CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

> Things that might seem obvious now were far from obvious then. What to us is the past, unalterable and fated, was to them still the future, full of possibility, confusion and doubt.[1]

At 5.30 a.m. on 9 April 1917, a wintry Easter Monday, British and Canadian troops advanced to assault the German positions at Arras. Within two days they had seized the important Vimy Ridge, and further south had broken through all the prepared German defensive positions in the area. They had made the longest advance by Entente forces in a single day since trench warfare had begun on the Western Front, capturing thousands of prisoners and hundreds of guns. This was victory, and the British commanders gave orders that risks must be freely taken in the pursuit of the defeated enemy.[2]

On the German side, something like panic set in. The commander of the forces facing the British, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, asked himself anxiously in his diary whether his troops would be able to hold further attacks, and even whether it made sense to continue the war.[3] First Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff described the situation as extremely critical; he had looked forward to the offensive with confidence, based on the recent introduction of new defensive tactics, and was now deeply depressed.[4] His chief, *Generalfeldmarschall* Paul von Hindenburg, hinted at Ludendorff's shaken nerves: 'I pressed the hand of my First Quartermaster-General with the words: "We have lived through more critical times than to-day together." To-day! It was his birthday!'[5]

[1] Alan Allport, *Britain at Bay 1938–1941: The Epic Story of the Second World War* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 100.

[2] Captain Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917*, vol. 1, *The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the Battles of Arras* (London: Macmillan, 1940), 259 (hereafter, BOH 1917, 1).

[3] Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. Eugen von Frauenholz (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), 2:136 (9 April 1917).

[4] General Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memories 1914–1918* (London: Hutchinson, 1919), 421.

[5] Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, *Out of my Life*, trans. F. A. Holt (London: Cassell, 1920), 265. In formal terms, the Kaiser was Supreme Commander [*Oberster Kriegsherr*] of all

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

However, this British success was the high point of the Entente joint spring offensive that it opened.[6] The British made little progress in the rest of the battle of Arras. When the French launched the main effort of the joint offensive on 16 April – the Nivelle offensive – they made only tactical gains that bore no relation to their casualties, the strategic vision of the commander-in-chief, General Robert Nivelle, or the hopes of the troops. As the German official history commented, it was clear on the evening of the first day that the breakthrough had failed.[7] The collapse of the French assault and attempts to renew it led to mutiny in the French army, affecting its offensive capabilities for much of the rest of the year.[8] Both battles continued for weeks, but strategically the Germans had won.

This book explains the dramatic reversal of fortunes from the German side. In formal terms, it is a case study analysing the five key tasks of German operational command in the battles. The tasks – defined later in this Introduction – were co-ordinating the masses of troops, matériel and different levels of command needed to fight a modern battle, including striking the correct balance between decentralisation and control; selecting the right men for command and staff positions; using intelligence and communication to reduce the uncertainty caused by the chaotic nature of war so that it could be exploited; continuously learning and applying lessons from the ever-changing Western Front; and crucially, winning, both by preventing an Entente breakthrough and inflicting more casualties than suffered.

These tasks are derived from contemporary German and modern thinking on command, as well as from the current state of research on the Entente spring offensive and on the German army as an institution. But an even more important source is how German commanders and staff officers viewed the problems they faced and what to do about them. The book systematically compares pre-war thinking on these issues and developments in the early war period with what was going on in 1917, and it distinguishes the German army's doctrine and reputation from what actually happened.

German armed forces, Hindenburg was his top military adviser with the title Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army [*Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres*] in Supreme Army Command [*Oberste Heeresleitung* or OHL] and Ludendorff was Hindenburg's deputy as First Quartermaster-General [*Erster Generalquartiermeister*]. In fact, Ludendorff exercised the real power in the army.

