



Mutiny on the Aisne

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The appalling conditions that the average soldier experienced during the First World War are almost impossible for 21st century society to appreciate. Mud, filth, lice, death, disease and macabre landscapes were the grotesque realities of the frontline, making everyday life, at times, simply unbearable. On top of this, massed infantry attacks, trench raids and incessant artillery barrages, what the German officer Ernst Junger referred to as 'drumfire,' strained the nerves of men to breaking point, as soldiers waged a daily battle against the industrially produced materiel of modern warfare. The idea of moral courage, discussed by Dr Edward Madigan and others, lends an insight in to how it was possible to endure the muddy hell of the frontlines, but nevertheless there was a limit to what men could take and for the French, when the communal reservoir of moral courage ran dry, the outcome would be a tidal wave of overt discontent.

The British Army was quick to realise that if men were kept in the frontlines for too long they rapidly became ineffective and accordingly men were regularly rotated in and out of the trenches. But it was not the same in the French army, where in general, conditions were worse than they were for the British and in 1917, after three years of total war, something snapped amongst the poilu stationed on the Chemin des Dames sector of the Western Front.

It was the ill-fated Second Battle of the Aisne that finally broke the will of the French. Despite the protestations of General Robert Nivelle, who boldly declared before the battle that 'We have the formula' victory is certain?', it was anything but. Even so, Nivelle's confidence was not entirely misplaced; after all he had assembled a mighty force for the grand offensive. Some 1,200,000 men, 5,000 guns, 200 tanks, 47 squadrons of artillery-spotting aircraft, 39 observation balloons and 8 squadrons of fighter planes were all set to engage the Germans along an 80km front. But what Nivelle didn't know was that the Germans had captured his entire battle plan some two weeks previously. This, coupled with the French general's tendency to boast, meant that elements of his strategy were in open circulation. The attack, like so many before it, was doomed.

The weather that April was particularly inclement, with rain and snow turning the battlefield into the typical quagmire of mud, men and materiel so often associated with the war. These conditions further meant that only a fraction (53 out of 392) of the German artillery batteries had been identified before the whistles blew. As a result, the storm of steel in to which the French advanced proved to be almost as costly as the 1st July 1916 had been to the British.

The Germans knew exactly what was coming and they had prepared for the onslaught by retiring from their forward positions, lessening the effect of the French bombardment. As the barrage rained down, the Germans took shelter in the many souterraines that underpinned the ridgeline, bracing themselves for the massed infantry

charge. The 5,000,000 shells that ploughed into their lines ultimately did more damage to the French than the Germans, churning the ground into a seething mass of mud and slime, and when the infantry engaged, their rolling barrage proved woefully inadequate, falling desperately short and immolating much of the advancing French forces before they even breached the enemy's lines. As the attack commenced, the Germans appeared from their deep sanctuaries, dazed but relatively unscathed, and began to strafe the French from the rear. It is estimated that the Germans had 100 machine guns for every kilometre of the battlefield; the French didn't stand a chance.

At the end of that first day, the French had suffered over 40,000 casualties, but despite what had now become a forlorn hope, the attacks continued over the coming days, during which, in a Herculean effort, the 69th Battalion of the Senegalese Infantry managed to reach Hurtebise farm on the top of the Chemin des Dames ridge before it was finally annihilated, almost to a man. Today, their efforts are memorialised outside the Dragon Cavern museum, in the guise of several stoic statues that gaze down on the former battlefield.

By 9th May, the French had finally managed to reach the crest of the ridge en masse, capturing the Plateau de Californie and the Laffaux Mill, but at a cost of more than 187,000 casualties to the German's 168,000. It was an intolerable defeat for an army that had registered few victories during the war, Nivelle lost his command on 15th May and the French were left in a state of abject despair.

The famous *lan spirit* of the *poilu* had been broken, battered and left to die on the slopes of the Chemin des Dames. Finally, after countless battles, the reservoir of moral courage had run dry, and on the 5th May the 21st Division mutinied. It wasn't just the slaughter on the field of battle that had broken the French; it was the daily grind, the attritional nature of an industrial war and the feeling of being simply expendable that had finally caused the dam to burst. The French did not benefit from the British attitude to rotation, home leave was regularly cancelled and when men were moved out of the frontlines they were not properly rested before they were sent back in. Rations were appalling and the faith in the Command had evaporated. Nivelle, the hero of Verdun, had failed his men.

Once the 21st Division had made their stand, the insurrection spread like wildfire through the lines. Mutinous acts were recorded in 68 divisions, 136 regiments and 23 battalions. Soldiers began to desert at a frightening rate and many of those that stayed refused to go back up the lines. They demonstrated openly and sang revolutionary songs, including the Internationale. Despite the failures of Nivelle, on the whole the French did adhere to his famous utterance at Verdun, *'Ils ne passeront pas'* (they shall not pass). Any more pointless attacks were out of the question, but the lines were still defended. The enmity felt towards the High Command was indeed strong, but it was nothing compared to that directed at the hated invaders.

In the end, it was General Petain who finally ended the insurrection and brought order to the lines. He took command and immediately improved living conditions, the allocation of leave and further rotation of troops in and out of the line. He also instigated a policy of focusing attacks on achievable objectives and ensured that artillery, aircraft and tanks properly supported the infantry's assaults.

The Germans never grasped what was occurring only a few metres from their positions. If they had, then the outcome of the war might have been very different. Quite why the Germans didn't pick up on the mutiny is difficult to assess, but partially it must be attributed to their attentions being focused on the Ypres salient and the

British attack at Passchendaele. Even so, the discontent in the French ranks was no minor event. Between April 1917 and January 1918 as many as 40,000 men were involved in the uprising. As a result, 554 men were condemned to death by the Command, although ultimately only 26 were actually executed.

The main French victory in the war, albeit a pyrrhic one, had been at Verdun. As a result, Petain was held in high regard by the poilu and his efforts to control the line and improve conditions proved to be invaluable. Within a few months of the insurrection being brought under control the Germans launched their Kaiserschlacht offensive, which tore through the Allied lines at a ferocious rate. But by then, a man who many regarded to be one France's greatest soldiers had reinvigorated his armies, enabling them to soak up the German onslaught, a fact that became lost only a few years later, when Petain was accused of treason and complicity in the face of the German invasion of 1940.

Mutiny in the ranks could have happened to any of the armies that occupied the ruined earth of the Western Front, but the fact that it was the French who rebelled is not a complete surprise. Nevertheless, it was certainly not cowardice that shattered their attacking will. The French losses during the war were truly horrendous, with their dead, wounded and missing totalling almost six million men - about double the figure for the British and more than that of the Germans. At the time, France's population was six million fewer than Britain's and fifteen million less than that of Germany. The war was also fought on French soil, further adding to the pressure placed on the French armies, and the hatred that lingered from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 perhaps meant that battles were not always conducted with a cool head.

But more importantly, the mutiny was the result of men being pushed beyond the limit of what they could endure. Their collective courage had been slowly eroded away by the attritional nature of a war from which there could only be one winner. For the conflict may have been a war between nations, but in reality it was also a titanic battle between man and his industrially manufactured killing weapons. And in a global conflict between flesh and materiel, it was always going to be man who cracked first.

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