be ended. In an ironic reversal of roles, the 5th Army argued that the offensive should be continued as it was achieving the goal of wearing down the French army. They wrote: “The fate of the French army will be decided at Verdun” and that the “annihilation of the trained French reserve as well as their reserve of material and munitions should be completed as soon as possible.”⁹⁰

Indeed, from the German perspective, it appeared as if their attritional battle was succeeding, though poor intelligence meant that they had an inaccurate picture of the damage being inflicted upon the French defenders. Trusting in the superiority of the average German soldier over his French opponent, Falkenhayn believed that the French suffered five casualties for every two Germans. In early March, he told the German Foreign Office that the French had suffered more than 100,000 casualties, the equivalent of a “strong army” to German artillery fire at Verdun. He believed that they would soon suffer another 100,000 if they did not come to terms soon with Germany.⁹¹ The reality, though still horrible, was considerably below German calculations. By 15 March, the French had taken nearly 70,000 casualties defending Verdun. This “result” had cost the 5th Army more than 52,000 casualties.⁹²

With his tactical commanders committed to seeing through the battle and having been converted to his original idea of attrition, Falkenhayn would have found it difficult to end the battle even if he had wanted to do so. It did not help that Kaiser Wilhelm II stated on 1 April: “The decision of the war of 1870 took place in Paris. This war will end at Verdun.” Indeed, by April, too many important reputations were bound with the operation at Verdun. Falkenhayn could ill afford to end the battle before significant results were achieved. The offensive had been launched at his instigation and even its tactics were shaped by his desire

⁸⁹ *Weltkrieg X*, pp. 122-132; Wendt, *Verdun*, pp. 98-102.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Foley, *German Strategy*, p.228.

⁹¹ Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p.237; Foley, *German Strategy*, p.235

⁹² The French 2nd Army lost 1,607 officers and 67,842 men between 21 February and 11 March. AFGG IV/1, p.649. The 5th Army lost 25,363 officers and men between 21 and 29 February and another 25,928 between 1 and 10 March. Wendt, *Verdun*, p.243.

to fight an “offensive-defensive” battle. To “lose” at Verdun would deal such a blow to the General Staff Chief’s prestige that he might be forced to step down from his post. Moreover, the command team of the 5th Army was heavily invested in the offensive. Part of the rationale for attacking at Verdun was for the German Crown Prince to be seen to be leading the German army to victory against its mortal enemy the French. Failure at Verdun would taint the reputation of the future German emperor. While not the only reason for continuing the attritional battle, the importance of commanders’ reputations in coloring the decision to fight on should not be discounted.⁹³

After the initial failure to seize the dominating heights on both banks of the Meuse River, the best that Falkenhayn could hope for was to limit the numbers of German casualties and increase the numbers of French. Throughout the remainder of the battle, Falkenhayn attempted to reign in the enthusiasm of the 5th Army and their attacking troops. Part of the reason for the relatively high German casualties was the reckless attacks carried out by German troops. Over the course of the battle, Falkenhayn issued guidance on offensive tactics based on the lessons of the battle of Verdun. These called for close infantry/artillery cooperation and for greater use of the new ‘stormtroop’ tactics that had been developed during the battle.⁹⁴ Falkenhayn also replaced those generals in charge of the attacking groups who attacked with the greatest vigor and under whose command German troops suffered the highest casualties. These changes produced limited results.

Although the French army was suffering tremendous casualties, the battle did not have the political result Falkenhayn had hoped for. Indeed, if anything, the battle had the opposite effect, and drew the French nation closer together.⁹⁵ On the battlefield, Pétain had developed an aggressive unit replacement system. The French commander put great emphasis on relieving units before they had become completely burned out, reasoning that the risk of catastrophic failure was too great with worn out units. This method also preserved a cadre of trained and experienced manpower around which units could rebuild once out of battle.⁹⁶ Although the strain on the French army was immense, it did not break, denying Falkenhayn even a tactical victory in the battle.

Conclusion

⁹³ Foley, *German Strategy*, pp. 227-231; *Weltkrieg X*, pp. 140-143.

⁹⁴ Foley, *German Strategy*, pp. 231-234. For a local study, see Christian Stachelbeck, *Militärische Effektivität im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die 11. Bayerische Infanteriedivision 1915 bis 1918* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010) pp. 97-126.

⁹⁵ See Ousby, *Road to Verdun*, passim.

⁹⁶ AFGG IV/1, pp. 364-366; Ousby, *Road to Verdun*, pp. 100-102; Pétain, *Verdun*, pp. 110-112.

Falkenhayn survived the initial failure at Verdun, the catastrophe of the Brusilov offensive on the Eastern Front, and the early onslaught in the battle of the Somme. However, each of these events, and in particular the failure of his strategy and tactics at Verdun, had a cumulative effect. When Rumania declared war on the Central Powers on 27 August 1916, even Falkenhayn's greatest supporter, Kaiser Wilhelm II, lost faith in his abilities. He was replaced by his great rivals, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. The new command pair were diehard proponents of Germany's traditional method of war, and advocated winning the war via a few large, 'decisive' battles. Falkenhayn's attritional approach was discarded, seemingly discredited.

There is no doubt that the battle of Verdun was a German defeat. Although the French army suffered terrible casualties, so too did the German army. At no time in the battle was the casualty ratio anywhere near as favorable as Falkenhayn assumed. However, this failure was due more to the execution by Falkenhayn's subordinates and should not detract from the novel conception of Falkenhayn's strategy for 1916. Indeed, far from merely a post-war fabrication to clear his name, as we have seen, contemporary evidence shows that Falkenhayn attempted to re-conceptualize battle in his approach at Verdun. He attempted to make use of German tactical and technological superiority to have a strategic effect on the French. By capturing dominant terrain and using superior German artillery, he hoped to inflict enough casualties on the French army that the French population would force their government to sue for peace. Falkenhayn's failure was that he overestimated the abilities of his own troops and underestimated the resolve and resourcefulness of the French. Moreover, he was unable to communicate effectively to his subordinates how he wanted the battle to be conducted. Both his subordinates and subsequent historians were and have been trapped in a conceptual framework that did not allow them to understand fully Falkenhayn's approach and goals in the battle. This failure to communicate would perhaps have mattered less if the 5th Army had succeeded in seizing the key terrain around Verdun in their initial drive, and today we would be discussing Verdun as a model of flexible thinking in warfare rather than a senseless slaughter.