[6] Formally speaking, the Triple Entente powers (Britain, France and Russia) became the Allies with the signing of the Pact of London in September 1914. However, the Germans often continued to refer to the Entente, and this book adopts the same usage. 'Entente spring offensive' means the principal Anglo-French operations of April–May 1917.

[7] Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande*, vol. 12, *Die Kriegführung im Frühjahr 1917* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1939), 403.

[8] BOH 1917, 1:505.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

The concluding chapter shows that the findings from this case study apply well beyond early 1917 and in fact illustrate the story of the German army throughout the First World War. In this way, the book contributes to the debate on what has been described as the real question of the war: how was Germany able to hold out for over four years despite growing Entente dominance in both matériel and manpower?[9] This is the first strand to the meaning of 'holding out'. Holger Afflerbach's aptly named book *Auf Messers Schneide* [*On a Knife Edge*] is an important reminder that the conclusion of the war was not inevitable and that for much of its duration German defeat was by no means certain. Afflerbach argues that throughout the war the Central Powers, particularly Germany, were more militarily effective than their enemies and that this counterbalanced the latter's numerical and material superiority.[10] A pre-eminent component of this effectiveness was German fighting power, which only began to decline in summer 1918. Afflerbach further suggests that an unshakeable pride and confidence in German military superiority permeated German society from before the war till late in 1918, leading to the belief that the way out of the war must and could be found through military means.[11]

The second strand of 'holding out' in the book's title is how the German army held out against the Entente assault in early 1917. It is easy to dismiss this offensive as doomed to failure, the victim of the iron laws of early twentieth century warfare on the Western Front – the force/space ratio, with too many men and too much matériel in a small area, preventing manoeuvre; the added constraint on manoeuvre imposed by firepower's contemporary dominance over mobility; and the fragility of battlefield communications, which particularly disadvantaged the attacker. But this is hindsight. As we shall see, before the event the German army viewed the offensive as the decisive moment of the war, and afterwards thought its success in holding out was an 'absolutely extraordinary' achievement.[12] Furthermore, different operational choices by the Entente high command would almost certainly have produced much better results for the attackers. Even as it was, the

[9] Holger Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide: Wie das Deutsche Reich den Ersten Weltkrieg verlor* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 8, quoting Professor Jay Winter on the real question of the war.

[10] The Central Powers were Germany and its allies Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey).

[11] Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide*, 21, 512–13 and 519.

[12] General der Infanterie a.D. Georg Wetzell to the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres [Army Research Institute for Military History], 19 January 1939, BArch, RH61/1901. In spring 1917, Wetzell was head of the First Section (Operations) in OHL's Operations Department [*Abteilung Ia/Operationsabteilung*].

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

German army only achieved its defensive victory at great and lasting cost to itself.[13]

The book examines the role of German operational command in this victory. 'Operational' here means relating to military operations rather than the operational level of war discussed in the next section. What the German army referred to as *Führung* [command] or *Truppenführung* [unit and formation command] would probably now be called command and control. One typical modern explanation describes command as what a commander does, and control as how he does it; the two are closely related and the boundaries between them are so blurred that they may become indistinguishable.[14] This suggests that there was logic behind the German army's treating the two concepts as one. The Germans themselves wrote much about command without defining it. German pre-war thought focused on mobile, offensive operations aimed at bringing about decisive battle. Conceptually, this was the core role of what was seen as 'high command' [*höhere Truppenführung*]. In organisational terms it was the realm of divisions, corps and, once they were formed in wartime, Armies and later army groups: these were the formations that comprised units of all arms and were therefore capable of conducting major battle.[15]

The third strand of the title is the paramount duty of German soldiers at all levels to hold out.[16] Most obviously, this means ordinary soldiers at the front facing the terrors of an attritional war. But it also refers to more senior officers in headquarters, who were subject to ferocious mental strain. The book is not about the experience of individual soldiers, but in reading its academic analysis of operational command, we must always remember the human consequences in all the combatant armies. For me, this means my paternal grandfather Comrie Cowan, a 20-year-old British company commander in 34th Division who was seriously wounded at the battle of Arras. A few days later, he wrote to his father:

