

Holding Out

This is a ground-breaking study of German operational command during a critical phase of the First World War from November 1916 to the eve of the third battle of Ypres. The situation faced by the German army on the Western Front in 1917 was very different from the one anticipated in pre-war doctrine, and *Holding Out* examines how German commanders and staff officers adapted. Tony Cowan analyses key command tasks to get under the skin of the army's command culture, internal politics and battle management systems from co-ordinating the troops, matériel and different levels of command needed to fight a modern battle to continuously learning and applying lessons from the ever-changing Western Front. His detailed analysis of the German defeat of the 1917 Entente spring offensive sheds new light on how the army and Germany were able to hold out so long during the war against increasing odds.

Dr Tony Cowan is a retired diplomat and member of the British Commission for Military History, Society of Military History and Western Front Association. He co-edited a translation of the German official monograph on the battle of Amiens (2019).

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Holding Out

*The German Army and Operational Command
in 1917*

Tony Cowan
Independent Scholar



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or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
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In memory of my grandfather, Captain Alexander
Comrie Cowan, MC and Bar, 16th Battalion The
Royal Scots

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xii Acknowledgements

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Comparative Ranks

German

Generalfeldmarschall
Generaloberst
General der Infanterie (Kavallerie, Artillerie)
Generalleutnant
Generalmajor
Oberst
Oberstleutnant
Major
Hauptmann (Hauptleute)
Rittmeister
Oberleutnant
Leutnant

British

Field Marshal
General
Lieutenant-General
Major-General
Brigadier-General
Colonel
Lieutenant-Colonel
Major
Captain (Captains)
Cavalry Captain
Lieutenant
Second Lieutenant

Chronology

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
13–18 Nov. 1916	Battle of the Ancre (Somme)	
15–16 Nov. 1916		
21 Nov. 1916		
1 Dec. 1916	First edition of new German defensive doctrine issued	
6 Dec. 1916		Germans capture Bucharest
7 Dec. 1916		
12 Dec. 1916		
12 Dec. 1916		
15–16 Dec. 1916	Second French counter-offensive at Verdun	

(cont.)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
18 Dec. 1916		
26 Dec. 1916		
26–7 Dec. 1916		
4–7 Jan. 1917		
15–16 Jan. 1917		
31 Jan.–3 Feb. 1917		
1 Feb. 1917		
1–20 Feb. 1917		
3 Feb. 1917		
15 Feb. 1917	Germans capture new French attack doctrine	

(cont.)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
22–3 Feb. 1917	German withdrawal from Bapaume salient	
26–7 Feb. 1917		
11 Mar. 1917		British capture Baghdad
12 Mar. 1917		
12–13 Mar. 1917		
14 Mar. 1917		
16–18 Mar. 1917	German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line	
17 Mar. 1917		
20 Mar. 1917		
23 Mar. 1917		
24 Mar. 1917		

(*cont.*)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
4 Apr. 1917	British bombardment for battle of Arras begins	
4 Apr. 1917	Germans capture part of French attack plan	
6 Apr. 1917		
6 Apr. 1917		
7 Apr. 1917		
8 Apr. 1917	French bombardment for Nivelle offensive begins	
9–14 Apr. 1917	Battle of Arras first phase	
9–16 Apr. 1917		
11 Apr. 1917	First battle of Bullecourt	
13 Apr. 1917	Nivelle offensive (Oise)	
15 Apr. 1917	German attack at Lagnicourt (Arras)	
16–20 Apr. 1917	Nivelle offensive (Aisne) first phase	

(cont.)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
17–20 Apr. 1917	Nivelle offensive (Champagne) first phase	
17 Apr. 1917	First mutiny in the French army	
19 Apr. 1917		
20 Apr. 1917		
23–4 Apr. 1917	Battle of Arras second phase	
24 Apr. 1917		
26 Apr. 1917		
28–29 Apr. 1917	Battle of Arras third phase	
29 Apr. 1917		
30 Apr.–7 May 1917	Nivelle offensive (Champagne) second phase	
3 May 1917		

