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AQA AS The Development of Germany, 1871–1925

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Fuhrer: Germany 1900–1945

OCR (A) A2 The Challenge of German Nationalism, 1789–1919

Why did Germany lose the First World War?

Understanding the myth of the 'stab in the back'

stalemate on the Western Front: for most of the war the two sides faced each other across opposing trenches, which ran from the Channel coast to the border with Switzerland. Neither side was able to secure a decisive breakthrough.

Central Powers: Germany and its allies (Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman empire, Bulgaria), which fought against Britain, France, Russia, Italy and (from April 1917) the USA.

Key concept

Causation

Before you read this

This article explodes the myth of the 'stab in the back' peddled by the German High Command after the First World War by exposing its miscalculations and failures in military combat and government policy-making. As such it forms essential background reading to an understanding of the issues Hitler was able to exploit when seeking to undermine the Weimar Republic during the 1920s.

Germany's defeat in the First World War did not appear a foregone conclusion to those who took part in the events of 1914–18.

German forces had occupied northern France and much of Belgium at the start of the war, creating defensive positions from which they could not easily be dislodged. Britain and France were unable to break the **stalemate on the Western Front** and in the summer of 1917 the French Army suffered a series of damaging mutinies as soldiers wearied of the continuing slaughter.

In October the Western powers' Italian allies suffered a major defeat at Caporetto, at the hands of Germany and Austria-Hungary. No less seriously, Russia, which had opposed the **Central Powers** for 3 difficult years, collapsed in internal revolution. The Bolshevik government, which came to power in November 1917, sued for peace with Germany. By the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of March 1918, the revolutionary regime was forced to accept

The Western Front changed little between 1915 and 1917.



Timeline

warfare: the German unrestricted submarine policy of using submarines (U-boats) to sink shipping bound for Britain, in an attempt to starve the country of vital resources. stormtroop units: small groups of highly trained soldiers whose purpose was to penetrate enemy lines at weak points.

The Germans failed, however, to convert the initial, break-in into a decisive, breakthrough. The troops suffered heavy losses and it proved difficult to move artillery forward over terrain that had been severely damaged in earlier engagements. In addition, the ground secured by the Germans offered hard to retain. The offensive was also undermined by faulty management on the part of its author, Ludendorff. He proved unable to focus consistently on one objective, allowing the weight of the German assault to become hopelessly diffused. Although Ludendorff possessed a good grasp of the technical and organizational aspects of war, he allowed the pursuit of temporary tactical advantage to take priority over wider strategic thinking.

•• or Allied Success? ••

...or Allied success?

Crucial to Germany's eventual defeat was a series of miscalculations by the country's leadership. These errors were a consequence of the increasing subordination of political authority to the power of the military, a development that accelerated after the appointment of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich von Ludendorff to the Supreme Command in August 1916. The decision to begin unrestricted submarine warfare against Britain in February 1917 was taken under pressure from Germany's military leadership. It was based on the assumption that Germany's strongest opponents could be brought rapidly to its knees by deploying its naval fleet. In addition, by provoking US entry into the war in April 1917, it brought the formidable supporters. In addition, by participating fully into never reached the levels anticipated by the policy's critics. Significant hardship on Britain, shippling losses although the underwater campaign imposed significant hardship on Britain, shippling losses never reached the levels anticipated by the policy's critics.

German failure...?

1918, taking their opponents by surprise. By this stage the Western Powers were expert in enacting a scheme lack of personnel and there was an expectation that the war would last into 1919 or even later. Yet in spite of all this, Germany and its allies lost the war by November 1918. Why was this?

economic resources of the USA fully into play on the side of the Western Allies.

The German 1918 spring offensive finally broke the deadlock that had lasted for much of the war.



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decision to give an overall commander, Marshal Foch, the authority to coordinate British and French forces also assisted the Allied fight back. As historians such as Gary Sheffield and Paddy Griffith have demonstrated, we should note the willingness of the Allied forces to adopt new and more effective fighting methods. These scholars argue that, after suffering heavy losses for limited advantage in a number of engagements, the British Expeditionary Force followed a ‘learning curve’ after the Battle of the Somme in 1916. As a result, by 1918 British forces had a much firmer grasp of the necessary interrelationship between artillery and infantry, and were able to integrate new technology, such as the tank and the aeroplane, more effectively into the conduct of battle.

The use of aerial observation and of techniques such as **flash spotting and sound ranging** enabled artillery fire to be directed more accurately onto enemy positions. The adoption of the number 106 percussion fuse for high explosive shells represented an important technical advance. It enabled shells to detonate as soon as they hit the ground rather than — as often happened with older ammunition — being buried harmlessly in the earth. It was more effective in cutting enemy barbed wire and did not make craters, which impeded the advance of Allied troops.

At the same time the ‘creeping barrage’ was perfected, enabling infantry to advance under cover of a moving curtain of heavy gunfire, keeping German forces pinned down and unable to retaliate as the attackers moved forward. This was more effective than the tactics employed earlier in the war, in which troops attacked after a prolonged bombardment of German positions had taken place — a procedure that gave notice of the impending assault and usually resulted in heavy infantry casualties.

These methods came into their own after the Allied forces, having withstood the spring offensive, began a relentless series of counterattacks on several fronts.

Tactical innovation, supported by increased quantities of artillery and ammunition, enabled British, French and empire forces to sustain an impressive campaign through the summer and autumn of 1918. In this campaign, known as the ‘Hundred Days’, the German Army was steadily forced back from the positions it had temporarily gained.

The balance of resources

Underpinning the changing fortunes on the battlefield was a relentless build-up of material resources on the Allied side, which the Germans and their co-belligerents could not hope to match. Far from being a source of strength to their senior partner, Germany’s main allies, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, were weaker powers which required assistance in order to stay in the field.

