

Wilhelm's battle

Prologue

Paris, France, March 29th, 1918, district of Saint Gervais, Good Friday. In the church of the district, some people have met for praying. There are men, women, young and old people. Suddenly, a whistle overwhelms the whisper of the prayers. The faithful become silent, they prick up their ears towards that sinister whistle which is closer and closer...

Then, only fire and smoke, flames and dust, blood and screams. Vaults and walls collapse, tons of stones and bricks fall on the faithful. Paris is under fire of a monstrous gun made by the Krupp Factories. In the previous days, some other places of the city had been hit by it. Many inhabitants had already left the city. The Germans are almost at one hundred kilometres from Paris.

And they are advancing.

A nasty business.

After almost four years of war, Germany was exhausted. Bread was lacking, the infant mortality had doubled, the economy was on its knees, Socialists and Pacifists were adding fuel to the flames, the social riots were increasing. Till that time, on the western front, Germany had stood on defensive, intending – and hoping- to convince the Allies about the impossibility of a victory on the field and to force them to negotiate the peace. The attempts had failed. The Chancellor Theobald Bethman-Hollweg-- a moderate-- had resigned and the power, de facto, had passed into the hands of the militaries.

Nasty business when the policy is decided by the militaries. They had imposed the indiscriminate submarine warfare, they were about to impose a new offensive on the western front. The word would be passed, once more, to the weapons. Because a victory was necessary. As and more than bread. Otherwise, Germany would be collapsed because of starvation, strikes, and riots.

And the Allies? After useless and expensive attacks, they were about to assume a defensive deployment. Tension was high. Russia was virtually out of the conflict, the Italians had been defeated at Caporetto, the United States of America were not ready to enter the war in forces on the western front, the casualties suffered the previous year had opened wide empty spaces in the allied Army. But deploying in defence signified that the new notions connected with the defence in depth had to be assimilated-- and assimilated in a hurry. And, above all, the survivors of Passchendaele would have had to rest and the new recruits had to be trained. How much time would have been necessary?

And there was also something else. The Germans had made their frontline shorter, withdrawing, intentionally, behind a new defensive line, the so called "Hindenburg Line"(or *Sigfried Line*). In other words, they *had chosen* where to take position, preparing themselves consequently. The allied line, on the contrary, had not been chosen: this line was, simply, the most advanced point reached by the allied troops. If the Allies wanted to deploy the troops on defence, their line had to be fortified and modulated in accordance with the principles of the defence in depth.

A not very simple job. In particular, south of Saint Quentin, in the sector entrusted to the British Fifth Army under sir Hubert Gough's command, the fortifications – inherited by the French- were in a pitiful state and reorganizing them in accordance with the new criteria, would have required much time. And also the Third Army under sir Julian Byng, dislocated north of Saint Quentin, was not in better conditions. For his part, sir Douglas

Haig, the Commander in Chief, had required six hundred thousand men to fill the losses and to constitute effective reserves; the new British Premier, David Lloyd George -- who did not like Haig's tactic -- had given him only one hundred thousand. Non very much to constitute an effective reserve force. Thus, some units were split and some sectors of the front were weakened for strengthening other ones. The left flank (near Ypres, in Flanders, to protect the ports of the Channel) was reinforced; the right flank , held by the Fifth and Third Army, was weakened. In complex, twenty-six divisions were defending a front one hundred twenty-five kilometres long.

And what about the French Army? Shaken by mutinies and rebellions, it was about to be restructured. How would it have react against an eventual German offensive? Would it have been able to fight? Able to help and to support the British Army, for its part not still completely restructured? There were, it is true, the USA and their immense power in men and materiel. But when would they have been ready to enter the war? How much time would have been necessary before they would make feel their whole weight on the conflict? One year? Two years?

For his part, Lloyd George, in partial contrast with the militaries, wanted to isolate Germany, by taking away the support of her allies- Turkey, Austria, Bulgaria--instead of attacking in force her on the western front. There were too many uncertainties, too many conflicting opinions to continue with the massive attacks. Better, much better stopping, reorganizing, thinking and waiting for better times.

Germans permitting, of course.

Defence and attack.