(*cont.*)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
3–4 May 1917	Battle of Arras fourth phase	
3–17 May 1917	Second battle of Bullecourt	
4–5 May 1917		
4–9 May 1917	Nivelle offensive (Aisne) second phase	
12 May–8 Jun. 1917		Tenth battle of the Isonzo
15 May 1917		
15 May–30 Jun. 1917	Peak of French army mutinies	
18 May 1917		
20–5 May 1917	Nivelle offensive (Champagne) third phase	
22–5 May 1917	Nivelle offensive (Aisne) third phase	
28–9 May 1917		

(*cont.*)

Date	Western Front	Other fronts
7–14 Jun. 1917	Battle of Messines	
9–29 Jun. 1917		Battle of Asiago (South Tirol)
1–28 Jul. 1917		Kerensky offensive
10–11 Jul. 1917	German attack at Nieuport	
13 Jul. 1917		
19 Jul. 1917		
19 Jul.–3 Sept. 1917		German and Austro-Hungarian counter-offensive
31 Jul. 1917	Third battle of Ypres begins	

Abbreviations

a.D.	<i>außer Dienst</i> (retired)
AFGG	<i>Les Armées françaises dans la grande guerre</i> (French official history)
AHW	Archiv des Hauses Württemberg
AK	Armee-Korps
AOK	Armee-Oberkommando (headquarters of an Army)
BArch	Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Militärarchiv (formerly BA/MA), Freiburg im Breisgau
BID	Bayerische Infanterie-Division
BK	Bayerisches Korps
BOH	<i>Military Operations France and Belgium</i> (British official history)
BRD	Bayerische Reserve-Division
BRK	Bayerisches Reserve-Korps
CGS	Chef des Generalstabes
f.	folio
GID	Garde-Infanterie-Division
GHQ	Großes Hauptquartier (General Headquarters)
GLAK	Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, file series 456
GQG	Grand Quartier Général (French General Headquarters)
GRD	Garde-Reserve-Division
HAM	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Abteilung III, Geheimes Hausarchiv
HDK	Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz (Army Group Crown Prince)
HHA	Heeresgruppe Herzog Albrecht (Army Group Albrecht)
HKR	Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht (Army Group Rupprecht)
HSAD	Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden
HSAS	Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart
ID	Infanterie-Division

xxiv List of Abbreviations

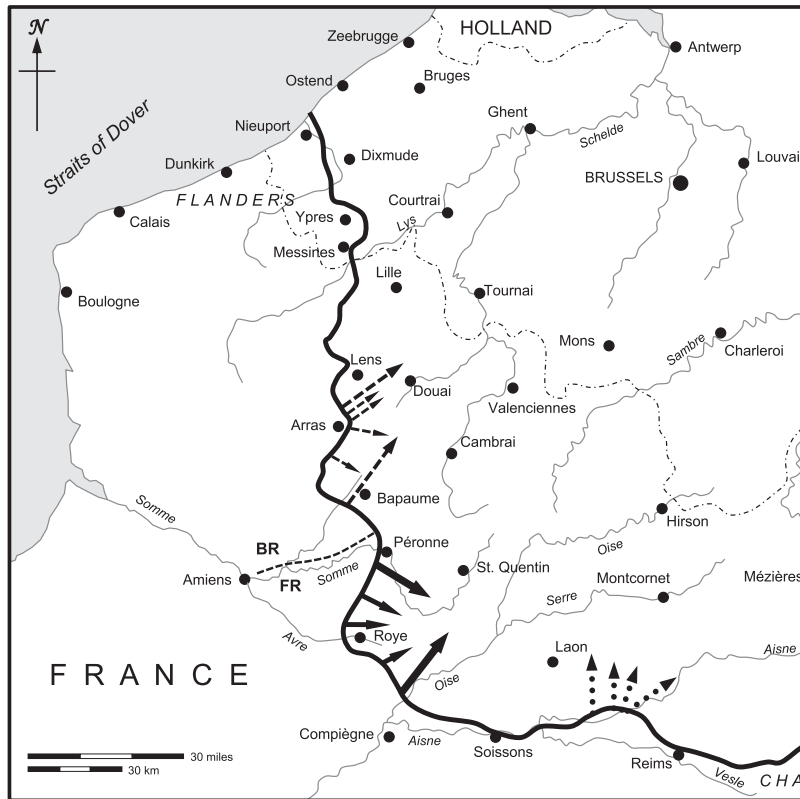
KAM	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Abteilung IV, Kriegsarchiv
KTK	Kampftruppenkommandeur (combat troop commander)
LIB	Landwehr-Infanterie-Brigade
MGFA	Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt der Bundeswehr
NARA	US National Archives and Records Administration
OHL	Oberste Heeresleitung (German Supreme Army Command)
RD	Reserve-Division
RIR	Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment
RK	Reserve-Korps
SHD	Service historique de la Défense
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party)
z.D.	<i>zur Disposition</i> (retired on half pay)