The Royal Navy imposed a blockade of German ports, which denied the country vital imports of food and raw materials. By contrast, Britain and France could draw on the support of overseas empires and were able to maintain access to overseas trade routes. Despite the occupation of its main industrial base, France rapidly improvised factory production of munitions, becoming the indispensable supplier of its allies. This included over three-quarters of the field artillery, tanks and aeroplanes used by US forces.

In addition, the Western powers were able to use foreign financial markets that were closed to Germany. The latter had to rely on domestic borrowing to fund the costs of the war — a policy that damaged the economy by creating inflationary pressures. The position was worsened by the German government’s reluctance to raise money by taxing incomes or wartime profits, since it feared offending powerful business interests.

The intervention of the USA reinforced a balance of resources which in the long run was bound to work to the advantage of the Western powers. To give some indication of the fundamental inequality,

flash spotting and sound ranging: techniques used to pinpoint the position of enemy artillery. The former entailed noting the location of the muzzle flash from the German guns; the latter used microphones to detect the report and flight of the shell.

Lorries replaced horses as the means for transporting equipment.



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Key points

- A black and white photograph showing a field of destroyed wooden structures, likely a village or town, with debris scattered across the ground and charred remains of buildings in the background.



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Morale was key to the outcome of the war.

equipment as readily as its opponents. Extended battles, such as the Somme (July–November 1916) or third Ypres (July–November 1917), took a heavy toll on both sides in terms of casualties, but on balance Germany could afford these less easily than the British or French. Many of those who were lost were among the most skilled and experienced troops in the German Army.

German casualties and morale

Although Ludendorff was able to muster impressive forces for the spring 1918 offensive, it was impossible to replace the German total of almost 500,000 casualties. The need to maintain a military presence in the lands ceded at Brest-Litovsk reduced the number of troops available for the Western Front. The problem was made worse by the attempts of the German leadership to meet the needs of the war industries at home. The Auxiliary Labour Law, passed as part of the 1917 Hindenburg programme, released thousands of men from front-line military service to work in munitions production, with damaging effects on the strength of the army. At the same time the sheer number of fresh troops arriving from the USA — 64,000 in March 1918, rising to 227,000 by October — made it clear that Germany could not hope to win.

German leaders

Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934) and Erich von Ludendorff (1865–1937)

- Field Marshal Hindenburg and his chief of staff, General Ludendorff, rose to prominence for their role in defeating a Russian invasion of eastern Germany at the Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914.
- Appointed to head the army's Supreme Command (OHL) in August 1916, they exercised a virtual dictatorship over the German home front as well as military aspects of the war.
- Germany's government was theoretically in the hands of the Kaiser (emperor), Wilhelm II, who controlled foreign policy and the armed forces and appointed a civilian head of the imperial government, the chancellor. Real power, however, shifted towards the military leaders in the last 2 years of the war.
- Ludendorff planned Germany's spring 1918 offensive. He suffered a breakdown after his plans failed and was removed from command in October 1918. Hindenburg remained in post and was instrumental in the Kaiser's decision to abdicate the throne in November.

There is a useful link at www.historyplace.com.

First World War and links the failure to the start of the back theory that Hitler exploited. Another web link aquamets this: see <http://tinyurl.com>

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In Germany, by contrast, people faced hardship as wages, consumption and standards of nutrition fell, but there was no sense that sacrifices were being shared equally across society. The result was a growing sense of alienation from the ruling elite, leading to protests and strikes and culminating in the rejection of the imperial government in November 1918. In leading their people to military defeat, Germany's leaders also ensured the downfall of the system of government they had sought to uphold.

The economic strains inflicted by the war sapped the morale of the civilian population and by 1918 opposition to the Social Democratic Party, had become widespread in German society. The authoritarian nature of the regime played a part in the defeat. It was unable to inspire the population in the way that the people of Britain and France. The Western powers proved better at striking a balance between the needs of war and civil society, mobilising their peoples while extending a promise of a democratic future.

1918: the beginning of the end

In terms of manpower, financial strength and industrial resources, the German Reich could not match the coalition arrayed against it. It was unable to find effective allies and in the autumn of 1918 could not prevent its steadily weakening partners, Bulgaria, Turkey and Austria-Hungary, from dropping out of the conflict.

Judenordff, whose political views became increasingly extreme in the postwar years, leading him to flirt with the fledgling Nazi Party, was one of those who propagated this highly misleading explanation of the German catastrophe. In truth, the German people were led to defeat through the mistakes of Hitler from the Western Allies.

After the war a persistent myth grew up that Germany had lost because of an internal conspiracy by socialists and liberal politicians, among whom Jewish influences were prominent. It was alleged that the so-called November criminals, headed by General Erich Ludendorff, had been secretly aiding the German Army in the back by seeking arms.

The 'stab in the back' legend

Another factor was disease, to which undermine-
ment, famine, pestilence, and willfulness to surrender was evident by the last
autumn of the war.

The forces that took part in the German spring offensive were not only numerically reduced but also thoroughly exhausted and demoralised. The psychological strain of relentless campaigning was exacerbated by the growing scarcity of food and other supplies. The morale of some German units was further weakened by their surprise at discovering ample British ratios — contrary to the propaganda put out by their own leaders — when they overran enemy positions.

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Further reading

- Parties:
 - Social Democratic Party (SDP)
 - German Social Democratic Party (USDP)
- Events:
 - Anti-war Independece
 - Industrial section broke away in 1917, forming the overtly industrial working class.

Questions

- Was Germany simply overwhelmed by the superior resources of its combined opponents?
 - Was Germany simply overwhelmed by the British Army that claim that the British Army never faced its tactics through a learning curve?
 - Between 1916 and 1918? Was the quality of Germany's military leadership