As we have seen, the Allies were about to deploy themselves in defence, in accordance with the principles of the defence in depth or flexible defence. The copyright were not theirs, it was German. The main principle of the defence in depth was the following: acquiring strength, make lose strength to the enemy. Or better: *acquiring strength, while the enemy is losing its.*

Thus, few soldiers on the first line (or advanced line), into blockhouses , bunkers, forts; many more soldiers on the second line (or combat line); reserve troops on the third line (or rear line). The enemy advanced, faced by the soldiers located into the forts or into the bunkers. More it advanced, more it lost its momentum; more it lost its momentum, more its strength became weaker. When its artillery was not able to give it some cover, from the second line the counter-attack started.

This concept was not a new concept. Two thousand years before, Hannibal , at Cannae, withdrawing step by step the centre of his deployment, had lured the Romans into a mortal trap. But in the Twentieth Century, something like that sounded as a kind of heresy for whom, as the Allies, had made of the offensive at all cost and of the maintenance of the initiative their own tactical credo. Yielding ground-- even if temporarily--and then counter-attacking? Never. Giving wide autonomy to the subaltern officers about the use of the artillery and of the management of the objectives? This is a thing coming from Mars.

But, instead, these attitudes were the keys of the German defensive success.

In truth, also they delayed to renounce to the idea of the immediate counter-attack. Falkenhayn's orders both during the battle of Verdun(1916) and during the battle of the Somme (1916), prefigured already some forms of flexible defence, but they reaffirmed : the first line, if lost, must be immediately conquered again. Left this idea to avoid being bled, it was easy for the Germans to adopt a different kind of defence. For The Allies it was not equally easy, but finally also they, whether they like it or not , were forced to adopt the new concepts.

They made, however, many mistakes. They reduced the number of the men on the first line of combat, but, however, they left on that line too many soldiers (one third of the whole

force) exposed to the enemy fire; they created mobile units, but they did not modify the chain of command, depriving these units of the necessary autonomy; they considered the machine gun a defensive weapon and not an offensive weapon. The rear line, then, often existed only on paper. On the rear line there were often no fortifications, no blockhouses, no storages, no shelters for the artillery. In some cases, a simple strip of meadow indicated its existence. In the area of the Fifth army, that strip of meadow was known as *Green Line*.

From a certain moment on, the Germans changed also their way to attack. For the Allies, attacking en masse, wave after wave, conquering the positions and making them sure before advancing, were a kind of dogma. Moreover, every attack was preceded, for days and days, by a heavy bombardment for preparing the attack and for destroying the defences. It happened during the battle of the Somme, it happened during the battle of Passchendaele.

The Germans changed this scheme. No prolonged bombardment, but a short, heavy and devastating bombardment in the immediacy of the attack. This tactic had been elaborated by Colonel Georg Bruchmüller on the eastern front. The artillery fire was concentrated on a short frontline. It began hitting the rear artillery positions, the centres of communications, the telephone lines, the centres of command, for concentrating, then, in proximity of “zero hour”, on the first line positions. The guns of Bruchmüller alternated fragmentation bombs and gas projectiles, they went and came back on the targets with absolute precision, unchaining everywhere panic, mess, chaos. And sowing death. The Germans called it *Feuerwalze*, something like “hitting again and again everywhere”.

The bombardment lasted usually not many hours. When it stopped, the assault troops, accompanied by a creeping barrage, went out in small groups (platoons or companies) from their shelters and infiltrated through the enemy lines. It was not important how many they were: it was important how much they could be effective. In other terms, as for the attack, as for the defence not the number of the soldiers used was important, but the fire power produced by them was important. The commanders of the platoons (often NCOs) and of the companies had a wide operative autonomy. Once delivered the targets, establishing how to reach them was their responsibility. The German assault troops (*Stosstruppen*) were armed with light machine-guns (before only a defensive weapon), with flamethrowers and with grenades. They did not take care of consolidating the conquered positions or of having their flank covered, but they advanced towards their targets, leaving to whom was arriving after them the task to eliminate the eventual centres of resistance. This tactic was complex but it worked. The allied soldiers were completely unprepared to face it. When they felt the enemy advancing behind them or along their flanks, they lost their head, scattered and were very confused. Something similar had happened during the battle of Caporetto (October 1917). There was, however, a problem: would the supplies be able to keep the pace with the advance of the assault troops?

Archangels, saints and gods.

On the table of Lt. General Erich Ludendorff many papers, maps and documents are heaped. He has analyzed them dozens of times, he has discussed with his collaborators. Now he must decide.