General key to maps

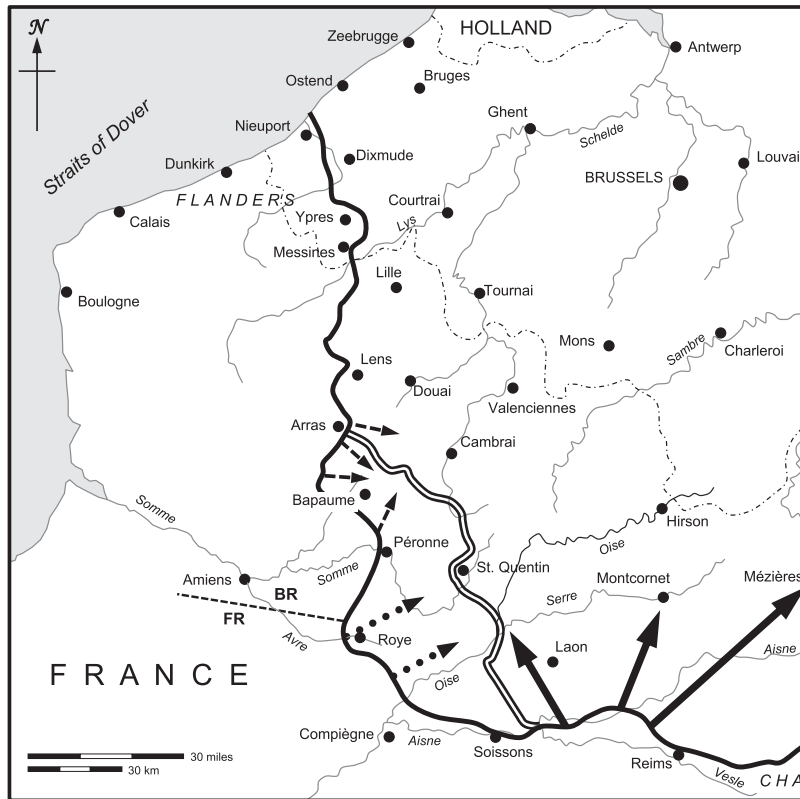
BR	British
FR	French
BE	Belgian
	German formations
XXXXX 	Army group
XXXX 	Army
XXX 	Gruppe/Corps
	Canals



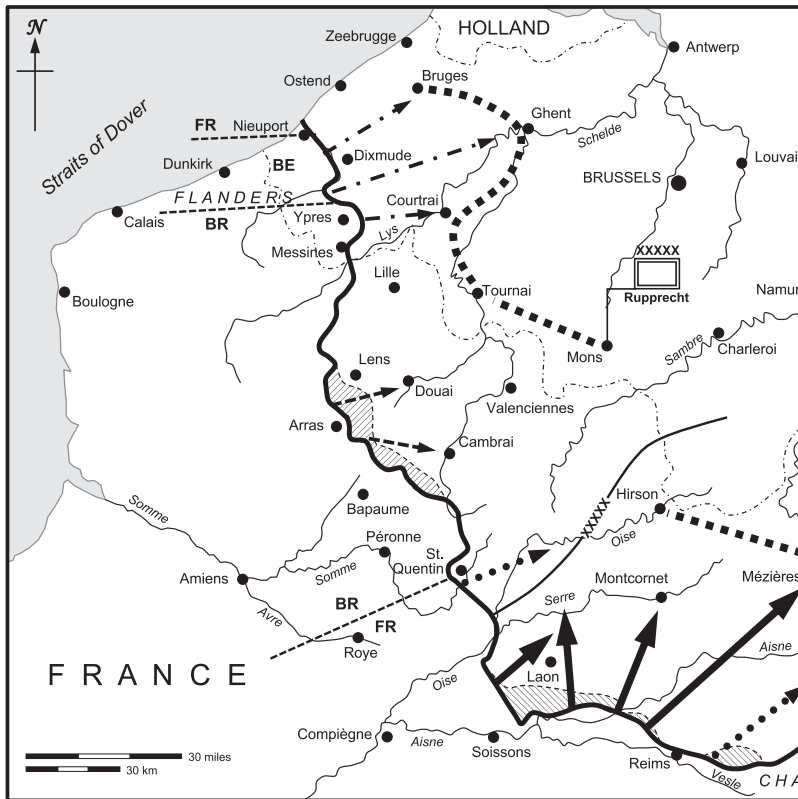
Map 1 Plan for co-ordinated offensives in France, Russia and Italy



