

The MYTHICAL HINDENBURG Line

And the Relation Between the Western Retreat and German Hopes in Russia

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IT is not difficult to understand the German withdrawal in France as a means of economizing men, when we look at the combination of events on the western and eastern lines in conjunction with the Russian revolution. It will be remembered that some few weeks before the revolution occurred we were told of the great military events that were in preparation by the Germans on the Riga section of the eastern line. There can be no doubt that there was a concentration of German troops in this area, since both the German and the Russian bulletins referred to it. There was even a good deal of actual fighting in spite of the weather conditions, and those with a tendency to foresee "irresistible drives" and the like were quite sure that Germany was about to deliver one of those sledge-hammer blows that have so often promised to end the war and that have never done so. But now we are told, and from German sources, that the idea of a Riga offensive has been abandoned, or at least postponed, and that Hindenburg will seek a decision on the western, instead of the eastern, front.

The inference is obvious. Something was expected to happen in Russia that did not happen. The Riga concentration was in preparation for some event that did not occur, and that now is not likely to occur. We may profitably speculate as to the nature of that event, and we are not likely to go very far wrong. Either the Germans were well aware of the coming Russian revolution, and counted confidently upon a condition of internal chaos that must necessarily play directly into their hands by weakening the army and sapping its loyalty, or the revolution itself was intended by its sponsors to forestall and to prevent some other happening that would be equally favourable to the German plans. Now if the former theory is the correct one, then the German projects were frustrated by the orderliness of the revolution, the entire absence of chaos and anarchy, and the accentuated war spirit that it has seemed to call forth. The Riga concentration that expected to find its road opened to it by a Russian army torn in two by revolution and dissension, found on the contrary that the road was more effectually barred than ever, and that the army regarded the revolution, not as an incentive to stop fighting, but rather as an inducement to fight harder than ever.

But there are some indications that the latter alternative is actually the correct one, and that the revolution in its mysterious swiftness was intended to prevent some plan that was successfully maturing at Petrograd either for an entire withdrawal from the war and the making of a separate peace, or for some sudden and traitorous move that should hamstring the armies, and so give easy access to the German invader. Certainly we do not yet know the real and immediate causes of the revolution. We know in a general way that it was due to a patriotic dissatisfaction with the progress of the war, but there are now many indications that there was some peculiar and pressing emergency that must be met instantly or not at all. It may be that the Duma was aware of a "separate peace" project that was on the point of maturity and that must be quickly thwarted by revolution. It may be that something far more sinister was in preparation. But however that may be, we may be fairly certain that Germany was expecting that something would transpire in Russia that would be to her advantage, and that she was massing men at Riga in readiness for a move in the direction of Petrograd that was presently to be facilitated by some internal Russian happening. And since that expectation has been falsified we are now told that the Riga offensive has been abandoned.

THE connection with the western front now becomes fairly obvious. It is by no means easy for Germany to make a concentration anywhere. She is gravely embarrassed by a lack of men, a condition due not only to her casualties, but to the constant lengthening of her battle lines. She can do nothing to help Turkey in Asia Minor, while there are credible reports that she has actually borrowed Turkish troops and sent them as far north as Riga, and that she is now being importuned to return them.

She must have a considerable army locked up in Roumania, and there are certainly German troops in Bulgaria. Under such circumstances a western withdrawal that would economize a large force would not seem to be an unmixed misfortune. She would certainly not have carried out such a withdrawal with its serious moral effects except under the compulsion of force, but at the same time she could hardly be indifferent to the saving in man power that would result from it, a saving that would be particularly welcome in view of her unforeseen activities in Russia. There can be no question that Germany had great expectations from Russia. She has always had them, but perhaps never with such good reason as recently. Nor can there be any question that those expectations have just been grievously disappointed. This is shown by the eagerness with which the German newspapers are printing every scrap of information pointing to internal dissensions in Russia, and the possibility that the extremists may yet grasp the reins of power. It would indeed be rash to predict the future in Russia, but at least it may be said that up to the present moment there are no indications whatsoever of any happenings there from which Germany might profit directly or indirectly. Quite the contrary.