Ludendorff is a determined, ambitious and clever officer. If he has a flaw, that is flying off easily on the handle. In the Imperial Staff he is who is in command. Formally the Chief of Staff is Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, national monument, saviour of the Motherland, winner of the Russians at Tannenberg and at the Masurian lakes, venerated by millions of Germans. The elderly Field Marshal, recalled in service in 1914 from retirement in order to save the situation in a critic moment, is not however only a mere decorative figure. He is calm, he is able to reason, he knows how and when intervene, he

has charisma. With his stillness and with his apparent affability, he is the opposite of Ludendorff. And it is the reason why those two opposite personalities complete each other and work perfectly. But the most important decisions are taken by Ludendorff. And this is an important decision.

From a military point of view, Ludendorff has grown having the myth of Count Schlieffen as his point of reference. And also the myth of the encircling and of the decisive victory. Unlike the Count, he is a man of action. He has conquered Liege, he has defeated the Russians, he has fought on the battlefield, side by side with officers and soldiers. In short, he knows the warfare.

He is convinced of this thing: perhaps Germany can't win the war, but it *could* win the peace. On one condition: it needs a great victory on the western front in order to treat the peace from a strong position. For him, the moment is favourable; separating the British from the French and encircling the first ones is possible. The Russians are not a problem any more, the Americans not yet. But the Americans will be a problem, as time goes by. Thus, anticipating them is necessary as well hitting the British harshly is necessary. If the British are beaten, the victory is sure: France will not be able to continue the war and Germany will be rewarded for all its efforts. Where the "dove" Bethman-Hollweg wanted to arrive using the negotiation, the "hawk" Ludendorff wants to arrive using the weapons.

On his side he has archangels, saints and gods: Saint George, the winner of the dragon, Mars god of the war, the archangel Michael, protector of Germany. *Saint George* could give him the victory at Ypres and in Flanders; *Mars* nearby Arras; *Saint Michael* nearby Saint Quentin. And there are, above all, one hundred eighty divisions, formed by brave soldiers. They are motivated, trained, tired to defend and eager for attacking. From East new units have arrived. The troops deployed on the western front are young, experienced of the new tactics, eager to resolve definitively the stalemate, attacking instead of being slaughtered in the trenches. They, together with the archangels and the gods are going to fight the "battle of Kaiser Wilhelm" (*Kaiserschlacht*).

But in the final analysis, Ludendorff's plan is based more on a desire than on a definite objective, more on a hope than on a certainty. "Make a breach, the rest will follow", he says to prince Ruprecht of Bavaria, one of his most intelligent commanders. A little bit vague, to be sincere. And very uncertain, if we want. It is like saying: we breakthrough, hoping to can exploit the good occasion, *when and if it there will be*. Politically, moreover, would a great German victory able to force the Allies to begin negotiations of peace? On which concrete data is this assessment based?

Ludendorff feels, completely, the responsibility of his decision. A glance to the maps. Whom must he choose for the main blow? *Saint Georg*? *Mars*? *Saint Michael*? After further talks with his collaborators, after having thought and thought again many times, Ludendorff chooses *Michael*.

Between Saint Quentin and the river Oise, the 18th Army under Oskar von Hutier – one of the best officers in the German Army- would be to move west towards the Canal Crozat and the village of Ham, to consolidate the line, to protect the flank of the Second Army and to stop eventual French interventions.

With its left flank covered by von Hutier, the Second Army under Georg von Marwitz would be to attack towards Peronne. The Seventeenth Army under Otto von Below would be to head south of Arras towards Baupome and, once made the breakthrough, it would be to turn north towards Arras for encircling the British troops.

Ludendorff is aware of having *only* a blow at his disposal. Because of it conditions, Germany cannot withstand a prolonged offensive. And the Americans are arriving on the western front. For this reason the first blow must be the definitive blow.

Wilhelm's battle.

The battle begins well for the Germans. On March 21st, the first day of Spring, there is a very thick fog on the battlefield in the area of Saint Quentin. At 4:40 a.m., the guns open fire. The fragmentation bombs and the gas projectiles fall, with great precision, on the allied positions along the whole front. The Germans do not want either to give the enemy any points of reference, or make him aware where the main attack will be launched.

According to the plan, in the area between the Oise river and Saint Quentin (main target of *Michael*), the artillery fire is concentrated on the command centres, on the communication lines, on the artillery emplacements and, finally, on the advanced line of combat. At 9:40 a.m., covered by the fog still very thick, the first assault troops burst into the area of the Fifth Army and into the sector held by the right wing of the Third Army. Their orders are to avoid the centres of resistance, to head towards the command centres, to cut off the communications, to attack the artillery emplacements.