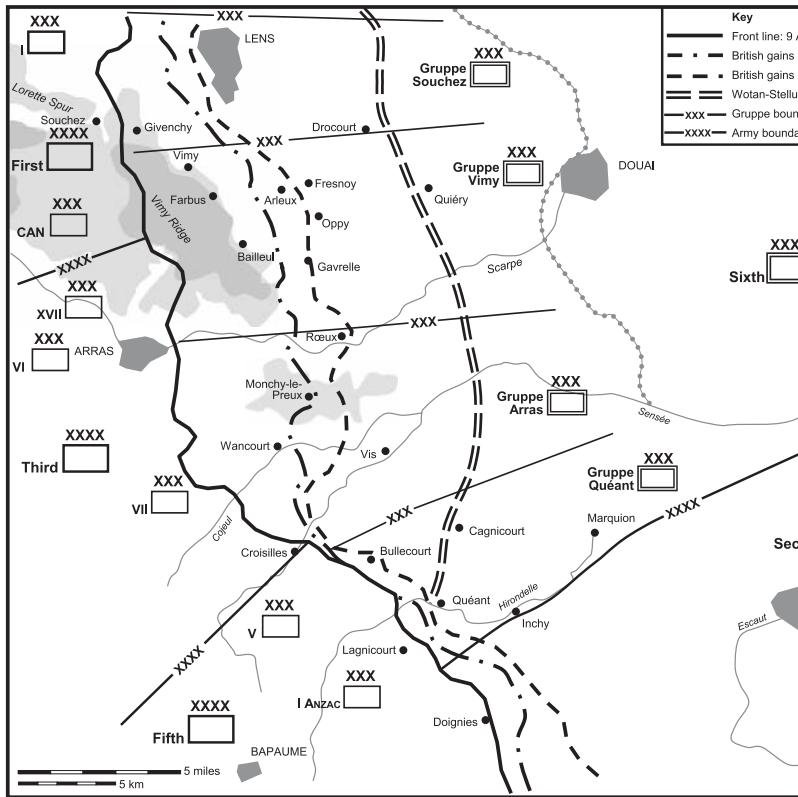
Map 2 Joffre's plan for the 1917 Western Front offensive



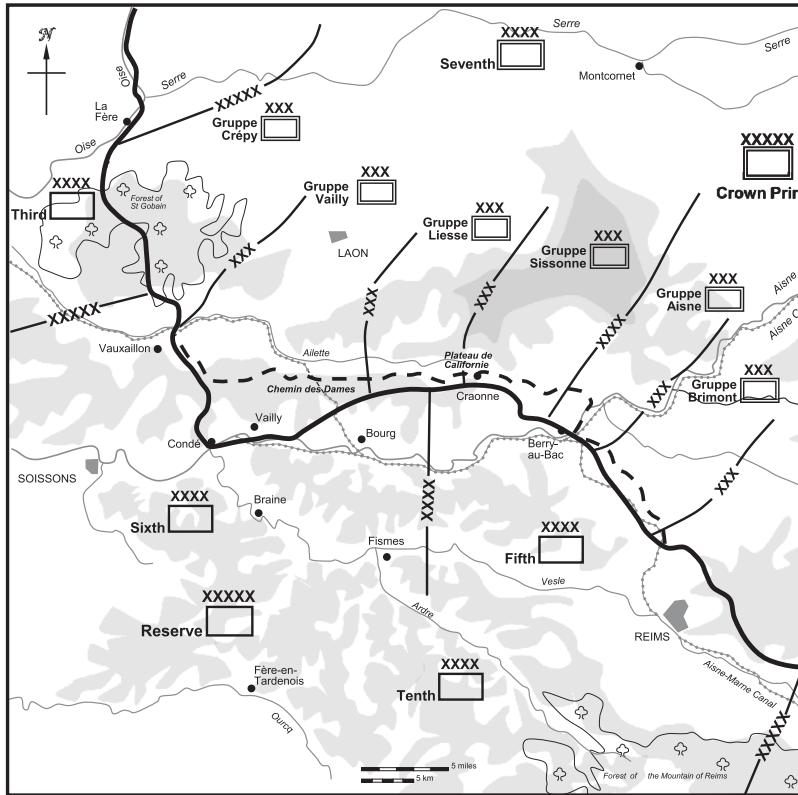
Map 3 Nivelle's initial plan, the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line



