

THE GREAT ALLIED OFFENSIVE BEGINS—ARRAS

Most Significant Campaign Since Waterloo Is On—New British Armies Win Greatest Success in Western Trench Warfare—Will Germans Halt or Retire Out of France?

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The last ten days have seen the beginning of what must be the most momentous campaign of the present conflict and the most significant in European history since Napoleon started for Waterloo. After a full winter of preparation, the British armies struck their first blow on Monday, April 9, before Arras, and a week later the French began between Soissons and Rheims. On the outcome of the battle now joined depends the question of peace by negotiation or by victory.

In the present article I intend to discuss the British offensive, which is now passing into a new phase, leaving for another week any detailed discussion of the French operation, which is just beginning as I write, on Tuesday, April 17.

The Successful German Retreat

The new campaign may be said to have begun on February 6, when the Germans drew out of Grandcourt along the Ancre. During the month of February there was a gradual retirement before the Somme positions of the British, and on the 16th of March this retirement suddenly broadened into the great retreat out of the country between Soissons and Arras. By this retreat the Germans accomplished three things. They escaped from positions which had become difficult to hold, owing to the successful advance of the French and the British during the Battle of the Somme. They straightened their line and shortened it, saving a certain number of thousands of troops. And they also temporarily frustrated all the plans of the British and of the French to attack between Soissons and Arras by putting a belt of twenty miles of devastated country between the old positions of the Allies and the new German line.

This new German front, which has been christened the Hindenburg line, extended almost in a straight line from Arras eastward to Cambrai and Le Catelet and east of St. Quentin to the Oise River, and thence to La Fère through the Forest of St. Gobain to the suburbs of Soissons. On this line it seemed, and still seems, that the Germans had chosen to meet the attack of the Allies. Their retreat along this front was one of the most successful operations in military history and will remain a model of military efficiency. The captures of prisoners and material by the Allies were infinitesimal, and the Germans reached the positions they had intended to stand on in exactly the manner they had expected. By Easter the retreat was practically completed, and the Germans could refer with pride to the success of their operation.

Pivots Now Attacked

Meantime Allied strategy had conformed to the new situation. All along Haig and Nivelle had planned to strike at the appointed moment. Where they had intended to strike we do not know, but it was clear as soon as the German retreat began that it would no longer be possible for several months to attack between Arras and Soissons, and that any immediate offensive would have to be made either north or south of the extremities of the so-called Hindenburg line. This situation the Allied commanders accepted, and chose as their points of attack the two pivots of the retreating German movement, which were the Vimy Ridge, north of Arras, and the Craonne Plateau, east of Soissons. A very simple figure may serve to illustrate the situation. The German retreat may be likened to the closing of the old-fashioned double barn door, swinging inward on its hinges. Before the retreat began the German position somewhat resembled the angle made by the halves partially open. When the retreat was completed the German position resembled the door closed. The Allied attack was directed at the hinges of the doors, which swung on the Vimy Ridge and the Craonne Plateau.

The British attack was one of the most successful incidents of the whole war, and must remain the measure of the achievement of the British in making a new army. After a bombardment which reached its

culminating fury on Easter, British and Canadian troops left their trenches early on Monday morning on a twelve-mile front from the old battlefield at the north end of the Vimy Ridge, along the Deule River, to Henin, on the Cojeul, twelve miles south-east of Arras.

The chief obstacle immediately before the British was the famous Vimy Ridge, a little less than five hundred feet high, rising gently on the west side facing the British and falling abruptly into the great Plain of Northern France on the east. Up this hill the troops of Foch had struggled in the great battle of Artois in 1915, only to be driven back. A hundred thousand French casualties paid for the unsuccessful effort in this region in May and June, 1915. But this time the attack was instantly successful, and in a few hours the Canadians had reached the crest of the Vimy Ridge at every point save Hill No. 140, at the extreme northern end. Meantime the British centre—the Canadians were the left—moved out along both banks of the Scarpe River from the suburbs of Arras, rapidly penetrating four systems of German intrenchments and making an advance of upward of six miles in the next four hours, forcing their way through all the old German lines and making a greater total advance than had yet been made in Western trench warfare. Between the Scarpe and the Cojeul the British right wing made corresponding advances and by Tuesday had cleared the west bank of the Cojeul River.

