

THE FALL OF ANTWERP AND THE FAILURE OF THE GERMAN BATTLE BLUEPRINT

In early October, the conditions for a stupendous and effective German push were ideal. Six divisions of cavalry, with motorcyclists, light artillery, machine guns, and an abundance of armoured automobiles, were available, and in any army but the German, the officers, on the spot, would have gathered their forces and dashed off while the opportunity was theirs. But with organisation, planning and scheduling as their watchwords, the German forces do not move that way. Everything in the machine must be coordinate and subordinate to the general plan. Its strategy aimed at finality, and subordinate initiative was forbidden. The theory of envelopment must be worked out in detail. The ponderous columns reaching Belgium had to move up for deployment; Antwerp must fall, and advance guards must not seek premature engagements while the front was developing for the decisive attack with a maximum and irresistible force. This theory had sent the army to the gates of Paris, and only failed by an overconfident flank. How could similar masses fail in a second invasion, along a solid front, wheeling and changing direction, with the right protected by the sea, and the Allied armies spread far to the south and depleted by the forces necessarily moved westward to maintain the entrenched front?



1st Oct 1914: The month dawns bitterly cold with a penetrating rawness that chills to the marrow adding enormously to the hardships of the unsheltered troops

1st Oct 1914: Freed from the Aisne deadlock, the German military machine is now sweeping across France, slaughtering and ravaging unchecked. Joffre and the French troops moved out of Albert - but then the women, children and nurses, all obvious, were wantonly murdered

2nd Oct 1914: To hold back the German flood, Joffre has increased the 2nd Army to eight corps along a 60 mile front from Amiens to Lille

3rd Oct 1914: The General Staff's Plan 1 to rout the French Army and capture Paris, has failed and a modified Plan 2 is now the German grail. Maud'huy's 10th army has withdrawn from Arras and Lens is now under threat as Prince Rupprecht's 6th army leads a new attack. Reinforcements from the Royal Marines are at Lier and closing on Antwerp but the Germans have penetrated the outer ring of forts. On the banks of the Somme, the Germans now hold a complete semicircle on the south and west boundaries of the Thiépval plateau.

4th Oct 1914: En route to Bethune, we pass a mass grave of old men, women and children lying heaped in a sunken ditch on the Albert-Arras road. Refugees tell of German commanders ignoring violent abuse, torture, murder and rape, as their troops sweep across France

5th Oct 1914: Attacks by Bavarian reserves along the Arras-Lens line are holding the French 10th army while the German cavalry moves north

6th Oct 1914: A vicious bombardment rages, ruthlessly battering the city of Arras, murdering its citizens, destroying its famous buildings. Twice the enemy poured over the

ramparts of Arras, and the streets ran with French and German blood before they were expelled. Above Arras, with their guns on advantageous ridges, the Germans fight their way over the hills and across the road to Lille. The swathe of destruction which marks German warfare is now spreading like prairie fire, obliterating everything in its path

7th Oct 1914: Lille abandoned as XXI Corps move south towards Artois: defence of the city is left to the Territorials and some Algerian troops. Marshall Foch, now in command of French forces north of the Oise, orders 10th Army to end withdrawal and regain the initiative. German cavalry attack between Lens and Lille but are quickly repulsed and forced back by French XXI Corps advancing from Bethune

7th Oct 1914: Reports from the Belgian Field Army that Antwerp is now suffering a devastating bombardment and is likely to fall within hours

8th Oct 1914: Talking with scared refugees scurrying south, the truth dawns - the Arras battle is not the high-water mark of the German flood. Refugees from districts north of Lille report masses of German cavalry and horse artillery, and no forces to cope with them.

8th Oct 1914: Broad, inviting routes are open above Lille direct to the Channel ports, offering the Germans the opportunity to attack England. It all appears to be unravelling around us: we fight inland while they are within a day's march of the French coast, unopposed. Tomorrow, the German flag could float twenty-one miles from British shores, with siege guns dominating the straits of Dover

9th Oct 1914: Waiting for Antwerp to fall, masses of German cavalry waste time while French troop trains are rushing the Allies to the north. When the Allies realised how the German wave was flowing, the race was against time, and trains came north every twelve minutes. It is hard to believe but, under their very noses, the Germans are allowing us to fill the gap from Maud'huy's left to the coast

10th Oct 1914: The shattered city of Antwerp fell with astonishing suddenness today, after suffering a terrific bombardment of twelve days. Antwerp's capitulation was a severe blow to the Allies and a signal for Von Beseler to start across Belgium - his siege artillery outranged the defending guns, and pulverised the outer line of forts, only to find them deserted. The Belgian army had crossed the Scheldt behind the civil population, and made a detour around the end of the German lines

11th Oct 1914: Still west of Lille, the Bavarian columns, headed by cavalry, do nothing but waste time on ornate plans, strategy and tactics. The Germans hold ground but the retreating forces of the Allies turn on a pitifully thin line to check the sweep across Belgium.