Map 4 Nivelle's final plan including exploitation objectives, and ground act

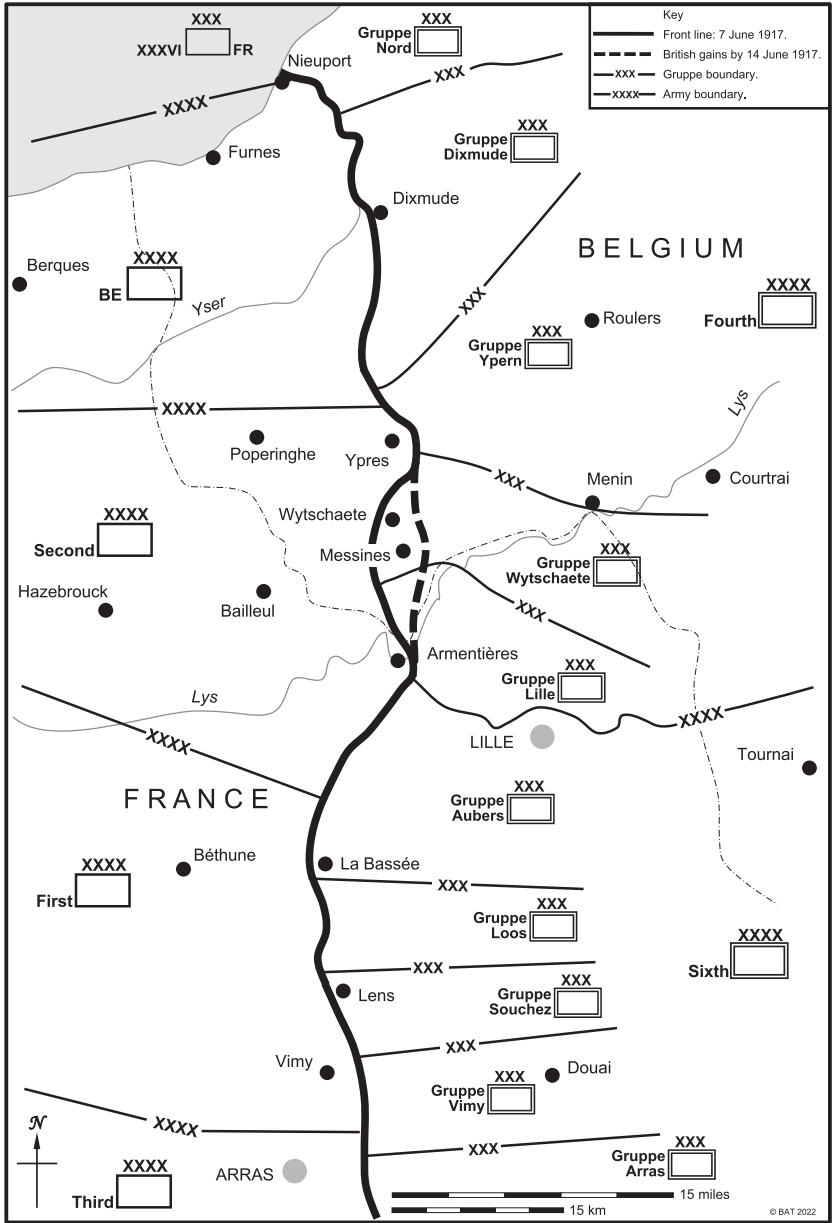


Map 5 Arras



Map 6 Nivelles offensive

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Map 7 Messines