General Retreat Compelled

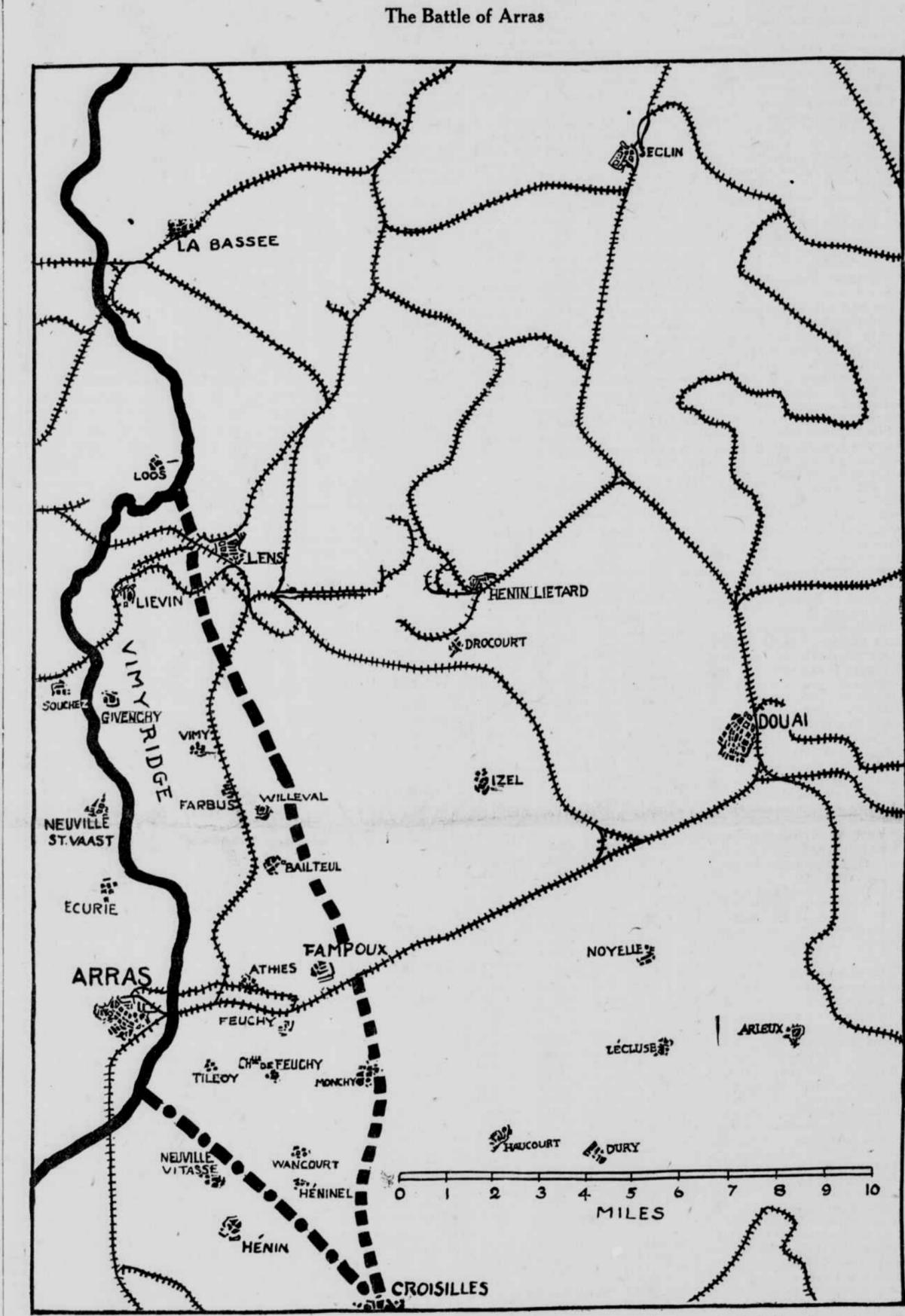
This was the first phase of the Battle of Arras. In it the British took some one hundred and fifty guns, many of them heavy pieces, a vast amount of material and at least ten thousand prisoners. The single failure up to this moment had been in the effort to get control of the northern end of the Vimy Ridge; but to balance this the British had reached the village of Monchy, six miles east of Arras and dominating the whole plain toward Douai.