12th Oct 1914: Von Beseler to people of Antwerp: "Resistance will cause the destruction of your beautiful city" They left, and he destroyed it. 26,000 Belgian and English soldiers escaped from Antwerp, while the fight left 45,000 German dead

12th Oct 1914: In response to President. Wilson's inaction, Joffre refuses to give US correspondents information or access to any war operations. For now, I will wear my British coat - William Sims and six other American correspondents have been arrested on Joffre's order

13th Oct 1914: Gen Smith-Dorrien digs in and says Bethune can be retaken if his 2nd Corps “join hands” with the French on the Arras-Lens front. Bravery out of order on the thin Allied line: batteries are commanded by subalterns; sections by sergeants; soldiers fight alone. “Formations be damned Get up the road as far as you can and fight!” was one British order, epitomising the Allies new resolve

14th Oct 1914: Every village northward from Lens to Bailleul reveals further German atrocities, prompting calls for international justice. The mangled heaps that had been a young mother and her pretty tot beg the question: should neutrality silence official protest?

15th Oct 1914: Fighting has been intense for the past 48 hours: with a handful of Red Cross and lost troops I have been holed up at Hazebrouck. French and British cavalry now hold all the towns, villages, and bridges on the Lys up to Armentieres, twelve miles above Lille. In a spectacular raid, Allied troops recapture the railroad at Lille, destroy the flimsy barricades and gallop into the city. Two British squadrons take Warneton but, within hours, they are repulsed by a German regiment attacking from adjacent streets. The pendulum of battle continues its wild swing - first an allied push, then an enemy counter - erratic, un-ordered, pointless

15th Oct 1914: I receive a message from Beveridge via 2nd Corps signaller from Bethune: a colleague will be contacting me with information from Roosevelt

16th Oct 1914: From Arras to Armentieres, we have seen a hundred pretty towns and villages, well behind the firing line, ruthlessly bombarded. As rows of tiny coffins pass by, men tremble with rage at the slaughter of innocents and the gross injustice of the ‘neutrals’

17th Oct 1914: British cavalry at Lille close the front with an irregular and thin, but effective line from Vermelles to the Belgian frontier. Now there is not a single unit in reserve along the entire Allied front that stretches precariously across Belgium to the sea

18th Oct 1914: Not only Antwerp but conquered Belgium is now in flight; fear has spread over Flanders and made refugees of these gentle people. On the hills and ridges south of Ypres, the Belgians, the French and the British now have the enemy advancing on three sides. The Germans are now on the march from Antwerp to the coast but the Allies are still holding open a gap between Bruges and Ghent

19th Oct 1914: The entire line from Switzerland to the North Sea is now intact; a thin, curving front of 588 miles - Joffre's greatest triumph. Across Belgium, though, the line was but a thread. “Help is coming - hold on for another 48 hours,” commanders asked of their tired men

20th Oct 1914: The battles in Belgium have raged for 6 days; at odds of 4 to 1, and in places 8 to 1, our line had to stand alone but the Germans are starting to pour along the coast from Ostend, seeking to smash their way through the exhausted Belgian lines.

21st Oct 1914: Walking over the wet sand dunes near Nieuport after dark, every village, hamlet and farm along the front could be seen on fire

22nd Oct 1914: A mysterious thunder crept through the fog from the sea. Heavy guns flashed, signalling the arrival of a British naval flotilla. The naval guns, helped by a captive balloon from a warship, now hurled their shells even to the German positions at Schoore

23rd Oct 1914: Amid reports that Gen Congreve's Sherwood Foresters have been destroyed at Ennetieres with losses of more than 700 killed or MIA, Field Marshall Haig's I Corps reaches the western boundaries of Ypres to face a massive assault from the German IV army

24th Oct 1914: At last reinforcements came to the battered line of three nations and muddy, bloody, haggard spectres crept out of the trenches and then went into the flaming hell of Dixmude, where 3,000 shells an hour were falling

25th Oct 1914: Covered by concentrated artillery fire, the Germans cross the Yser, pushing the Belgians back to the Nieuport-Dixmude railroad. To stem the German advance, the Nieuport sluices are opened and gaps blown in the dykes near the shore, flooding the Yser basin

26th Oct 1914: Every available Belgian joins in a bitter offensive as the man-made floods and a heavy rainstorm swamp the German occupied area

27th Oct 1914: The mass of blue-gray German infantry squirm and flounder through the flood, many of them wounded, many sinking and drowning

28th Oct 1914: When this district of submerged salt meadow is recovered, the final history of the German retreat from the Yser may be written

29th Oct 1914: Through the month, the rival lines have battled, with positions lost, won and consolidated; and the trenches have grown deeper

30th Oct 1914: Realities of War: a German gun booms and a Tommy quips "Chicken for dinner" with the punchline, "well - I just heard von Kluck"

31st Oct 1914: Realities of War: the bloody losses of the previous weeks of fighting at the Marne and the Aisne are now painfully evident. Companies are woefully depleted, junior officers hold critical commands, and there are batteries with but a single officer

