

Account for the Allied Victory in the Great War, 1914-18.

Jay Winter writes “why the Allies won [the First World War] is a question which [has] remained open.”¹ This viewpoint conveys the great level of debate amongst historians as to what accounted for the Allied victory in the Great War, whether it consisted of military, social, political or economic factors. Heather Jones, author of *The Historical Journal*, advocates a similar view, noting that interpretations regarding the Allied victory tend to espouse contrasting “political and military approaches.”² Various explanations have been emphasised as to what accounted for the Allied victory in the Great War. These arguments amongst historians include the Allied naval blockade, decisive military offensives, the failure of the Schlieffen Plan and the United States entering the war in 1917. German and British accounts tend to have conflicting views as to what culminated in Allied victory. For example, British historian Gary Sheffield focuses on Britain's personal contribution to victory, citing the British military's “co-ordinated use of shock troops, airpower and mobile military” in the Hundred Days as being the event “that culminated in the Armistice on 11th November 1918 and Allied victory.”³ German historians such as Gerhard Ritter, Wilhelm Deist and Christoph Jahr would contrastingly argue that “morale was a growing problem for the German army”⁴ in the war's latter stages, having implications which would lead to Allied victory.

A key cause of Allied victory in the Great War was the significant effectiveness of the Allied naval blockade, which led to the extensive domestic “suffering of the German population” and to a great extent damaged “the country's entire war effort.”⁵ The blockade had fundamental social and economic implications for the German Empire, primarily in the war's latter stages, with “the decline in the standard of living” having “assumed crisis proportions”⁶ in the early months of 1917, especially “when coupled with the poor harvests of 1916/ 17.”⁷ This assertion of the blockade being extensively damaging upon the civilian population is conveyed by Grebler and

¹ Winter, J. (2005) *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, page 110

² Jones, H. (September 2013). *As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography*, *The Historical Journal*. 56 (3), page 861

³ Jones, H. (September 2013). *As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography*, *The Historical Journal*. 56 (3), page 862

⁴ Boff, J. (2012) *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918*, Cambridge University Press, page 15

⁵ Osborne, E. (2004) *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*, Routledge, page 159

⁶ Osborne, E. (2004) *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*, Routledge, page 161

⁷ Beckett, I. (2014) *The Great War: 1914-1918*, Routledge, page 547

Jake Thomson

Winkler, who note that by the winter of 1916-17, the government "provided only 1,335 calories per day", and by the summer of 1917, "this had fallen to 1,100 calories, which was only half of the average peacetime consumption of 2,276."⁸ What further emphasises the effectiveness of the Allied blockade are the dire food alternatives the German population resorted to due to critical shortages. Checkering writes of how "the nutrient quality of food declined, to say nothing of its palatability." For example, as a result of the blockade, "bread was made from coarsely milled grains or laced with potato flour, corn, lentils, rice and sawdust."⁹ Osborne further notes that by the German economy depending on international trade for its "economic wellbeing", the interruption of "such trade proved a disaster for Germany, which collapsed domestically as much as it did militarily in 1918."¹⁰

Furthermore the economic effects of the blockade on the states allied to Germany were also extensively damaging. Siney notes how the food supplies of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire were "all subjected to a rationing system" as a result of the blockade. Furthermore, restrictions on the exportations of vital supplies as a result of the naval blockade were so severe that "there was little chance that one of the Central Powers could buy in the markets of the other states of the alliance."¹¹ By the Central Powers' military unity not extending to that of an "economic sphere", it could be argued that it was at this stage in the war that the Central Powers "first revealed signs of collapse."¹²

States which were allied to the German Empire tended to have inherent weaknesses both socially and militarily. Austria Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were already plagued by social implications at the outbreak of war in 1914, with Austria Hungary concerned with "the threat the South slavs seemed to pose to the survival of the multinational empire."¹³ Both of the Triple Alliance states were multinational empires at a time of deep nationalism across Europe, which would inevitably cause social

⁸ Grebler, L. Wilhelm, W. (2012) *The Cost of the World War to Germany and to Austria Hungary*, Literary Licensing LLC, page 79-80