> I had wonderful good luck the day that I was hit on 7th [April] as I took a bombing raid of three officers and 100 men over. I was struck by a piece of shell just behind his second line and had my leg broken above the knee. I couldn't get away and about 2 hours afterwards I was taken prisoner and luckily remained in their fourth

[13] More on all this in Chapter 8.
[14] Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman, eds., *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914–1918* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), 1.
[15] The book uses 'Army' with a capital letter to refer to specific field formations such as First Army, and 'army' in lower case for generic organisations such as the German army.
[16] On the centrality of holding out [*Durchhalten*] to German soldiers' duty during the war, especially in 1916–18, and to their subsequent interpretation of their experiences, see Anne Lipp, *Meinungslenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), particularly 129–72 and 320.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

line until after the attack when I was released by our own fellows. Pretty lucky!! I am afraid that I have lost my leg, but I'll soon get used to that.

Holding out indeed.

Significance of the Entente Spring Offensive

> . . . this gigantic struggle, which can really only be compared with our 1918 attack.[17]

The Entente spring offensive of 1917 is well-suited as a case study of German command because it was a significant event at each of the four different levels of war where military activity takes place. At the risk of oversimplifying, a short explanation may be helpful here. The top level is national or grand strategy, which concerns 'the co-ordinated use of the three principal instruments of national power: economic, diplomatic and military'. Next comes military strategy, the military component of grand strategy. Third is the operational level at which campaigns are planned and executed. Finally, the tactical level is where 'warfighting actually takes place'.[18] These levels should not be seen as totally distinct, and indeed one of the themes of this book is the linkages between them.

The year 1916 had been very difficult for all the main participants in the war. As David Stevenson has put it, 'The European nations had dug themselves into a war trap, and on one level the story of 1917 is of their efforts to escape it.'[19] At the beginning of the year, both the Central Powers and the Entente looked for a quick-fix conclusion to the war, but not at the cost of abandoning their war aims. Throughout 1917, military operations interacted with various peace initiatives. These initiatives all failed, partly because respective war aims were far apart and partly because of the political–military interaction. Stevenson again: 'The diplomatic impasse set the context for decisions to launch offensives, and the military balance shaped responses to the peace bids.' Both sides still had reason to believe that military operations would win them more than diplomacy.[20]

[17] Wetzell to the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, 19 January 1939, BArch, RH61/1901.

[18] Ministry of Defence, *British Defence Doctrine (Joint Warfare Publication 0–01)*, 2nd ed. (London: Ministry of Defence, 2001), 1–2 and 1–3. This edition, rather than more recent ones, is used here because for analytical purposes its terms are clearer, especially on grand strategy. British and allied doctrine now refers to three levels of war, confusingly putting national and military strategy on the same level.

[19] David Stevenson, *1917: War, Peace, and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

[20] Ibid., 234 and 395.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

In grand strategic terms, the Entente objective in spring 1917 was to launch a knock-out blow by concentric offensives on the Western, Italian and Eastern Fronts. Failure to co-ordinate these efforts, partly caused by the Russian Revolution beginning in March, was one of the chief factors in the defeat of the Anglo-French offensive.[21] German grand strategy for the year was to beat off the Entente attacks on land while a greatly intensified U-boat campaign at sea – unrestricted submarine warfare – brought Britain to its knees. The German assessment, or gamble, was that the campaign would succeed in five months. It would almost certainly cause the United States to enter the war on the Entente side, but Britain would collapse before American military forces could have any significant effect in the crucial theatre.[22]

So the two sides' grand strategies, including the Entente spring offensive, affected and were affected by the Russian Revolution and the United States' entry, events that shaped the rest of the war and indeed the twentieth century. As an illustration of the chronological links, the United States declared war on the day of an important and controversial French conference that finally gave the go-ahead for the Nivelle offensive. Lenin left Zurich in the famous sealed train on 9 April, the day the battle of Arras started, and arrived in Petrograd on 16 April, the day the Nivelle offensive started.[23] The dates are of course coincidence, but nevertheless underline the linkages between political and military developments.