In Fifth Army's area, the impact is devastating. The British soldiers, plunged into the fog, "hear" the *Stosstruppen* infiltrating along their flanks and advancing behind them. But they can not see them. There is almost no reaction. The more the Germans are advancing, the more the confusion is increasing; the more the confusion is increasing, the more the resistance is becoming weaker. North of Saint Quentin, in the sector held by Byng's Third Army, the resistance is more tenacious. In particular close to the salient of Flesquieres, conquered during the battle of Cambrai(1917). In the afternoon, Gough, unable to stop the *Stosstruppen's* advance, orders the withdrawal beyond the Canal Crozat; in the evening the Germans have penetrated in many points of the line. On March 22nd – another day of fierce fights- the Third Army is forced to withdraw after having fought fiercely for every inch of ground; the Fifth Army—which has been hit harshly (almost fifty thousand casualties only on the first day of the battle)-- leaves in disorder the second line. At evening, the German assault troops are on the British rear line. On March 23rd Haig uses fresh troops in the attempt to stop the Germans, but in vain: the *Stosstruppen* are entered the enemy deployment sixty kilometres. The Kaiser himself is on the battlefield for honouring, with his presence, the battle fought in his name.

For the Allies the situation is hardly desperate. Wilhelm II leaves the operations area and comes back to Berlin convinced of the victory. But on the battlefield, the victory is growing more remote. The British, in fact, are fighting with bravery and tenacity; the first reserves are arriving to the front; the Germans are in serious troubles with their supply lines. The assault troops are advancing *too quickly*; the supply lines are getting longer; the tiredness is increasing. Starving soldiers begin to kill their horses- slim like themselves- and to eat them; whole regiments stop for sacking the storages abandoned by the enemy who is withdrawing. Ludendorff must choose: he must decide in which sector the reserves have to be used, in which sector the pressure has to be increased. He must do it quickly and he must not make a mistake.

On March 23rd, he orders the Seventeenth Army (Below) to continue south of Arras towards Saint Pol with its left wing towards Abbeville; he orders the Second Army (Marwitz) to advance towards Amiens; he orders the Eighteenth Army (Hutier) to manoeuvre towards Montdidier.

His is not a decision: it is a mess. Instead of an unique target, Ludendorff identifies three targets; instead of strengthening the correct wing (Hutier), he moves the weight of the attack on the wrong wing(Below), where the resistance is fiercer and where the success is smaller. On the contrary, Hutier is advancing almost without any contrast through the breach opened in the opposing deployment. If he received suitable reserves, he would be able to separate definitively the allied forces, turning his right wing northwards, contributing to encircle the British.

Till the beginning- and even more at that moment of the battle- Amiens should have become the only objective of the whole operation and the German reserves should have been deployed behind Hutier to exploit his successes. But, under pressure of the events, gripped by a terrible tension, having few and, in addition, contradictory information, Ludendorff decides in a different way. Making a mistake.

“Open a breach, the rest will follow”. Now, on both sides of the Somme, the breach is opened, in some points, it is even almost a chasm, but time is over: choosing to strengthen the right wing, Ludendorff wastes the victory. Or, at least, this is the opinion of many scholars.

And in fact, in the Somme territory, both Marwitz and Below are advancing slowly. The men are fighting in an area ravaged by the battles of the previous years, in a desert without a village, without trees, with the wells poisoned, without roads and without railways. The supplies are always in delay, the troops are suffering starvation. Before withdrawing behind the Hindenburg line, the Germans, in that area, had made scorched earth. And now they are about to pay this behaviour.

Always more in upset, Haig orders Byng to head rightwards in the attempt to keep again in contact with Gough. Byng obeys and his Third Army, although it has to fight in evident inferiority, withstands. Baupome is reached by the Germans, but Amiens is still very far from them. Close to Albert, Marwitz's troops find food reserves abandoned by the British in withdrawal and they refuse to go forward. Also Hutier begins to feel the usury. Despite he is pushing on Gough's forces and on the not very organized French, he is still far more than ten kilometres from his targets. It is a negative signal: if also Hutier is advancing slowly, it means that also Michael is losing strength.