THAT the Russian military misfortunes were due directly to the calculated action of the Russian government is asserted by Mr. Boris Ivanovich Avilov, who is now in America for the purpose of purchasing munitions, and who communicated his views to the New York Herald. Mr. Avilov says that in 1914 he offered to place his industrial plant at the service of the government for the purpose of making shrapnel, for which it was well adapted. He produced a letter which he received in reply to his offer, and it was to the effect that the Russian armies were in no need of guns or of ammunition, and it was at this very moment that the Grand Duke Nicholas was pleading with the government for both guns and ammunition. The Maltzev factories made a similar offer, and it was refused in almost identical terms. Mr. Avilov said that after Przemyśl was retaken the government intended to put its plan into operation. Its purpose was to go before the people with the announcement that Russia had done its duty in trying to win the war, but had been beaten, and that the only thing left to do was to make the best peace it could with Germany and Austria. It had anticipated a revolt by arranging with the Kaiser to suppress it. "But the public storm of indignation was too great for the government to go through with the scheme without another show of resistance. The government had been forced into the war reluctantly in the first place. It could not escape a show of support for Serbia because of the sympathy of one Slav nation for another. The withholding of guns and ammunition from the armies set back Russia a year in her military operations. The government's intriguing with the Kaiser did not cease with its renewal of perfunctory efforts to win the war. But meanwhile the forces of revolution gathered the strength for the stroke which means an emancipated Russia."

There is no need to comment on the submarine war save to point out the conflict of opinion regarding it that comes from Germany herself. Thus Admiral von Capelle says that the submarine successes have exceeded expectations. Major Moraht says that the submarine can never starve England into submission. Von Reventlow tries to soften the blow by saying that "through the indirect effect of the submarine war, the longer it lasts the more will the enemy's offensive strength on land be weakened. The submarine is not a military thing in itself." And the expert of the Vossische Zeitung remarks: "History will some day characterize as the mightiest

deed of the present campaign the brain-work which brought about the situation which we are momentarily in. In this sense the submarine war is nothing in itself."

What is the famous Hindenburg line to which such constant references are made, and which is supposed to have

been rendered impregnable by months of military labour? We speak of it glibly as though it were something established and fixed, like the equator, and thereby we show that we are still somewhat under the sway of the "German myth" that causes us always to expect something tremendous, almost miraculous, from Teuton prowess. As a matter of fact no one outside of the German command knows where the Hindenburg line is to be found, or indeed whether there is actually any such line at all.

It is a hypothetical line that is supposed to include Cambrai, St. Quentin, Le Fere, and Laon, and perhaps Douai and Lille at the north. Now if there is actually such a line as this and of such unconquerable strength it does not seem that the Allies have yet discovered it. During the last few days we have read of constant British and French advances, made, it is true, against considerable opposition, but none the less made. The British are now actually in the suburbs of St. Quentin, which is supposed to be one of the strongholds of the Hindenburg line, and there could certainly have been no such advance as this if the line had been anything like so strong as it has been supposed to be. And while this success was being registered by the British the French were doing something similar to the northeast of Soissons, and were threatening Laon, which is another fortress on the Hindenburg line. Now it is quite likely that there is a fortified line running from Lille to Laon. Indeed there are certain to be fortifications of some kind. An army would not bivouac for the night without fortifications. It may be that the cities on that line are strongly garrisoned, but that there is any line that can be compared in strength with the Somme line that has been evacuated is highly improbable. The Somme lines were as strong as human skill could make them, as we were constantly assured from German sources until it became necessary to give them up. They were underground fortresses of concrete and steel that had been slowly perfected by years of labour. The Germans evacuated them, not because they preferred some other and mythical line known as the Hindenburg line, but because they had to evacuate them, because they could not hold them any longer against the British artillery. And they will presently evacuate the Hindenburg line for the same reason, and then they will tell us once more that they are "retreating to victory."

THAT the plans of the Allies were disconcerted by the movement of withdrawal goes without saying. Of course they were, since those plans were intended to accomplish this very aim, and therefore they now become obsolete. One may always disconcert an enemy's plans by changing resistance into flight, but this can hardly be described as a victory. Summing up all the evidence there is not the smallest reason to suppose that there is anything mysterious, anything that must be accounted for by subtle theories, in the German withdrawal, or that we may expect any kind of unforeseen coup, or any new stroke of strategy. The withdrawal became inevitable with the demonstration of the superiority of the British artillery, and for the same reason a further withdrawal is now inevitable as soon as the heavy guns can be brought up to the front. Neither the Hindenburg line nor any other line, present or prospective, can withstand the bombardment that the British artillery is now in a position to administer, a bombardment more intense and sustained than has been possible at any previous stage of the war.

Recent bulletins give us the first intimation that the heavy guns are now coming into action along the northern part of the new line, that is to say, upon that part of the line that is nearest to the old positions. The delay, if it can be called delay, is not surprising when we realize the enormous task of moving up the big guns.