Taking Russia first, the revolution highlights how what is obvious now was not at all obvious then. By the end of 1917, Russia was about to leave the war, a major victory for the Central Powers. But this only became clear after the Bolsheviks' coup in November, with their policy of peace at any price. Earlier in the year, everything was uncertain. Even a senior officer like *General der Infanterie* Moriz Freiherr von Lyncker, one of the Kaiser's closest confidantes, changed his mind almost daily about the future of Russia in the first half of the year – sometimes believing the country was about to collapse, sometimes that it was recovering; sometimes that events there would help the Entente, sometimes the Central Powers.[24]

[21] See Chapter 8. Dates in this book relating to Russia follow the Gregorian calendar rather than the Julian used in Russia at the time, which was thirteen days behind.
[22] Stevenson, *1917*, chapter 1 gives a full account of the evolution of the unrestricted submarine warfare campaign.
[23] Catherine Merridale, *Lenin on the Train* ([London]: Allen Lane, 2016), 179 and 226.
[24] Holger Afflerbach, ed., *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg: Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914–1918* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005), 99 for a summary, and in more detail Lyncker's letters to his wife, 475–81 (March–April 1917), 483, 487, 491, 494, 496–9 (May), 503–4, 506–8, 511 (June) and 514–15 (July).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

Such uncertainties affected decision-making on both sides. OHL's chief operations officer, *Major* Georg Wetzell, assessed in late May that it was premature to place too much hope in a Russian collapse. In his view, OHL should act on the worst-case scenario, that the present stalemate on the Eastern Front would continue and the Central Powers would have to keep strong forces there.[25] From the western allies' point of view, Russia's failure or inability to co-ordinate an offensive with them greatly reduced the pressure on the German army in spring 1917. But by remaining a belligerent and indeed taking the offensive later on – the so-called Kerensky offensive – Russia provided relief right up till November. This affected operations throughout the year: the British government saw Russia continuing to pull its weight and pin significant forces on the Eastern Front as a factor in the success or failure of the offensive at Ypres that summer and autumn.[26]

Conversely, the need to support Russia in its difficulties was one reason why Britain and France decided in early May to continue their offensive. Similarly, the Italian high command feared that a Russian collapse would enable the Germans and Austro-Hungarians to transfer strong forces to their front. So relieving pressure on the Russians was a factor in the decision to keep attacking on the Isonzo. Indeed, the defeat of the Kerensky offensive in Russia did allow the Central Powers to divert forces to Italy for what became their very successful attack at Caporetto.[27] And Russia's disintegration at the end of 1917 enabled a German build-up on the Western Front for the huge spring offensives in 1918.

Not long after the United States declared war on 6 April, British War Cabinet member Lord Milner wrote to his colleagues, 'The entrance of America into the war has introduced a new factor, of great ultimate promise but small immediate value.'[28] The Germans certainly agreed with the latter point, and indeed had earlier assessed the United States as militarily less important than Bulgaria.[29] Given its small size, the US army would be unable to make a significant contribution on the Western Front till 1918. This would be too late, since Germany expected that the U-boat campaign would already have forced Britain out of the war by then. The US part of this assessment was well founded, as there were in fact only 130,000 American troops in France by December.[30]

[25] Reichsarchiv, *Weltkrieg*, 12:549. [26] Stevenson, *1917*, 145, 168 and 190–1.
[27] Ibid., 179, 210–11 and 222.
[28] David R. Woodward, *Trial by Friendship: Anglo-American Relations, 1917–1918* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), 68.
[29] Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide*, 189.
[30] Brigadier-General Sir James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1918*, vol. 1, *The German March Offensive and Its Preliminaries* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 35 (hereafter BOH 1918, 1).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