After forty-eight hours the Germans began to react. The next two days saw a desperate effort to regain the Vimy Ridge on the north and to break the right flank of the British lines southward between Cojeul and the Sensée. Bear in mind that at this point the British had crossed the Hindenburg line at its point of junction with the old trench line and had, in fact, to use the figure of the door, cut the hinges of the northernmost door.

By Thursday the Germans recognized that their defeat was absolute, that Vimy Ridge could not be retaken—they had already lost Hill No. 140—and a general retreat was ordered. Meantime, while the army of General Allenby had been winning the Battle of Arras, the army of General Horne, to the north, extending from the suburbs of Lens to La Bassée, suddenly became active and began to move east and south in an enveloping movement around the city of Lens. This operation accentuated itself on Friday, and very promptly the Germans began to draw out of Lens itself, and the evacuation of all the lines between Lens and Croisilles was foreshadowed. By this time the extent of the British victory was better known, and two hundred pieces of artillery and fifteen thousand prisoners were the proofs of the success.

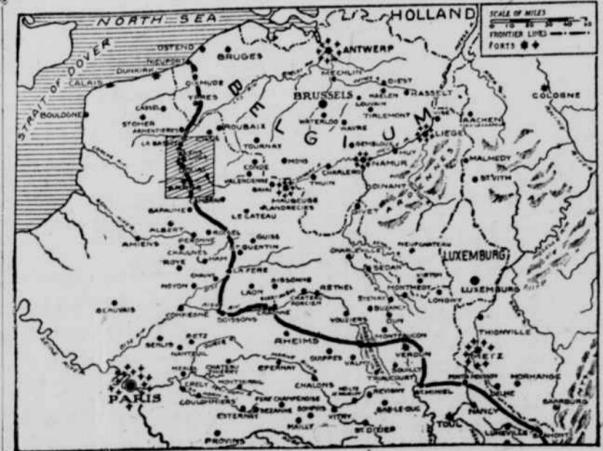
Can British Flood Be Stopped?

The question that was now raised remains unsolved as these lines are being written. The British victory had already passed any victory in Western trench warfare. There had been a complete piercing of all the first system of German works, and the sole problem was whether between La Bassée and Cambrai the Germans had constructed a rearward line which would serve to withhold the British flood now pouring through the broken dike. This remains still a problem. That such a line does exist, extending from behind Lens to the outskirts of Cambrai and known as the Drocourt-Quéant line, British reports had



The solid line shows the front before the German retreat. The dot and dash line shows the Hindenburg line at the point of junction with the old line. The broken line shows the British gains in the battle of Arras to February 18.

told us. As to its capacity for resisting we do not know. The three phases of trench attack are illustrated by three great trench battles. In Champagne, in 1915, the French penetrated the first line of the German defences and were checked at the second. As a piercing operation it was a failure and came to an abrupt end. The second phase is illustrated by the battle of Brusiloff, in Galicia, last year, when, having penetrated the Eastern trench lines on a wide front, he was, after a number of weeks, held by German attacks before he had effected such a breach in the Eastern front of the Central Allies that the whole front had to be withdrawn. The third phase is illustrated by Mackensen's attack in Galicia in 1915, when at Gorlice he broke the whole Russian trench system and, penetrating behind the Russian line, dislocated the whole Russian front from the Baltic to Rumania and compelled the ultimate evacuation of Galicia and the loss of Poland. At present the problem in the Battle of Arras is whether it will terminate in a second phase, which it has now entered, as did Brusiloff's attack, or if it will be successful as was Mackensen's and compel the German retirement out of France. These two possibilities are to be borne in mind