⁹ Chickering, R. (2014) *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Cambridge University Press, page 45

¹⁰ Osborne, E. (2004) *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*, Routledge, page 193

¹¹ Siney, M. (1957) *The Allied Blockade of Germany 1914-1916*, The University of Michigan Press, page 257

¹² Siney, M. (1957) *The Allied Blockade of Germany 1914-1916*, The University of Michigan Press, page 257

¹³ Robson, S. (2014) *The First World War*, Routledge, page 24

Jake Thomson

implications. The Ottoman Empire faced a similar social issue of internal national insurgencies across its vast empire. These social issues emphasise the view that Germany's primary allies in the Great War were already inherently weakened and declining before the war, and therefore would not have had as great a military alliance which could win a global conflict as that of the combined powers of Britain, France, Russia and later the United States.

Several historians such as Hewins characterise the blockade as only partially successful in its intended effects on Germany, and therefore should not be the factor which accounts for the Allied victory. Whilst acknowledging that the blockade "damaged some sectors of the German domestic economy", Hewins analyses this allied success as "not very important because the German army still had the supplies necessary to continue in the field"¹⁴, and therefore were still able to maintain the war effort; not suffering any critical blow. Siney however disputes this view, noting how in a war of such great economic mobilization, the destruction of one area of the war effort would greatly culminate in "a weakening on the whole."¹⁵ Osborne further stresses this view, noting that the ever aspect of the German war effort was vital; it was "an age where all sectors of the national economy were important."¹⁶ The blockade may have had limitations, it could have been more effective and would not have resulted "in any swift German economic collapse"¹⁷, but its effectiveness was still great in severely weakening the German war effort and causing a decline in morale amongst the civil population. Strachan suggests that despite the blockade having various limitations, any explanation for Allied victory in 1918 which does not consider the blockade a key factor "is as deficient as one which overemphasises it."¹⁸

Ludendorff's Spring Offensive in 1918 has been extensively argued as a factor which accounts for Allied victory in 1918; its outcome was ironically "decisive in shifting the

¹⁴ Hewins, Speech to the House of Commons, 27 March 1917, *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th, ser., vol. 92, col. 227

¹⁵ Siney, M. (1957) *The Allied Blockade of Germany 1914-1916*, The University of Michigan Press, page 130

¹⁶ Osborne, E. (2004) *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914-1919*, Routledge, page 159

¹⁷ Beckett, I. (2014) *The Great War: 1914-1918*, Routledge, page 151

¹⁸ Beckett, I. (2014) *The Great War: 1914-1918*, Routledge, page 547

Jake Thomson

balance of the war against the German army."¹⁹ The military offensive was initially a success, but it soon led to defeat; the Germans did not have the supplies, energy or weight of numbers to maintain their advance; therefore there was no decisive breakthrough in the Allied territory. Robson argues that all the Germans won throughout the four month offensive were "diabolical flanks, diabolical supply problems and longer lines to defend."²⁰ The Germans gained land which was of limited advantage to them, therefore leading the offensive to have consequently been a great waste of supplies as well as manpower. Travers notes that the strain of the offensive were colossal for the Germany army; casualties throughout the offensive amounted "to nearly one million men."²¹ The historian concludes by stating that the Central Powers really lost the war "between March and July through the costly failure of its own offensives."²²

Logistics is a key factor according to several scholars as to what accounted for the Allied victory in the Great War. David Stevenson, author of *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918*, writes of how the war "was of a highly contingent nature" in its latter stages, but what decisively tipped the war in the Allies' favour and therefore accounted for victory was Germany's "ongoing shortage of supplies."²³ *The Economies of World War I* justifies Stevenson's viewpoint, stating how due to the German military's lack of vital supplies, Allied victory "was enabled by an overwhelming predominance in resources."²⁴ What conveys the Allies' unsurpassable advantage of overwhelming military resources is their total expenditure on war production. Whilst the Central Powers' war expenditure totalled \$61.5bn, this was far less than what the Allies spent; £147bn in 1916.²⁵ It is often argued that the war could be won only by attrition; "the belligerents were too powerful and competent to be defeated by anything other than exhaustion."²⁶