In the longer term of course, the huge accession of strength represented by the United States' entry into the war was a decisive factor in the eventual Allied victory. But the expectation alone of the US army arriving on the Western Front influenced Entente thinking from much earlier. Even before the United States actually declared war, the French government considered whether to defer the spring offensive until American help could make itself felt.[31] As soon as General Philippe Pétain replaced Nivelle after the offensive had failed in May, he stressed the need to wait for the Americans.[32] In June, British prime minister David Lloyd George worried that if Russia dropped out on the Entente side but Austria-Hungary remained with the Central Powers, the Germans could transfer 1.5 million men to the Western Front, greatly outnumbering the half a million Americans expected at that time. The Allies would then have no chance of victory.[33]

In Germany, when Hindenburg and Ludendorff had formed the 'Third OHL' in late August 1916, they faced a crisis on the Western Front:

> We had heavy losses in men and material . . . The strain on physical and moral strength was tremendous and divisions could only be kept in the line for a few days at a time . . . The number of available divisions was shrinking . . . The supply of ammunition was steadily getting shorter . . . The situation on the Western Front gave cause for greater anxiety than I had anticipated . . .[34]

Germany's rapid success against Rumania in late 1916 gave it an end-of-year fillip. But this was balanced by a sharp local defeat at Verdun in December and anyway the reality was that in the west at least the Entente had the initiative: OHL was well aware that they would aim to launch multiple attacks in different theatres early in 1917. Austria-Hungary was a particular worry, and Lyncker for one feared that it was finally falling apart and might even become an open enemy.[35]

By now, Germany's economic and political situation was also turning to crisis. A hard winter and growing problems of food supply led to strikes and the foundation of the radical Independent Social Democratic Party [USPD] promoting a compromise peace with no annexations or reparations. As one sign of the increasing strain, OHL's department IIIb

[31] Ministère de la Guerre, *Les Armées françaises dans la grande guerre*, tome V, vol. 1, *L'offensive d'avril 1917 (1er novembre 1916 – 15 mai 1917)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1931), 561 (hereafter, AFGG, V/1, etc.).

[32] AFGG, V/2, *Les opérations à objectifs limités (15 mai – 1er novembre 1917)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1937), viii.

[33] Stevenson, *1917*, 190.

[34] Ludendorff, *My War Memories*, 244–6. The First OHL was headed by *Generaloberst* Helmuth von Moltke, the Second by *General der Infanterie* Erich von Falkenhayn.

[35] Lyncker to his wife, 14–15 April and 12–19 June 1917, in Afflerbach, *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr*, 480–1 and 507–10.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

(the military secret intelligence service) set up a section to study the growing number of attacks on the monarchy, OHL and morale in the civilian population and the army.[36] In a political concession, the Kaiser's 'Easter Message' promised a more democratic voting system in Prussia – the largest federal German state – once a successful peace was concluded.

The increasing political and economic tensions had a direct effect at the front, as the strikes included armaments workers and contributed to difficulty replacing aircraft losses in May. So concerned was OHL that it called for reports on the effect political developments in Germany were having on the troops, and issued orders to 'educate' them on the army's right to demand the highest possible production of munitions from the homeland.[37] *Generalleutnant* Otto von Moser, commanding a corps at Arras, raged that the strikes were taking place 'when our brave troops are fighting with all their strength against such a superiority in men and matériel and when every rifle, gun, shell and aircraft which does not arrive or arrives late must be replaced with German blood!'[38] More generally, the tensions in Germany mirrored the growing and continuous strain to which the army was subjected throughout the year.