for the next few days and weeks. We may see the British stopped permanently on a new German line between La Bassée and Cambrai, or we may see the British advance go pounding forward through Douai, and thus compel a general German retirement to the line of the Meuse and thence westward to the city of Lille. It is too early to say that we are seeing the end of trench warfare, but the sudden success of the British in sweeping through four or five miles of German trenches on a front of twelve miles must at least suggest that heavy artillery has found an answer to the trench warfare, and that we are seeing the approach of open fighting

German Offensive Is Perhaps Dislocated—End of Trench Warfare May Be at Hand

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French are now attacking, in the bloody battle of the Aisne, which marked the beginning of the trench war. Eastward of the Craonne Plateau is the one weak spot in the German position, the point where the Aisne River comes through a wide level plain between the Craonne Plateau on the north and the hills east of Rheims. Through this gap a French division penetrated during the pursuit after the Battle of the Marne. It actually succeeded in separating the armies of Kluck and Buelow, and had it held its ground, the German retreat must have been to the frontier. Unhappily, the troops were green, the officers inexperienced, and, finding themselves momentarily out of touch with their supporting troops, they withdrew. Could the French now push up through this gap, they would be in the rear of the forts of Rheims, held by the Germans, the fort of Brimont, from which the Germans have bombarded Rheims during the last two years, and a general German retreat between the Vesle and the Argonne would be necessary.

The Precedent of 1915

We have, then, the problem of the new offensive. Two great forces of Allies are striking at either end of the Hindenburg line, to which the Germans have retreated. A break at either end would compel the Germans to retire to the French frontier. A simultaneous break at both points might mean the envelopment and capture of large German forces between Soissons and Lens, for the troops penetrating through these breaks would be moving in a converging direction in the rear of the German armies on that front.

This situation entirely recalls that which existed in September, 1915, when the British made their great attack at Loos, coincident with the French offensive in Champagne; but at this time the Allies lacked heavy artillery, the British army was still untrained, and the operation was made primarily to relieve the pressure upon the defeated Russians and only with the remote hope of a general victory in France. It is worth recalling also that at the Battle of the Somme last year the Allies were compelled to make their attack in advance of the completion of their preparations because the situation at Verdun had become critical and the city seemed likely to fall if German attention was not at once directed elsewhere.

We may say that in the new offensive the Allies have had the privilege of choosing their own time and their own places of attack, save only as the German retreat may have or may not have dislocated their plans on the front between Soissons and Arras. But it is well to bear in mind that the Germans have also the men and the material to make an offensive in the West if they choose, and that we must watch for a German counter demonstration once both Allied armies are committed to their great offensive.

Five Millions of Fighting Men

On the other hand, it is equally possible that the extent of the British success at Arras has dislocated the whole German plan and compelled the diversion to the imperilled front of the troops that were intended to form a necessary part of Hindenburg's new attack. If this proves to be the case, then the British have by one battle and at a single stroke wrested the offensive from the Germans for the rest of the campaign, and this will be of inestimable advantage because it leaves it to the Allies to fix the time and place of battle.

We have all of us become dulled by familiarity to the magnitude of the campaigns of this war. Yet it is worth recalling that at the present moment not less than five millions of fighting men are engaged on the Western front in what must prove the most tremendous and momentous struggle of human history. We are seeing three nations in arms putting forth their ultimate strength, and the Battle of Arras, considerable success as it has been for the British, must be accepted as only the prelude to the great summer campaign. It remains possible that it will prove to have been so decisive a victory that German plans will have been permanently dislocated, but, having recognized that possibility, we must equally recognize the possibility either of a German counter attack before Arras, such as the Germans made in Galicia last year, or a successful operation such as the Germans attained in Rumania last year.