¹⁹ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 280

²⁰ Robson, S. (2014) *The First World War*, Routledge, page 94

²¹ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 280

²² Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 280

²³ Jones, H. (September 2013). *As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography*, *The Historical Journal*. 56 (3), page 862

²⁴ Broadberry, S. Harrison, M. (2005) *The Economies of World War I*, Cambridge University Press, page 36

²⁵ BBC News. (2012) *How Germany lost the WWI arms race*. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17011607>. [Accessed 16 February 12]

²⁶ Gray, C. (2013) *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, Routledge, page 109

Jake Thomson

For many historians, the entry of the United States into the First World War led to the defeat of the German Empire, as its direct involvement in the latter stages of the war ensured this great expansion of “financial, material and human resources”²⁷ for the Entente and therefore led to the Triple Alliance lagging behind in war production and vital supplies. Paul Kennedy notes that no matter how skilful Germany attempted to be with the organization and management of its military resources, it could simply not compete against “this massive disadvantage in sheer economic muscle, and the considerable disadvantage in size of total mobilized forces.”²⁸ Many historians would however argue that victory was not achieved due to the United States entering the war, as the Allies suffered several defeats and issues in late 1917 which led to feelings of a stalemate. *1918 The Unexpected Victory* lists Caporetto, three failed British offensives, and the German army moving west, having been “substantially strengthened by the armistice with Russia”²⁹ as key arguments for the US entry not decisively culminating in Allied victory. Stevenson however further notes that “substantial American troop contributions [had] arrived”³⁰ in Europe by 1918, and therefore would have tipped the balance and accounted for the Allied victory, despite these difficulties of 1917.

A valid argument for the Allied victory in 1918 were the long term consequences of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914; the plan failed in delivering Germany the quick victory it wanted, and many would argue that the strategic gamble led to a situation in which the Triple Alliance most certainly “would probably lose the war.”³¹ The formulator of the plan, Count von Schlieffen, in discussing long term warfare, suggested “such wars are impossible in an age when the existence of the nation is founded upon the uninterrupted continuation of trade and industry.”³² There are however key flaws in this strategy. Feldman notes that “Schlieffen could not understand that it was precisely the industrial might of nations which made lengthy, total wars possible.”³³ Boemeke also stresses this view, suggesting Schlieffen made a

²⁷ Chickering, R. (2014) *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918*, Cambridge University Press, page 199

²⁸ Chickering, R. (2014) *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918*, Cambridge University Press, page 228

²⁹ Johnson, J. H. (1997) *1918 The Unexpected Victory*, Arms & Armour, page 7

³⁰ Jones, H. (September 2013). *As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography*, *The Historical Journal*. 56 (3), page 862

³¹ Flynn, M. (2008) *First Strike: Pre-emptive War in Modern History*, Routledge, page 86

³² Feldman, G. (2014) *Army, Industry and Labour in Germany, 1914-1918*, A&C Black, page 6

³³ Feldman, G. (2014) *Army, Industry and Labour in Germany, 1914-1918*, A&C Black, page 6

Jake Thomson

fundamental error not even attempting “to insist on long term economic and financial preparations for extended warfare.”³⁴ Germany's High Command under Moltke had not quite taken into account what would happen if the plan failed; the Empire “could have prepared state, economy, and society for a long war”³⁵, but instead had not made any long term preparations for total war before 1914. The plan realised “Germany could not win a long war of attrition”³⁶ against a collection of powerful states, and to many historians, this is precisely what happened in the end. The long term consequences of the Schlieffen Plan therefore ensured that Germany's hopes of victory “darkened as the war continued.”³⁷