In France, the disappointing results and heavy casualties of over two years of war triggered increasingly vociferous parliamentary attacks on the commander-in-chief, General Joseph Joffre. At the same time, morale in the army dropped to crisis point.[39] To save his government, Premier Aristide Briand restructured his cabinet in December 1916, brought in General Hubert Lyautey as Minister of War, side-lined Joffre (who soon resigned) and appointed Nivelle commander of the armies in France. Briand's reformed government did not last long. A row with parliament in March 1917 led to Lyautey's resignation and the fall of the government.

Two main factors lay behind these changes. First was concern that France was running out of time, given the exhaustion of the army and declining manpower. Both Joffre and Nivelle supported a decisive offensive in 1917. But whereas Joffre wanted a step-by-step Somme-style advance, Nivelle planned to adopt the rapid and violent tactics that had

[36] Michael Epkenhans, Gerhard P. Groß, Markus Pöhlmann and Christian Stachelbeck, eds., *Geheimdienst und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die Aufzeichnungen von Oberst Walter Nicolai 1914 bis 1918* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 366.

[37] General der Infanterie Otto von Below, 'Ausarbeitungen zu Kämpfen und Feldzügen des Ersten Weltkrieges. Bd. 22: Sommerkrieg in Artois 27. Apr.–8. Sept. 1917', unpublished manuscript in BArch, Otto von Below Nachlass, N87/61, 6 and 18 May 1917 (hereafter, Otto von Below diary); Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, 258 and 290–2.

[38] Otto von Moser, *Feldzugsaufzeichnungen 1914–1918 als Brigade-, Divisionskommandeur und als kommandierender General*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Belser, 1928), 297. More on Moser in Chapter 4.

[39] Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 317.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-83023-2 — Holding Out
Tony Cowan
Excerpt
More Information

brought him two smart victories in Verdun in October and December 1916. Everyone knew that Nivelle meant risk, but this was balanced by the risk that if the Entente could not bring about victory before autumn 1917, France would be forced to negotiate for peace on unfavourable terms. Nivelle promised a way of winning the war; more cautious methods advocated by commanders such as Pétain did not. As Lyautey's successor Paul Painlevé said, 'In war one must take the gravest decisions in uncertainty about the exact state of the enemy, and none is without risk.'[40]

The second factor was the desire to reassert parliamentary and governmental control of military affairs. But there were sharp differences of view about war aims and how to achieve them militarily.[41] President Raymond Poincaré supported wide-ranging French demands, including some kind of control over the Rhineland and possibly dissolving Germany as a unified state. He therefore backed first Joffre's and then Nivelle's plans for a decisive campaign in 1917, which might equally well have been named the Poincaré offensive. Painlevé on the other hand believed in a more moderate peace involving the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France and guarantees of security. Militarily, he sought a third way between the all-out offensive represented by Nivelle and defeatism espoused by some politicians to his left. To achieve this, he backed Pétain's plans for a defensive posture while waiting for the Americans. From entering office on 20 March 1917, he was therefore hostile to Nivelle and his offensive.

In Britain, disappointment over the results of the battle of the Somme and an escalating commitment to the war had contributed to Lloyd George becoming prime minister in December 1916. He was as determined as anyone to secure victory, but equally he was appalled by the casualties on the Somme. When his attempts to promote offensives away from the Western Front failed, he eagerly accepted Nivelle's proposal that France should make the main effort in early 1917. His subsequent plot to subordinate the British commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, to Nivelle for the period of the joint offensive was one of the lowest ever points in British civil–military relations.[42]

One of Lloyd George's most immediate problems was Britain's increasingly poor financial situation, dependent as it was on American loans to pay for strategic imports. US government restrictions on loan

[40] Stevenson, *1917*, 119–21, 143–4 and 398.
[41] What follows draws heavily on Georges-Henri Soutou, 'Poincaré, Painlevé et l'offensive Nivelle', in Jean-Claude Allain, ed., *Des Étoiles et des Croix* (Paris: Economica, 1995), 91–109.
[42] Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 133–48.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org