The Allies are very close to hysteria. Haig is not knowing which way to turn and he wants that Pétain send immediately twenty(!) divisions to deploy in front of Amiens. The withstood of the allied line is at stake; the defence of the Flanders ports is at stake, he claimed. Pétain's answer is sharp: nothing to do. In the first place because the French Reserve Force (in French *GAR*, Group of the Army of Reserve, under General Fayolle) would be too much weakened; secondarily because the *GAR* forces must be used to face an eventual German offensive in Champagne; and, finally, because the first objective of the French is defending Paris. But the right flank of my deployment is uncovered, Haig implores. I am aware of it, Pétain answers firmly, but I do not want to risk my reserves.

Also General John Pershing, commander of the first American troops arrived in Europe, plays a role in that tragicomedy: he does not accept to put his soldiers under command of British or French officers. Haig flies into a rage and he comments: “Pershing? Obstinate and stupid. Ridiculous.” In short, everyone seems to act independently: *Michael* seems to have suddenly taken the lid off of a pot in which tensions and misunderstandings have boiled for years.

How to resolve the issue? Haig could withdraw his troops behind the Somme, abandoning the ports of the French Flanders and avoiding, in this way, that the Germans exploit the breach opened by *Michael*. But withdrawing is out of the question. And thus, here is a solution: a sole commander in chief is necessary. Not Pétain, too stingy when he must give reinforcements and, in addition, chronic pessimist, but someone more optimist and better disposed about the management of the reserves. It is strange: before that time, nobody had wanted to appoint a sole commander, now that appointment seems to be the solution of every problem.

On March 25th and 26th only Hutier obtains some remarkable progress. The other two German Armies are at their breaking point. In addition, the allied reserves are reaching the front: seven French divisions--one more than those promised time before by Pétain--take position beside the British. Slowly, the frontline is becoming settled. In particular,

Marwitz's Second Army is in many troubles. Since the beginning, it has adopted only partially the tactic of infiltration, preferring to attack the stronger points instead of ignoring them. For this reason it has lost time. And he has suffered many casualties.

Ludendorff, finally aware of the tactical importance of Amiens and of the necessity to give a sole objective to *Michael*, changes the plan for conquering the city, putting in action the *Mars* plan. But the Second Army and Seventeenth Army are exhausted, they are not able to advance and they are definitively stopped.

In the same day, during a high level meeting – also Clemenceau and Poincaré, respectively Prime Minister and President of the French Republic are present—at Doullens, close to the front, General Ferdinand Foch is appointed supreme Commander in Chief (Generalissimo) of the allied forces. Immediately Haig asks him for the twenty divisions which had been negated previously by Pétain, but in vain. Moreover, those divisions, by now, are useless: Amiens is, for the moment, safe. Hutier, the last one to try the impossible, is stopped nearby Villers Bretonneux.

It is April 5th: Michael has failed, “Wihlelm's battle” continues. But Ludendorff has wasted the blow at his disposal, the decisive blow.

With our backs to the wall

This time, the goal is the low valley of the Lys river. On April 9th, the *Feuerwalze*, Bruchmuller's barrage, falls as a scythe blow on the allied positions. The Sixth Army under Ferdinand von Quast attacks along the valley; the Fourth Army under Friedrich Sixt von Arnim attacks more north towards Armentières. The goals are the following: reaching Hazebrouck, an important allied railway junction and, a time more, pushing the British towards the sea. It is a re-release of the options *Georg I* and *Georg II*, now gathered in a sole operation called *Georgette*.

In the *Georgette* area, the static defences are better built, but many men have been used to stop *Michael*. Consequently adequate reserves lack. In line together with Belgians (north), with the British Second Army (centre, sir Herbert Plumer) and with the British First Army (south, sir Sinclair Horne), there are two Portuguese divisions. They are in a sorry state and they should be replaced on April 9th. Attacked in forces, they are overwhelmed. The Germans break through and they head towards Hazebrouck.

Once more, Haig is feeling completely lost. He has few reserves, Foch counts every division he gives him, the Germans are at a dozens of kilometers from Hazebrouck. It is necessary to do something. Haig, then, addresses to the troops an order remained famous: “There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end.”

But no one will be put with his backs to the wall. For the Germans, in fact, the problem is always the same: supplying the *Stosstruppen*. And the resistance, harder and harder, of the allied soldiers. The troops stop their advance to save the food storages abandoned by the enemy; groups of mixed-up soldiers with their uniforms in rags, more similar to ragamuffins than to elite troops, burst into the houses in search of food; the officers are unable to maintain the discipline; the few successes – the conquest of Messines or the conquest of Mont Kemmel, for instance-- are paid dearly. *Georgette* can not end well. And, in fact on April 30th also the Operation *Georgette* is cancelled. On the occasion of this battle—known as “Battle of the Lys”—General Plumer is forced to leave the village of Passchendaele, conquered the previous year at the cost of huge sacrifices.