Arguably a profound factor for the Allied victory in 1918 was the decisive outcome of the Hundred Days Offensive; the Germans lost all land gained in the Ludendorff Offensive, and were forced to retreat beyond the Hindenburg line. Erich Ludendorff himself cited the series of attacks on the first day at Amiens as devastating, labelling the 8th August, 1918 as “the black day of the German army in the history of this war.”³⁸ Robson notes that what further emphasises the military offensive accounting for Allied victory is that when Ludendorff met Kaiser Wilhelm II on the 13th August, he “admitted that the war was lost and offered his resignation.”³⁹ By this time, the Americans had landed in Europe to join the western front; whilst the German army were severely weakened by this period in the war, the Allies “were continually increasing manpower through the American build-up.”⁴⁰ The great success of the Hundred Days emphasises the argument put by Stevenson that Allied victory was substantially achieved due to logistics and material superiority. Travers agrees, writing how “the overall American reinforcement provided the margin for victory.”⁴¹ As a result of this offensive, Hindenburg and Ludendorff realised that an immediate armistice was the only way in which to prevent the total defeat of the German

³⁴ Boemeke, M. (1999) *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, Cambridge University Press, page 360

³⁵ Boemeke, M. (1999) *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, Cambridge University Press, page 368

³⁶ Sondhaus, L. (2011) *World War One: The Global Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, page 207

³⁷ Flynn, M. (2008) *First Strike: Pre-emptive War in Modern History*, Routledge, page 89

³⁸ Robson, S. (2014) *The First World War*, Routledge, page 95

³⁹ Robson, S. (2014) *The First World War*, Routledge, page 95

⁴⁰ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 280

⁴¹ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 250

Jake Thomson

Empire.⁴² It can therefore be interpreted that by the two military commanders realising that Germany was going to lose at this stage, the Hundred Days Offensive decisively ensured that Allied victory was very close.

Travers goes on to note that as well as material superiority, a key reason for Allied victory was the overwhelming "allied superiority in technology."⁴³ Whether it is weaponry in terms of air, land or sea, the historian writes "the allies were irresistibly superior."⁴⁴ In terms of statistics, the Allies were inherently superior to the Central Powers even before the Ludendorff Offensive, which permanently damaged German supplies. "The German army could mount only 14,000 total guns against 18,500 allied guns, 3760 planes versus 4,500 and 10 tanks against 800."⁴⁵ The Allies' military tactics altered substantially as the war progressed, so far that near the end of the conflict, they perfected "the combined-arms warfare"⁴⁶, which despite heavy industries, brought new technologies such as tanks and planes into effective military formations. The Allies having greater firepower in terms of arms emphasises yet again the viewpoint that the Great War was a conflict in which what accounted for Allied victory were overwhelming numbers.

Overall, what accounted for the Allied victory in the Great War was primarily the conflict being one of attrition; by the Allies having a greater quantity and prominence of resources, financially, militarily and materially, it culminated in "the complete economic and military exhaustion of Germany after four years of war."⁴⁷ The event which tipped the war in the balance of the Allies and therefore accounts for the Allied victory in the Great War is primarily the American entry into the conflict. This is due to several key reasons. As a result of the US entry, Imperial Germany and its already weakened allies, Austria Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria could no longer compete financially against the combined powers of Britain, France, the United States and all other allied states. By 1918, American troops had arrived in Europe and as the Germans were already exhausted by the failure of the Ludendorff

⁴² Robson, S. (2014) *The First World War*, Routledge, page 95

⁴³ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 288

⁴⁴ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 288

⁴⁵ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 289

⁴⁶ Strachan, H. (1998) *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford University Press, page 288

⁴⁷ (1934) *The Causes of the German Collapse in 1918*, Stanford University Press, page 11

Jake Thomson

Offensives, the American arrival ensured that the Allies had the overwhelming "financial, material and human resources"⁴⁸ to defeat the Triple Alliance. These arguments emphasise a clear case that the US entry into the war totally ensuring Allied superiority and the German exhaustion in a war that could only be essentially won "based on weight of numbers."⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Chickering, R. (2014) *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918*, Cambridge University Press, page 199

⁴⁹ Tucker, S. (2013) *The European Powers in the First World War: An Encyclopaedia*, Routledge, page 448

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