Operation *Georgette* has failed, but Ludendorff does intend to renounce. On May 27th, he attacks along the Chemin des Dames. His intention is attracting here the French forces

deployed in front of Amiens. He wants to defeat them and, after this, to resume the attack against the British.

The script is always the same: *Feuerwalze*, infiltrating of assault troops, break through. On the field there are thirty German divisions and, on the field, a thick fog is enveloping everything. Faithful to Foch's directives – never withdrawing and hindering to the enemy, inch by inch, the terrain—The French General Denis August Duchene, commander of the Sixth Army, renounces to the defence in depth for facing the Germans on a narrow bridgehead, north of the river(and not south, as advised by Pétain).

It is a disaster. The Germans sweep away the French bridgehead, occupy the embankment of the Aisne, pounce on the reserves(nine divisions), overwhelm them and advance for more than fifteen kilometres. They are surprised by the huge success. What to do? Stopping or prosecuting? Contenting with the tactical victory or looking for the strategic victory, sweeping away once and for all the French. Ludendorff decides to strike while the iron is hot: we go on. Without meeting serious obstacles, the Germans reach the Marne and arrive around twenty kilometres from Paris. But Clemenceau, the Prime Minister, seems not worried and he does not speak of peace.

Pétain organized in a hurry a defensive line from the forest of Villers Cotterets till the city of Reims, passing through the Marne. In this way, he leaves to the Germans a wide salient with not many railway lines and with its flank exposed. In the attempt to widen this bulge, Hutier with his Eighteenth Army takes some successes. But they are ephemeral successes.

Ludendorff is now with his backs to wall. The efforts made till that moment have required a very high price, the casualties have been too many. And , in addition, the Spanish influenza is beginning to sow victims, as in the Motherland, as at the frontline. The Americans have arrived with the whole power of their Army. For the Germans, the situation is critical; continuing the offensive is a huge risk.

But, however, continuing is necessary. Ludendorff insists: it is necessary launching a last blow, in order that the foe accept the peace. And so , in sight of the preparation of an operation in Flanders (code name *Hagen*), the German effort is concentrated on the weak French front nearby Reims. The *Marneschuetze- Reims* offensive, known afterward as the second battle of Marne, carefully prepared, supported by fifty-two divisions and by a very heavy artillery fire, begins as usual very well and ends, as usual, badly.

Started on July 15 with the *Feuerwalze* and a rapid advance of the assault troops, only three days after, on July 18, it is virtually ended. The French, in fact, counterattack successfully. In the night between July 20th and 21st , the Germans leave their bridgehead on the Marne river, taking again a defensive deployment behind the Aisne river.

Ludendorff's nerves are about to collapse. One of his officer, General Mertz, writes on his diary: His Excellency is out. Pressured by a high tension, the almighty lord of the war is not able to take a coherent decision.

Instead of withdrawing immediately behind the *Hindenburg line*, he is reluctant to leave the Aisne river and the made conquests, he is thinking about an offensive in Flanders. But on August 8th – the first of the “One hundred Days”-- supported by armoured tanks and by a short and heavy artillery fire, covered by the mist, the Allies break through Marwitz's positions on the Somme.

Ludendorff is forced to accept the reality. His idea to withstand at all cost-- as Hitler will do in 1942 at Stalingrad—collides with the tiredness and with the indiscipline of his soldiers, with the superior military conditions of the Allies, with the more and more powerful presence of American troops.

There won't be another Wilhelm's battles.

Epilogue

The treaty of Versailles- the peace after the slaughter- banned together with the gas, also the *Kaiser Wilhelm Geschuetz*, the monstrous gun able, during the March offensive, to hit Paris from about 150 kilometres. The Allies would have liked capturing it, showing it to the whole world as the evidence of the German “barbarity”. They tried to capture it. But the mysterious gun seemed it had disappeared. Nearby Chateau- Thierry, American troops found some spare parts. Nothing else was found. The notorious cannon, probably, was destroyed by the Germans together with its construction plans. It will be alive, twenty-six years later, in the German V1 and V2.

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